

## The Christian Life (10): The Fifth Commandment

The fifth commandment is the first of the second table. "The second table of the law prescribes our duty to man, which is in fact our duty to God, because He enjoins it; but it is called our duty to man, because He is the immediate object of it" (Dick).<sup>1</sup> It addresses the sanctity of authority. "The design or end of this commandment is the preservation of civil order, which God has appointed in the mutual duties between inferiors and their superiors" (Ursinus).<sup>2</sup> "The fifth commandment requires the preserving the honor and performing the duties belonging to every one, in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals."<sup>3</sup>

This commandment does not merely require that we honor and respect our parents, but all who are in authority over us; and requires, also, on the other hand, obedience not merely from children, but from all inferiors, of whatever rank or grade. So the duties which these two classes or persons owe respectively to each other, are in like manner enjoined in this precept of the Decalogue; for when God requires parents to be honored, He at the same time demands that they so discharge the duties of parents as to be worthy of honor; and in thus enjoining the duties which are devolving upon parents, He also enjoins the duties of all others in authority, inasmuch as they are all comprehended in the term parents, as here used.<sup>4</sup>

### I. The Fifth Commandment

1. *Who are meant by fathers and mothers?* "By father and mother are meant not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth."<sup>5</sup> "This command, of honoring our parents, is very large and comprehensive, and not to be limited only to the grammatical signification of the word but extends itself to all that are our superiors" (Hopkins).<sup>6</sup> "Although particular mention is made here of the father and the mother, there can be no doubt about God's wanting to provide a general doctrine with respect to honoring all forms of authority. Thus we are forced to conclude in this text that God has commanded that all persons who enjoy any superior status are to be honored and obeyed" (Calvin).<sup>7</sup> "By father and mother are meant not only our natural parents, but also all superiors, in age (1Tim.5:1-2), such as are superior to us in gifts or grace (Gen.4:20), but especially such as are by God's ordinance over us in authority, whether in the family as husbands (2Sam.12:3), masters (2Ki.5:13), in the church as ministers and other church-officers (2Ki.2:12), or in the state as magistrates (Isa.49:23). These are more directly meant by father and mother who are to be honored" (Boston). "*Father* is of different kinds; as the political, the ancient, the spiritual, the domestic, and the natural" (Watson).<sup>8</sup>

(1) Natural fathers. By these are meant our biological or natural parents. "Children are called to *honor* their parents. In Hebrew, the word used for 'honor' is one whose basic meaning is 'heavy.'

<sup>1</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:461

<sup>2</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 575

<sup>3</sup> Shorter Catechism, Q.64

<sup>4</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 576

<sup>5</sup> Larger Catechism, Q.124

<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:388

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 134-135

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 122

Someone who must be honored is someone of weight" (Douma).<sup>9</sup> "A wise son heeds his father's instruction" (Prov.13:1). "Listen to your father, who begat you, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (Prov.23:22). "Children honor their parents hearkening to their counsel and commands." (Watson).<sup>10</sup> To despise the words of your father or mother is to dishonor them. "The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it" (Prov.30:17). They would be stoned to death and their bodies consumed by birds of prey. "Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt" (Deut.27:16).

(2) Social fathers. By these are meant masters, employers, and teachers. "Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed" (1Tim.6:1). "Servants must obey their masters in things that are lawful and honest" (Watson).<sup>11</sup> Thomas Watson then suggest three ways slaves (employees) must obey their masters (employers): "(a) Diligently. The loitering servant is a kind of thief, who, though he does not steal his master's goods, steals the time which he should have employed in his master's service (Matt.25:26); (b) Honestly. This is the chief thing in a servant. "Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters...not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things' (Tit.2:9-10). (c) Humbly. A servant is to serve his master with silence, that is, without repining, and without replying. 'Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back' (Tit.2:9). Were the heart more humble, the tongue would be more silent."<sup>12</sup>

(3) Ancient fathers. "You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man and fear your God: I am the LORD" (Lev.19:32). "There are fathers for seniority, on whose wrinkled brows, and in the furrows of whose cheeks is pictured the map of old age. These fathers are to be honored. Especially those are to be honored who are fathers not only for their seniority, but for their piety; whose souls are flourishing when their bodies are decaying" (Watson).<sup>13</sup> "Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility" (1Pet.5:5).

(4) Civil fathers. "God has set these political fathers to preserve order and harmony in a nation, and to prevent those state convulsions which otherwise might ensure. When 'there was no king in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes' (Judges 17:6). God has promoted kings, that they may promote justice. As they have a sword in their hand, to signify their power; so they have a scepter, an emblem of justice. These political fathers are to be honored. 'Honor the king' (1Pet.2:17)" (Watson).<sup>14</sup>

(5) Spiritual fathers. These are people eminent in grace and especially ministers and pastors. "These are instruments of the new birth. 'Though ye have ten thousand instructors yet have ye not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel' (1Cor.6:15). The Spiritual fathers are to be honored in respect to their office. Their office is honorable; they are the messengers of the

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<sup>9</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 171

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 129-130

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 125

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 126-127

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 123

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 122-123

Lord of Hosts. They represent no less than God Himself (2Cor.5:20)" (Watson).<sup>15</sup> Thomas Watson then suggested three ways pastors are honored: "(a) By giving them respect. 'Know them which labor among you and are over you in the Lord, and esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake' (1Thess.5:12-13); (b) By becoming advocates for them and wiping off those slanders and insults which are unjustly cast upon them (1Tim.5:19); (c) By conforming to their doctrine. The greatest honor you can put upon your spiritual fathers, is to believe and obey their doctrine. As disobedience reproaches the ministry, so obedience honors it."<sup>16</sup>

2. *What is meant by honor?* "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex.20:12). As mentioned, the Hebrew word for *honor* literally means "to be heavy or weighty." It's means to consider their person and words as weightier or heavier than others. This honor is bestowed in recognition that all God-given authority bears His name. "Since honor belongs primarily and principally to God, secondarily it pertains also unto those whom He has dignified and made nobles in His kingdom, by raising them above others and bestowing titles and dominion upon them" (Pink).<sup>17</sup> "All legitimate human authority is God-given. It is there because God has put it there. Thus the husband is given authority over the wife. The parents are given authority over the children. And the duty to respect this authority is ultimately a duty unto the Lord" (Williamson).<sup>18</sup> "By the *honor* required is meant all inward regard and esteem, manifested by outward tokens of respect (Rom.12:10), reverence (Rom.13:7), and obedience (Heb.13:17)" (Fisher).<sup>19</sup> "There are three parts of the *honor* spoken of in this commandment: reverence, obedience, and gratefulness" (Calvin).<sup>20</sup>

Inferiors, or those who are in subjection, violate the honor which is due those who are over them, either when they do not regard them as occupying the place to which they have been called of God, or when they ascribe to them more honor than is becoming to men, or when they hate them for executing that which their office requires them to do, or when they esteem them more highly than they do God, or when they refuse to yield obedience to their just and lawful commands, or when they obey them only in appearance, and also when they command things which are unjust and wicked, or when they entertain them with flattery and in other ways which are unbecoming, or when they magnify their infirmities and faults, or when they flatteringly praise their faults and misdeeds, and do not admonish them with becoming reverence according to the position which they occupy, of their malicious and aggravated sins.<sup>21</sup>

Observe, that a difference of places and relations amongst the children of men is of divine appointment. All are not alike. Some God will have to be superiors, others inferiors, other equals; yea, the same persons superiors in respect of some, and inferiors in respect of others. God is a God of order, not of confusion. Let every one then be content with his place assigned him by the Divine Providence. Are worse than yourselves set above you? God has done it; say you Amen to your own position. And do the duty of your place and relation; and that will be your greatest honor. The moon shining by

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 123

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 124-125

<sup>17</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 24

<sup>18</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:51

<sup>19</sup> James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 307

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.36

<sup>21</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 579-580

night is very beautiful, but in the day there is little beauty with her. As little is there in those who, forsaking their own place and the duties thereof, thrust themselves into that of another, and act without their proper spheres.<sup>22</sup>

(1) Reverence. "This includes an acknowledgement of the will of God, who has been pleased to institute such an office, and to endow those who are invested with it, with necessary gifts" (Ursinus).<sup>23</sup> "You shall fear every man his mother and his father" (Lev.19:3). "Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ" (Eph.6:5).

Children are to reverence their parents. Now reverence is nothing but an awful love; a fearfulness to offend, out of the respect we bear them. It is not such a fear, as terrifies and drives us from the presence and company of those whom we dread; for that is slavish and tormenting: but a genuine, sweet, and obliging fear; a fearful esteem and veneration; a fear, that will engage us to attend on them, to observe and imitate them, and to abstain from doing anything that might grieve or trouble them.<sup>24</sup>

(2) Obedience. "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph.5:22). "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph.6:1). "Servants, be obedient to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh" (1Pet.2:18). "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exists are appointed by God" (Rom.13:1). "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb.13:17). "If superiors commit evil, they are accountable. The subordinate must, however, be obedient—not only because this is right and desirable, but also because the superior demands this. There is only the following exception: If they command what is contrary to God's law, one may not obey them. Then the direction of Peter is in force: 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, you be the judge' (Acts 4:19)" (Brakel).<sup>25</sup>

(3) Patience. By "patience" is meant forbearing with their faults. We must be willing to overlook petty and minor faults. "Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment? A. That I show honor, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all who are set in authority over me; that I submit myself with respectful obedience to all their careful instruction and discipline; and that I also patiently bear their failures, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand."<sup>26</sup> This is true of all God-given authority. Children must forbear with their parents; citizens with their rulers; employees with their employers; and members with their pastors. "Children ought to cover the infirmities of their parents with the wings of love. Whether they be natural or moral infirmities, they would beware of despising or insulting them on that account, or any way exposing them, as some foolish youngsters are apt to do (Prov.23:22)" (Boston).<sup>27</sup>

(4) Gratitude. "Gratitude is a virtue consisting of truth and justice, acknowledging from whom, what, and how great benefits we have received, and at the same time having a desire or will to perform in

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:207

<sup>23</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 579

<sup>24</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:391

<sup>25</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:188

<sup>26</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q.104

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:221

return such things and duties as are becoming and possible. This requires that everyone in his appropriate sphere aid and promote the interest of those over him according to his ability, and as occasion presents itself" (Ursinus).<sup>28</sup> The fifth commandment enjoins that we receive all authority as a gracious gift from God for our good and the overall benefit of others (in the home, church, and society).

(5) Adoration. This refers to a proper inward regard or value that shows itself in outward tokens of love and affection. While every form of father is to receive reverence, obedience, forbearance, and gratitude, natural and spiritual fathers are to especially receive love and adoration. "Children are bound to love their parents, and their obedience must grow upon this root. He is not a son, but a slave, that serves his father merely out of fear; family and servile obedience are opposite" (Swinnock).<sup>29</sup> "Recognize those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1Thess.5:12-13). "The gospel is the greatest benefit that men can partake of; and it is very natural to love those who are the instruments by whom the Lord conveys great benefits to us" (Boston).<sup>30</sup>

Love is the only state of mind from which all the other duties that you owe your parents can arise. By love, we mean complacency; and surely this is due to a father and mother. The very relation in which you stand to them demands this. If you are destitute of this, if you are without any propensity of heart towards them, you are in a strange and guilty state of mind. Till you are married, or are in prospect of it, they ought, in most cases, to be the supreme objects of your earthly affections. It is not enough for you to be respectful and obedient, and even kind; but, where there exist no reasons for alienating your heart, you should be *fond* of them.<sup>31</sup>

Remember that you have your being from them, and come out of their loins: remember what sorrow you have cost them, and what care they are at for your education and provision; and remember how tenderly they have loved you, and how much your happiness will make them glad: remember what love you owe them both by nature and in justice, for all their love to you, and all that they have done for you: they take your happiness or misery to be one of the greatest parts of the happiness or misery of their own lives. Deprive them not then of their happiness, by depriving yourselves of your own; make not their lives miserable, by undoing yourselves. Though they chide you, restrain you, and correct you, do not therefore abate your love to them. For this is their duty, which God requires of them, and they do it for your good.<sup>32</sup>

(6) Compensation. "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine" (1Tim.5:17). "If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God" (1Tim.5:4). "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (1Tim.5:16). "If your parents be in want, it is your duty to relieve them according to your ability; yea, and wholly to maintain them, if there be need. For it is not possible by all that you can do, that ever you can be on even terms with them; or ever require them (pay them back) for what you have received of them" (Bax-

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<sup>28</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 579, 581

<sup>29</sup> George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:454

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:237

<sup>31</sup> John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 173

<sup>32</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 454

ter).<sup>33</sup> "Parents brought up children when they were young, and children ought to nourish their parents when they are old" (Watson).<sup>34</sup>

It is base inhumanity, when parents come to poverty, for children to put them off with some short allowance, and to make them live almost like their servants, when you have riches and plenty for yourselves. Your parents should still be maintained by you as your superiors, and not as inferiors. See that they fare as well as yourselves; yea, though you got not your riches by their means, yet even for your being you are their debtors for more than that.<sup>35</sup>

The general head of all the duties which children owe to their parents regarding their needs is in one phrase, *giving back*, which is a duty by which children work as much as is possible for them to repay what they can for their parents' kindness, care, and cost towards them by way of thankfulness.<sup>36</sup>

It is the duty of children (as much as in them lies) to repay what they can for the parents kindness, care and cost towards them, in way of thankfulness. In sickness, they must visit them, in the time of mourning, they must comfort them, in want, they must provide for them: as the children of Jacob, who visited, comforted, and went to buy food for their father (Gen.37:35; 42:2; 48:1). In time of danger, they must endeavor their protection; as David did (1Sam.22:3-4). It is recorded of the stork, that when they become old, the young ones feed them; and when because of age they are ready to faint in their flying, the young ones help them; and when they are past flying, the young ones carry them on their weak backs. Thus, nature teaches children their duty, how much more should grace.<sup>37</sup>

3. *What is meant by living long in the land?* "Honor you father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex.20:12). "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth" (Eph.6:1-3). "In the OT this promise concerned material prosperity and long life. During the time of the theocracy, God's covenant blessings were closely tied to the promised land, and to safety, health and long life in it" (Scott).<sup>38</sup> In contrast to this, a repeatedly disobedient child was put to death (Deut.21:18-21). "The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it" (Prov.30:17). But within the NC these blessings are predominately spiritual in nature, and long life in the land refers to eternal life in heaven. This doesn't mean obedience earns eternal life, it simply means children who obey their parents "in the Lord" (i.e., as a Christian) go to heaven. The same principle is mentioned with respect to Christian slaves. "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh...and whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col.3:22-24).

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 456

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 130

<sup>35</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 456

<sup>36</sup> William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 3:50

<sup>37</sup> Isaac Ambrose, *The Well-Ordered family*, 30-31

<sup>38</sup> John Scott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 239