

Sermon for October 1, 2017 – The Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:12 (NIV84)

Theme: **Honor your Father and Mother.**

- 1) Why God wants us to show them honor.
- 2) How God wants us to show them honor.
- 3) A word to parents.

<sup>12</sup> *“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

Do you ever wonder why many of our nation’s public schools are such a mess, with reports of students disrespecting teachers and teachers abusing students? Do you ever wonder why some people think it’s ok to verbally assault or mistreat police officers, and why some police officers seem to abuse the powers entrusted to them? Do you ever wonder why many people think its ok to scorn and smear elected officials, and why some government officials think its ok to rudely insult other people?

It’s because our society neither understands nor keeps God’s command to honor father and mother. Since many children are not learning proper respect for authority in the home, it won’t be exercised outside the home – causing the breakdown of our society.

Because of the impact it has on social order, Luther once called the fourth commandment “the first and greatest” of all the commandments that deal with our relationship with our fellow man. Let us, therefore, consider the importance of this command, under the theme: **Honor your Father and Mother.** 1) Why God wants us to show them honor. 2) How God wants us to show them honor. 3) A word to parents.

Part One: Why God wants us to show them honor.

*Honor your father and your mother.*

Have you ever considered why God commands us to “honor” our fathers and mothers, and not merely “love” them – as he commands us to do with all other people? It’s because of the position and office they hold in relation to us. You see, when God calls us to honor our parents, he is calling us to see himself in them: that is to say, he wants us to understand that the authority they have is authority he granted them in order to act as his representatives.

And how are our parents God’s representatives? Well, the Lord gave them the responsibility to clothe, feed, love, nurture and protect us. Through our parents and caregivers, God not only provides the basic necessities for life, but entrusts them with the responsibility of teaching us how

to live and care for ourselves and others. Most importantly, he commands parents to teach us about himself, that we may grow to fear, love and trust in the LORD above all things.

So what, then, does the LORD mean when he commands us to honor our parents? It means more than to love them. It means that we recognize that they represent God and, for this reason, give them the same love, respect, humility and obedience that we would give God – understanding that however we treat them, we are treating the LORD they represent.

And this does not just apply to parents, but to everyone the LORD places in authority over us for our good: pastors, teachers, doctors, police officers, government workers, social service representatives, elected and appointed government officials, etc. . . . Insofar as they represent God in their varied vocations, the LORD wants us to respect and honor them – just as if he himself were ministering to us in their place.

Aside from the fact that the LORD commands it, the main reason we will want to honor parents and others in authority over us is because we recognize that they represent the LORD in their respective offices – meant to do us good by preserving law and order, keeping us healthy and safe, and (in the case of faithful pastors) teaching us God’s word.

On top of this, God wants us to honor our parents and all others he places in authority over us because of the promise he ties to this command: *so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

In his large Catechism, Luther explains that when the LORD promises a “long life in the land” he is not merely saying that you will live to a ripe old age; rather (as the LORD explains in Deuteronomy 5:16) it means that things will go well for you and society. How so? Well, just imagine what our own country would be like if children respected their parents. Those children would grow up to be responsible adults who would revere the government and, by their example, teach responsibility and respect to others. Just imagine what schools, the government, cities, communities and society in general would be like if people treated each other with dignity and respect. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out how much better our nation would be – filled with civility, peace, love and prosperity – if all children learned to honor and respect everyone in authority; starting with their parents.

“But,” someone might protest, “what if the parents are abusive? What if the government is oppressive or the pastor self-serving . . . God doesn’t expect us to honor such people in authority, does he?”

Now, listen carefully to everything I am about to say, because it may be hard to swallow: Yes, God expects us to honor even those who abuse their authority; BUT, before you gasp in shock, understand what this means. It does not mean that we can’t report an abusive parent, or use our constitutional rights to speak out against an oppressive government. We can and should do these things: not out of hate, however – but in love; all in accordance with the rules and laws God has given us.

At the same time, God wants us to continue to honor everyone in authority – even if they abuse their authority. He commands us to do this - not for their sakes, but for his! You see the respect we show others in authority is really respect towards God. This is why he asks us to bear up under their oppression with patience – praying that they would repent and fulfill their office the way the LORD desires. We pray for their soul’s sake, trusting that God will hold them accountable for the sins they commit if they do not repent. Vengeance, however, belongs to God – not us. Rather, God wants us to forgive them, just as he has forgiven us.

“But,” our hearts may protest, “why should we forgive those who abuse the authority entrusted to them? They don’t deserve our forgiveness and love.” That may be, but do we deserve God’s forgiveness and love? And yet he demonstrates these very traits to us in Christ. Understand, then, that God doesn’t ask us to submit to those in authority because “they deserve it.” He asks us to do these things because he commands it. Even though everything may seem to the contrary, he wants us to trust in his promise to work in all things for our eternal good - even the suffering we endure under incompetent or abusive leaders.

As I said before: this does not mean that we can’t call the police on abusive parents or seek legal help and protection from those who misuse their authority. No, we can and should do such things. We do it, however, not with an attitude of hate in our hearts, but out of love; not usurping the authority God hasn’t given us, but seeking refuge in other leaders that the LORD has placed over our care.

## Part Two: How God wants us to show them honor.

Now, someone might say: “I think I get what you are saying pastor, but I still don’t understand how I can do this! I mean, sure: it’s easy to serve and obey loving parents and competent leaders. But how in the world do I honor my alcoholic and abusive Dad who has done nothing but bring pain to my family? How do I honor a government that seems to be doing everything in its power to suppress Christianity? What you’re saying sounds impossible!”

And you do know what? This commandment is impossible for us to fulfill, even when our parents and government are good – let alone bad! But remember what Jesus once said: *“What is impossible with men is possible with God.”*<sup>ii</sup>

Yes, we all have sinned against the fourth commandment – failing to show our parents, government and others in authority the honor they deserved. In sinning against this commandment, we have sinned against the LORD.

But Jesus, our gracious Savior did not sin. No, as we read in our Gospel lesson for today,<sup>ii</sup> Jesus was obedient to his parents in every way –fulfilling this command in our place. And Jesus didn’t just stop at honoring his parents, he also honored others in authority as well – willingly submitting to both the Sanhedrin and Roman government for our salvation’s sake. He even prayed for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him!<sup>iii</sup>

As our Savior, Jesus perfectly kept God's law in our place and suffered the death we deserved for all our sins. Through repentance and faith, Jesus' fulfillment of this commandment becomes our fulfillment. All our sins are forgiven in God's sight. We are holy.

But Jesus didn't just save us from the consequences of not keeping this commandment, he also saved us to live a new life – pouring out the Holy Spirit upon us at our baptisms and providing a pattern for us to follow. Yes, covered in the forgiveness Jesus won for us, we find the humility, strength and forgiving love we need to honor all in authority – including the ones who, humanly speaking, don't deserve it. Seeing how Jesus endured all the injustices he faced out of reverence and love for his heavenly father, we find strength to do the same: trusting in God's promise to work in all things according to his good and gracious will. We understand that the honor and respect we show everyone in authority is really directed towards God – thankful for all the wonderful blessings he provides us day after day, and looking forward to the salvation he promised.

Yes, it is in Christ and Christ alone that we are able to keep this commandment – honoring all God has placed in authority over us, even if and when they sin against us. This honor is directed toward our loving Savior working through their office. Therefore, we willingly honor serve and obey them in all love and respect knowing that whatever we do for them we are, in fact, doing for the LORD.

### Part Three: A word to parents.

Before we finish our brief discourse on this commandment, I want to say something to parents. Even though the LORD doesn't directly address you in this commandment, understand from the rest of Scripture the great responsibility and duty God has given you. He has not given you the authority he gave you so that you can fulfill whatever selfish whim or desire you may have. Parents: your children are not toys for you to play with, slaves for you to command, or little experiments through whom you hope to make your unfulfilled wishes or dreams for yourself come true. No, your children belong to God. They have been entrusted to your care, so that you might bring them up in the LORD – teaching them how to live a God pleasing life to his glory. Take this responsibility seriously – remembering what our Savior said: *“if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*<sup>iv</sup>

Yes, the LORD will hold you accountable for how you raise his children. Seek, therefore, his mercy, grace and guidance to help you fulfill the wonderful responsibility he has given you as a parent. Lead by example – showing love and respect to others. Be the kind of parents that don't need to demand honor from their children; rather let your example be such that they offer it to you willingly. Remember, you are neither your children's master nor friend. You are their parent – representatives of the heavenly Father to whom we all belong.

I know, the responsibility of parenting is great. Who is up to the task? Repent, therefore, of your failures and sins, trusting in his mercy to forgive. Then go in his power, guided by His Spirit as

you seek the counsel of his Word to help you fulfill the blessed duty God has given you as parent, all to the glory of his name. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 18:27 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Luke 2:41-52 (with special reference to verse 51)

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Luke 23:34

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 18:6 NIV84