

HONOR YOUR PARENTS

A Sermon on Deut 5:16

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Today's sermon seeks to clarify the meaning and lasting significance of the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy—the call to honor parents. In Deuteronomy 5:16, Yahweh charges the Israelite community to honor their parents and then motivates this expression with dual promises: long life and good life in the land that God was giving them. Read along with me as I read Deuteronomy 5:16.... Pray with me.

Three Preliminary Observations

Three preliminary observations are noteworthy when interpreting this command. First, notice that no age-range is given. Those Yahweh calls to honor parents are the very household heads he just told to ensure that their son and daughter and servants rest on the Sabbath. The very ones he'll tell not to murder, commit adultery, or desire a neighbor's house are the ones who must honor Dad and Mom. God ordained that whether through procreation or adoption, we all have parents. And Yahweh here tells Israel that parents deserve honor from their sons and daughters, regardless of the age or stage of these progeny.

Second, this command is not bound to the old covenant era, for the need to honor parents is part of nature's law and thus is necessary in all cultures and all times. This is clear in the fact that Jesus reaffirms the command, "Honor your father and mother" (Mark 7:10; 10:19), as part of his kingdom ethic, and Paul charges, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" (Eph 6:1–2). Furthermore, the apostle attaches the principle of honor to creation order itself, saying at the end of Romans 1 that, "though [those in the world] know God's decree that those who practice such things [like disobedience to parents] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Rom 1:30, 32). Just as God as creator and sustainer deserves honor, so too do our parents, who naturally operate as secondary procreators and sustainers. Yahweh uses a similar argument at the head of the book of Malachi when he writes, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear?" (Mal 1:6; cf. 2 Sam 10:3).

Third, Yahweh does not say that honoring parents is conditioned on whether our parents are honorable. Some parents do disgraceful things, so in a sermon like this we must consider what it means and does not mean to honor parents, how we do it faithfully, and why we must show honor even to those who are dishonorable.

These things stated, let me read the verse one more time: Deuteronomy 5:16.... We will now approach this verse in reverse order, considering first the motivation to honor parents and then the call and nature of doing so.

A Long and Good Life in the Land: A Motivating Promise

Throughout Scripture God uses promises to motivate how we are to live. What we hope for tomorrow changes who we are today, especially when the goal can only be reached by a certain pattern of life. The Apostle Peter says, “[God] has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet 1:4). We battle sin and become more like God by believing his promises.

In this fourth of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, Yahweh gave a two-part amazing promise to motivate the Israelites to honor the dual leaders of their homes. When recalling this command in Ephesians 6, Paul is even explicit that “this is the first commandment with a promise” (Eph 6:2). Moses urges his people to honor parents “that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deut 5:16). Scripture consistently portrays a long and good life as a fruit of covenant loyalty to God. Thus, in 5:33 the prophet synthesizes the hope of all the commands when he says, “You shall walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may *live long* in the land you shall possess” (cf. 4:40; 6:1–2; 11:8–9; 22:7; 25:15).

Within Deuteronomy, life and good are covenant blessings, whereas death and evil are covenant curses, and the community’s experience of blessing or curse depended on whether they would obey (30:15–20; 32:47; cf. 28:1–14, 15–68). Some scholars interpreting Deuteronomy treat the promise of lengthened days and wellbeing more as a general principle with exceptions, for as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, “There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who *prolongs his life* in his evildoing” (Eccl 7:15; cf. 8:12–13). Others simply treat this promise as a hypothetical reality never fully enjoyed by a disobedient people but that, nevertheless, supplied a foretaste for eternal life.

In contrast, I propose that the provision and protection God promises was an absolute promise of eternal life that would have been enjoyed by any who perfectly obeyed (cf. Lev 18:5; Deut 4:1; 6:24–25; 8:1). Like Adam in the garden, whose obedience could have resulted in lasting life but whose disobedience resulted in exile, Israel was called to obey but would instead walk in unrepentant sin and experience death, not life (Deut 4:25–26; 31:16–18, 27; cf. Ezek 20:11, 13, 21 with

37:1–14). Nevertheless, Moses envisioned a day when life would triumph (Deut 30:6; 32:39), when Yahweh’s word would be in the mouth of a new prophetic mediator (18:18), and when the new covenant community would listen to him because the same word would be in their mouths and hearts (18:15; 30:8, 14; cf. Rom 10:5–9). Jesus is this mediator who represents Israel, obeying where they failed. He perfectly honored his parents (Luke 2:48–49; John 19:26–27), including his Father in heaven (Luke 22:42; cf. John 13:31–32; 17:1, 4; 21:19). Thus, he secures the long life and wellbeing for himself and all who are in him.

Deuteronomy itself anticipates this when, in 17:20, we learn that that the ideal king, ultimately embodied in Jesus, must “not turn aside from the commandment ... so that he may *lengthen days* in his kingdom, he and his children, amidst Israel” (author’s translation). Then, Isaiah adds in 53:10 that, if Jesus, Yahweh’s servant, will heed Yahweh’s will to the end and operate as a guilt offering for sinners, then “he will see offspring, he will *lengthen days*, and the will of Yahweh will prosper in his hand” (author’s translation), thus realizing in himself the promise God gave both to Israel and her king (cf. Ps 21:4; 23:6; 91:16; Prov 3:2, 16; 28:16). Paul notes that God’s promise to Abraham and his offspring was that “he would be heir of the world” (Rom 4:13), and this global inheritance is likely what he is envisioning in Ephesians 6:2–3, when he charges children, “Honor your father and mother ... that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” The “land” to which Paul refers is *not* the limited land of Canaan but the greater world-wide inheritance that is secured through Jesus and that will be realized in the newly transformed earth (Gen 22:17–18; 26:3–4; Isa 65:17–18; Dan 2:35; Heb 11:13–16; Rev 21:1–2, 9–11). This land will be enjoyed by those who, with the Spirit’s help, honor their parents. Or, as Jesus says in Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Giving Honor: What Does This Entail?

We’ve addressed the motivation for honoring parents. Let us now consider the first part of the verse and reflect on what honoring parents entails. The verb rendered “honor” (Piel כבד) at base means “to make heavy” or “to ascribe weight” to something and so, by extension, it grows to mean “to dignify, respect, honor, or glorify.”¹ Thus, a king should honor the one who gives him victory (Num 24:11), those visited from heaven ought to honor the messenger (Judg 13:17), people are to honor wisdom (Prov 4:8), servants should honor their masters (Mal 1:6), and those honoring God will be honored by him (1 Sam 2:30).

With respect to honoring parents, we gain a sense of what it means by considering its opposite. “Cursing, insulting, rebuking, reviling, shaming, despising, treating with contempt, doing violence against, and bringing reproach

against” are all expressions that describe a failure to honor parents or the aged, and Yahweh declares that all who practice such things deserve to die. Thus, we read “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death” (Exod 21:17; cf. Lev 20:9; Prov 20:20). And again, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (30:17). Recalling Moses, Jesus also says, “‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die’” (Mark 7:10).²

More positively, honoring parents takes three principal forms in Scripture. We honor parents by (1) revering, (2) respecting, and (3) recognizing and returning. Let me unpack each of these.

Revere

We should *revere* our parents for the office they hold and because they have been seasoned with more life than us. Thus, Moses charges, “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father” (Lev 19:3), and “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (19:32). The children of the wife of noble character in Proverbs “rise up and call her blessed,” thus revering their mom (Prov 31:28). Joseph was the second most powerful man in Egypt, yet he still “bowed down with his face to the earth” when his father Jacob arrived (Gen 48:12). If placed in a comparable position today, how many children would honor their father in like order? Even Solomon, perhaps the most powerful of all Old Testament kings, “bowed down” before his mother Bathsheba when she entered the royal hall (1 Kgs 2:19). To honor our father and mother means that we will revere them for the office they hold and because they have been seasoned with more life than you.

Respect

We should *respect* our parents as instruments of potential wisdom, and if you are still a child who is dependent on your parents for food and shelter, this respect also requires that you obey them in the Lord. The book of Proverbs opens with Solomon asserting, “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (Prov 1:8). Indeed, “My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ... then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God” (2:1, 5; cf. 3:1; 4:1, 20; 5:1; 6:20). “Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many” (4:10; cf. 7:1–2). “A wise son hears his father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke” (13:1; cf. 15:5; 19:27; 23:19).

Scripture seems to distinguish the form respect takes based on one’s station in life. When Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

‘Honor your father and your mother’” (Eph 6:1–2), he clarifies that the children are not any sons and daughters but specifically those whom a fathers could provoke as they “bring up [their children] in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (6:4). Similarly, writing to Timothy as pastor of the same Ephesian church, Paul stressed that the elder “must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church” (1 Tim 3:4–5). Children are those still under the watch care and responsibility of parents, and it is these children who have the responsibility to honor parents by obeying.³ Yet God calls all sons and daughters, even when we are no longer children, to honor our parents by respecting them as instruments of potential wisdom.

Recognize and Return

Finally, we show honor to parents when we *recognize* the gifts they’ve supplied us and the sacrifices they’ve made for us and we *return* some of their investment. This recognition and return happens in two ways.

First, we are called to care for our parents as they age, and this includes using our own financial resources to meet their needs. In Mark 7 Jesus confronts the Jerusalem leaders on their failure to honor parents in this way. Building on the old covenant rules on vows that were absolutely binding (e.g., Num 30:1–2), many were declaring property that they could have used to support aging parents to be dedicated as an offering to the Lord, likely to be donated to the temple after death. Jesus says to the Pharisees,

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.” But you say, “If a man tells his father or his mother, ‘Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’” (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do. (Mark 7:9–13; cf. Matt 15:1–9)

A similar example comes in 1 Timothy when Paul stresses the need to care for widows. He first highlights how our familial responsibilities extend to our relationships with others, especially in household of God. “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1; cf. 3:15). He then writes,

Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.... But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Tim 5:3–4, 8)

Within the framework of “honor,” Paul recognizes certain obligations or demands. In the light of how much parents invest in the raising of their kids, we as sons and daughters need to “make some return” to our parents when their own needs arise.

A second way we give some return to our parents is by living in ways that gladden and bless them rather than shame or sorrow them. In this manner, we honor them. Solomon notes, “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother” (Prov 10:1; cf. 15:20). “He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach” (19:26). “There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers” (30:11). Nevertheless, “Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.... The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice” (23:22, 24–25). Twice Solomon emphasizes how the facts that “your father ... gave you life” and “your ... mother ... bore you” obligates you to seek their joy. He even adds that this obligation extends into their later years: “do not despise your mother when she is old.” How you and I live elevates or denigrates our family name, and we honor our parents with joy by being sons and daughters who live righteously, successfully, and faithfully as adults.

Summary

So, in summary, Scripture gives us three ways to honor our parents. (1) We *revere* them for the office they hold and because they have been seasoned with more life than us. (2) We *respect* them as instruments of potential wisdom, and if still a child, this respect demands obedience in the Lord. (3) We *recognize* the gifts our parents have supplied and the sacrifices they have made, and we *return* some of their investment by caring for them in their old age and by always living in ways that bring them joy and blessing, not grief and shame.

But What If Our Parents Are Dishonorable?

But this now raises the question. Are we still called to honor dishonorable parents who stand hostile to Christianity or who have acted shamefully, even despicably abusing their children?

Jesus maintains the charge to “honor your father and your mother” (15:4; 19:9) and stresses that our enemies—even when coming from within our own household—deserve our love (Matt 5:44; 10:36). John Piper has noted seven biblical reasons why honor should be extended, regardless of whether the object is honorable. I will simply list them here, but I will send out to all members a link to his *Ask Pastor John* podcast titled, “How Can I Honor My Parents If I Don’t Respect Them?”⁴

1. We must honor those made in the image of God, knowing that how we treat the creation informs our view of the Creator (Jas 3:9–10).
2. We should honor those who are, by nature, our source of life or older; whatever is more seasoned demands more honor (Lev 19:32; Matt 15:4). “Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov 23:22).
3. We ought to honor all people, especially the leaders whom God appoints. “Honor every. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” 1 Pet 2:17; cf. 1 Thess 5:12).
4. We honor others whose work is valuable to us: “Esteem [your leaders] very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess 5:13).
5. We honor those who serve us (1 Thess 5:13).
6. We honor what is weaker. Like treating fine china with care, husbands are called to “live with [our] wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel” (1 Pet 3:7).
7. We honor even the dishonorable because we are to emulate Christ’s own grace toward us when we were dishonorable. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.... Having this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:3, 5–7; cf. Rom 5:6, 8).

Jesus said that those who fail to revere, respect, and return honor to their parents are “rejecting the commandment of God” (Mark 7:9). This means that to dishonor parents is to dishonor God. Whether child or adult, may we commit with the help of Christ to honor our parents, revering them for their office and seasonedness, respecting them as instruments of potential wisdom, and returning some of their investment by caring for them as they age and by living in ways now that make them glad. As we do, we will walk in the hope of enjoying every provision and every protection on the new earth in the coming age. Let us pray....

¹ The related noun קְבוֹד can refer to “wealth” (Gen 31:1; Isa 61:6), “reputation, importance” (Gen 45:13; Isa 8:7), “glory, splendor” (Ps 66:2; Hag 2:3), and “honor” (2 Chr 26:18; Hab 2:16).

² See also Deut 27:16; Prov 19:26; Isa 3:5; Ezek 22:7; Matt 15:4; 1 Tim 5:1–2.

³ In alignment with several old covenant texts (e.g., Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18–21; 27:16; Prov 20:20; 30:17; Matt 15:4; Mark 7:10), Paul stresses that from creation humanity’s has recognized that those who are “disobedient to parents” deserve to die (Rom 1:30, 32; cf. 1 Tim 1:9).

⁴ John Piper, “How Can I Honor My Parents If I Don’t Respect Them?” *Ask Pastor John*, Aug 23, 2021; <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-can-i-honor-my-parents-if-i-dont-respect-them>.