

The Ten Commandments for today

5. "Honour thy father and thy mother"

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THE APOSTLE PAUL tells us that "Honour thy father and mother", the fifth of the Ten Commandments, is unique, "the first commandment with promise" (Eph. 6:2). The context is the instruction for children to obey their parents because that is right, and it occurs before fathers are given advice on teaching their children to be faithful.

In Exodus 20 we find that the fifth commandment is pivotal in the structure of the Ten Commandments. The first four relate to God and how we should approach Him and worship Him, with reasons being given to encourage us. The last five are straight instructions, with no reasons or promises given. Thus the fifth is indeed the only one with a promise. The promise, "that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee" (v. 12), may at first seem rather materialistic. However, it is a consideration of that promise that drives home the relevance of the commandment in our generation, where we see a general decrease in respect for all authority.

The word "honour" is interesting. It is the Hebrew word *kabad*, which means 'to be heavy', and can apply in a good or bad sense. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is described as being "very grievous" (Gen. 18:20), whilst Abraham is described as "very rich" (13:2), with *kabad* being the original word for both "grievous" and "rich". The sense of the word in the context of Exodus 20:12 is, 'Give weight to father and mother'.

The commandment has three levels. Firstly, if every generation had fulfilled the commandment, then all parents would have been faithful to God, as Abraham and Sarah were faithful. This would have resulted in the nation of Israel being blessed, and they would indeed have been "long upon the land". However, pause and think of parents who are recorded as being faithful: Noah and his wife, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, along with Eli, Samuel and David. Their sons—Ham, Ishmael, Esau, Hophni, Joel and Absalom—all broke the pattern, not following the faithful example of their parents.

Therefore the second level of the commandment requires us to look to faithful forebears, and honour, or give weight to, their faith. The Jews

did this in Jesus' day, but in the wrong way; "We be Abraham's seed", they say to Jesus in John 8:33. The commandment forces us to look back to a faithful generation for an example to follow, leaving no one with the excuse of blaming their parents if they get things wrong.

The Jews again give us the clue when we come to the third level: "We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God" (v. 41). Little did they realise in this attack on the Lord Jesus that they were going against the very commandment they thought to uphold. They were not going to honour the Father, but instead they were going to crucify His Son and confirm the 'shortening of their days in the land'.

The land referred to in the promise is the land of Israel, and the promise to be "long upon the land" is applicable at both the personal and the national level. Thus Caleb inherited his portion of land when "As yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me: as my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in" (Josh. 14:11). Because of Caleb's faith, God preserved his strength during the forty years in the wilderness and gave him his inheritance. We trust that he will also occupy an inheritance in the Kingdom of God, when truly he will live "long upon the land", having been granted immortal life. At the national level, if all of Israel had followed the commandments, they would never have fallen into idolatry, and the curses of Deuteronomy 28 would never have been fulfilled. But thankfully there was always a remnant that honoured father and mother on all levels, and they will be God's people in the everlasting Kingdom.

But what of us? If we honour father and mother on all levels, it does not matter when we die, we can look forward to 'living long in the land' in the Kingdom, by the grace of God. There is only one true example that shows us how we should obey this commandment. Jesus Christ obeyed it to the fullest extent, and he died when he was about thirty-three, but now he is alive for evermore, sitting at the right hand of the Father, waiting for the command to return and 'live long in the land'.