

No Longer Slaves: honour your father and mother

When a command comes with a sweetener, you know it's going to be tough to action, right? And here is the "first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2): "honour your father and mother, that you may live a long time in the land YHWH your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12).

A great deal turns on the meaning of "honour".

1. Intuitively, what do you think it might mean?
2. Is it something that might change in expression over the course of life? How?

We'll come to the meaning a little later. For now, let's turn to the relationship our Lord had with his Father. Not straightforwardly applicable to us, maybe, since the relationship between God the Son and God the Father is unique and perfect! But as such it represents sonship, or daughterhood, in its perfect form. (We'll have more to say later on what honour looks like in situations of great brokenness between ourselves and our parents and caregivers.)

Read John 5:19 and Luke 22:42. What do you learn from the way Jesus frames his relationship with God the Father?

Imitation - the Son does just what he sees the Father doing - is one form of honour. We see what it is good and try to imitate it in our own lives. This dynamic is in full play, and not very discriminating, during childhood, as every parent is wise to remember. But as we age we learn, by God's grace, to see our parents more insightfully. We can then reflect - in the spirit of Philippians 4:8 - on what is good and wise in them, and seek to implement this in our own lives. And in so doing we honour our father and mother. Of course, for those whose parents are still alive, the opportunity to talk with them, to learn what we can, is not one to pass up.

3. What have you learned, and what do you seek to imitate, from your parents, or those who were primary caregivers for you?
4. What would it be like to talk with your parents or caregivers so as to learn from their wisdom and experience?

Jesus also deferred to the will of his Father, where his own will was leading elsewhere. In Gethsemane Jesus owns his desire to have the cup of suffering pass from him, but he explicitly submits to the will of his Father, trusting in its goodness. Deference is another form of honour, and one which changes during the course of life. In childhood it looks straightforwardly like obedience; in adolescence, a submission to limits in a growing climate of negotiation; in adulthood, as parents age, deference is shown in servanthood, as we care for those who cared for us.

5. How do you show deference to your parents?
6. What are the challenges to this in your own life?

The inward counterpart to the actions of deference is humility. We are not superior to our parents, nor do we think less of them for being older than ourselves (a particular temptation in our "ageist" society and a cultural moment obsessed with youth). We do not imagine that what they have learned is irrelevant to us, but remember that we will one day be as they are. We humble ourselves, the better to defer, the better to imitate, the better to honour.

7. Examine your heart and ask: am I humble toward my parents or caregivers? What judgments do I need to lay aside?

These dynamics of imitation and deference make good sense where relationships are healthy. Read Colossians 3:20-21 and Ephesians 6:1-4. The relationships here are between “children and “fathers”, but it’s useful to understand that, in ancient thinking, the division applies widely in life. “Children” here are not simply the very young, but all those who are young with respect to their “fathers”. This is instruction intended also for young and grown adults and their parents. And “fathers” here subsumes “fathers” and “mothers”.

A strong line in deference is taught here (Colossians 3:20, Ephesians 6:1); but notice the flip side: “fathers” are not to “provoke” or “exasperate” their children (Colossians 3:21, Ephesians 6:4). Imagined here are healthy relationships of mutual respect and safety, within which the younger may defer to the older.

8. How “healthy” are your relationships with your parents or caregivers?
9. How “healthy” are the relationships of your children (where applicable) with you?

What if relationships are profoundly broken? To put the challenge in strongest terms: how is it possible to honour a parent or caregiver who has abused you emotionally, or physically, or sexually? Does the command to “honour” apply? What could it mean?

A clue might be found in the word-group captured in “honour”. In Hebrew (*kaved*) the core idea is that of “weight” or “substantiality”. God’s glory is *kavod* (Exodus 16:7) famine is *kaved* (Genesis 12:10); the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was *kavod* (Genesis 18:20). All these and more are bound together by the metaphorical idea of weight: they have profound substance and are thus of deep consequence.

So, we might suggest that to *honour* your father and mother is to *recognize their weight, their substantiality, their impact* in your life. Where that is positive, we show honour through deference and imitation. Where it is negative, we show honour through our willingness to turn toward what is broken, seeking the grace and truth and redemption of the Lord. Where relationships are broken we do not dishonour our parents by naming that brokenness and grieving it. To declare the truth to ourselves, however painful that truth, is not dishonouring. We dishonour our parents only if we dismiss them as of no account, failing to recognize them as *kavod*.

10. Can you discern brokenness in your relationship with your father or mother or caregiver? What would it mean to turn toward it as a way of giving honour?

Finally, note that this commandment carries a promise, at its fullest in Deuteronomy 5:16 (read it): if we honour our father and mother we will “live long” and “it will go well with us”.

Certainly, if we model a good relationship with our parents, our own kids (where applicable) will have something good to imitate when we age. But in a deeper sense, our giving honour – in the many ways laid out above – releases our heart for humility and peace and compassion and joy, all of which improve our quality of life and extend our years!

Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you in the work of honouring, especially where it is hard to do so. If there is something to celebrate, share that with someone (a parent, maybe, if alive). If there is something painful to recognize, share it with a wise friend, pastor or counsellor.