

The Fifth Commandment

Q. What does God require in the fourth and fifth commandments?

A. Fourth, that on the Sabbath day we spend time in public and private worship of God, rest from routine employment, serve the Lord and others, and so anticipate the eternal Sabbath. Fifth, that we love and honor our father and our mother, submitting to their godly discipline and direction.

Text: Exodus 20:12 (LSB) – “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which Yahweh your God gives you.”

Traditionally, the two tablets have been divided into the “heavenly” commands – how we are to conduct ourselves towards God – and the “earthly” commands – how we are to conduct ourselves towards one another, with commands 1-4 comprising the former and commands 5-10 the latter.¹

Though helpful, there are some potential downsides to neatly breaking up the Decalogue this way.

For one, it creates the potential of “dividing” God’s moral law into a kind of two-tier “sacred-secular” system that are somehow unrelated. However, like the fruit of the Spirit², the Decalogue comes as a package deal, meaning we are not free to discard the portions that are more difficult to us than the others.

As the Scriptures clearly – and repeatedly – teach, love for God is made visible through our love for obeying His commands, which include loving our neighbors as ourselves.

- **1 John 4:20-21** (LSB) – “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot (οὐ δύναται) love God whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

¹ For example, Watson says, “The commandments may be likened to Jacob’s ladder: the first table respects God, and is the top of the ladder that reaches to heaven; the second respects superiors and inferiors, and is the foot of the ladder that rests on the earth. By the first table, we walk religiously towards God; by the second, we walk religiously towards man.” Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981 reprint), 122.

² See Galatians 7:22-23

- **1 John 5:3** (LSB) – “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments;³ and His commandments are not burdensome.”
- **2 John 6** (LSB) – “And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.”
- **James 2:10** (LSB) – “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all.”

We see the theological disconnect with many of the religious elites in Jesus’ time:

- **Mark 7:5-13** (LSB) – “And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with defiled hands?’ And He said to them, ‘Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDS OF MEN. Leaving the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.’ And He was also saying to them, ‘You are good at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.’ For Moses said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER’; and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH’; but you say, ‘If a man says to *his* father or *his* mother, whatever you might benefit to me is Corban (that is to say, given *to God*),’ you no longer leave him to do anything for *his* father or *his* mother; *thus* invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many thing such as that.”

Paul himself had to rebuke many of the religious elite for the hypocrisy they held of keeping the first table while blatantly disobeying the second.

- **Romans 2:17-29**

³ NLT = “Loving God means keeping His commandments.”

As Thomas Watson says, “He cannot be good in the first table that is bad in the second.”⁴

This again reminds us of Jesus’ own words in **Matthew 22:37-40**, where true love for God is inseparable from true love for our neighbor. Therefore, we must not think of commandments 5-10 as somehow inferior or less important than 1-4. Though the first table – indeed the first commandment – is foundational, it is not divorced from the second table.

This means that dishonoring one’s parents is ultimately the dishonoring of Yahweh, who Himself not only created the heavens and the earth, but ordered them as well, which includes the bestowing of household authority to parents over their children.

There are two parts to the Fifth Commandment:

1. The Command: “Honor”

The Hebrew verb (כָּבֵד, *kabbed*) literally means “to make heavy,” and simply means for children to give their parents the respect and honor that is appropriate for them. As the NET notes, it could be paraphrased, “Give your parents the weight of authority they deserve.”

Where has this “weightiness” come from?

- The answer is as simple as it is solemn: God Almighty.

And thus, to dishonor one’s parents is ultimately a dishonoring of Yahweh,⁵ which is why there were such severe consequences for the breaking of this commandment in the OT:

- **Deuteronomy 21:18-21** (LSB) – “If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they discipline him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and

⁴ *Ibid.* Watson also writes on p.128, “This is so necessary a duty, that Philo the Jew placed the fifth commandment in the first table, as though we had not performed our whole duty to God till we had paid this debt of honour to our natural parents.”

⁵ This is similar to the idea of Moses being designated as “God” to Pharaoh in Exodus 7:1, or authority bestowed to the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:8.

his mother shall seize him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. Then they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not listen to our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his city shall stone him, and he will die; so you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear *of it* and fear.”

- **Leviticus 20:9** (LSB) – “If *there is* anyone who curses⁶ his father or his mother, he shall surely be put to death;⁷ he has cursed his father or his mother. His bloodguiltiness is upon him.”
 - Interestingly, this is the exact same punishment for the blasphemer of Yahweh’s Name in **Leviticus 24:14**.
 - Cf. The death of Eli’s sons in **1 Samuel 4:11**, whose blasphemy of Yahweh (2:13-17) was inextricably linked to their refusal “to listen to the voice of their father” (2:25).

As with the command for wives to submit to *their own* husbands, so also are the possessive pronouns important in the fifth commandment: “Honor *your* father and *your* mother.”

- Though we are called to honor all people (**1 Peter 2:17**), this command shows that we are to have a special honor and “weightiness” set apart for our *own* parents.
 - For example, if another father or mother ask one of *my* children to do something contrary to my instructions, *my* children are obligated, out of honor to me, disobey them, for *I* am their father.⁸

WHAT does “honoring” one’s father and mother look like?

It is helpful to remember that a child’s honoring of their father and mother on earth is to mirror the child of God’s honoring of their Father in heaven.

A. Obedience

⁶ The Hebrew verb *qalal* in the Qal carries the idea of esteeming/treat something to be of small account or insignificant. The Piel – an intensification – rightly renders it “curses.”

⁷ The Hebrew emphatically and literally reads, “to die he will be put to death.”

⁸ The same argument applies to slaves and masters, and citizens and government.

Notice how the apostle Paul links obedience to with honor of, parents.

- **Ephesians 6:1-2a** (LSB) – “Children, obey your parents in the Lord,⁹ for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise).”

That obedience to one’s parents is to be total is not optional or up for debate:

- **Colossians 3:20** (LSB) – “Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is pleasing to the Lord.”
 - Note that Paul does not say, “Obey your parents whenever you agree with them or feel like it.”

Obedience to one’s earthly parents is so important that even the Son of God, in His incarnation, “continued in subjection” to both His father and mother (**Luke 3:51**).

- It is astonishing, and deeply humbling, to think that part of Jesus’ active obedience to the Law included perfectly keeping the Fifth Commandment as the perfect human, and that this “righteousness which is from *the Law*”¹⁰ would then be imputed to all those united to Him by faith.

B. Fear/Reverence

Watson’s words are worth quoting in full again:

In hearkening to their counsel, ‘Hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother’ (Prov. i 8). Parents are, as it were, in the room of God; if they would teach you the fear of the Lord, you must listen to their words as oracles, and not be as the

⁹ Of course, the command to honor one’s parents “in the Lord” does not mean that only Christian children are obligated to keep this law. As seen in our study on the Fourth Commandment, the law to honor and obey one’s parents is written on the heart and conscience of all children born into the world. But, like all the other laws, this becomes a delight to obey when one’s heart is “circumcised by the Spirit” (Romans 2:28-29), that is, regenerated (Titus 3:5; cf. John 3:3-9).

¹⁰ See Philippians 3:9; cf. Romans 1:17 (2011 NIV)

deaf adder to stop your ears...The more your children fear God, the more they will honour you.¹¹

- **Deuteronomy 27:16** (LSB) – “Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother. And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”
- **Leviticus 19:1-3** (LSB) – Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy. Every one of you shall fear his mother and his father,¹² and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am Yahweh your God.’”
- **Exodus 21:15** (LSB) – “And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.”

As Watson notes, “reverence must be shown both inwardly and outwardly, both in word and in gesture.”

- In word – children must speak to and about their parents with honor and respect.
- In gesture – Watson writes, “Children are to show reverence to their parents by submissive behavior, by uncovering the head, and bending the knee.”

As with our obedience to God, so our obedience to father and mother must come from the heart.

What kind of Obedience?

i. Prompt

- Delayed obedience is really disobedience.
 - **Matthew 21:28-31** – “Which of the two sons did the will of his father?”

ii. Without Grumbling or Disputing

¹¹ Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 129, 134.

¹² The Hebrew literally reads, “A man his mother and his father you [plural] shall fear,” fronting mother and father for emphasis.

- **Philippians 2:14-15** (LSB) – “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, so that you will be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

iii. Consistent and Joyful

2. The Promise: “Long life in the land”

“Obedience to parents spins out the life. Nor does obedience to parents lengthen life only, but sweetens it. To love long, and not to have a foot of land, is a misery.”¹³

NET note: The promise here is national rather than individual, although it is certainly true that the blessing of life was promised for anyone who was obedient to God's commands (Deut. 4:1, 8:1, etc.).¹⁴

- As Kaiser notes, “the land” that was promised was the land of Canaan, and the duration of Israel in the land was to be based on morality and the fear of God as expressed in the home (Deut. 4:26, 33, 40; 32:46–47), and that Israel’s captivity was in part caused by a breakdown in this area (Ezek. 22:7, 15). Malachi would announce at the end of his book that Elijah would come at the end of the age to turn the hearts of the children and the parents toward each other again.¹⁵

Ultimately, the eschatological realization of this promise awaits the new heavens and the new earth, of which, writes the Apostle John,

“Nothing defiled, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (**Revelation 21:27**, LSB)

¹³ Watson, *The The Commandments*, 132.

¹⁴ This seems to be the principle in passages like **Proverbs 30:17** (LSB) – “The eye that mocks a father and despises obedience to a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.” This saying reflects on the actions that undermine the hierarchical structure of the world in order to promote social and moral stability. See NIV, *Biblical Theology Study Bible*, eBook: Follow Gods Redemptive Plan as It Unfolds throughout Scripture (Kindle Locations 148167-148169). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, “Exodus” in *EBC*, vol.2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2008), 424.

In the words of Jesus, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (**Matthew 5:5**, ESV).

Addendum: How to Honor our Parents after we have moved out

How should the husband or wife respond when those pesky, controlling in-laws “plead the fifth” to get their way? That is, the husband makes a decision that is contrary to the advice offered by his wife’s parents?

- Is she breaking the Fifth Commandment by submitting to the headship of her husband, as commanded in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3?

We need to remember how God ordered the world, beginning with the family/household, where the husband/father is the head over those under his care.

- When a woman leaves the home and is married to a man, there is a transfer of authority from her father (and mother) to her husband.
 - See **Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31**

However, even if your parents no longer are the heads of your household, there are ways to still honor and respect them.

- Speak with respect, addressing them with the titles ascribed to them (father/dad, mother/mom).
- Pray for them
- Care for their physical – and if necessary, financial¹⁶ – needs, especially as they become older and unable to do so for themselves.

Addendum 2: How Parents Can Encourage this in their Children in this¹⁷

1. Be careful to bring them up in the fear and nurture of the Lord (Eph. 6:4; cf. Deut. 6:1-9)¹⁸. Augustine says that his mother, Monica, travailed more for his spiritual birth than his natural. Timothy’s mother instructed him from a

¹⁶ I do not believe this nullifies Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 12:14 (“Children ought not to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children.”)

¹⁷ I am borrowing extensively from Watson here. See his *The Ten Commandments*, 134-37.

¹⁸ Notice how the Decalogue in chapter 5 flows seamlessly into the instructions of the following chapters.

child (2 Tim. 3:14-16). “Children are young plants which you must be continually watering with good instruction” (cf. Prov. 22:6).

2. If you would have your children honor you, keep up parental authority: be kind, but do not spoil them. If you let them get too much ahead, they will contemn you instead of honoring you. The rod of discipline must not be withheld (Pro. 23:14). We see this principled modelled negatively by even such saints as Samuel and David.
3. Act lovingly toward your children. In all your counsels and commands let them read love. Love will command honor. By refusing to do all things in love, parents – especially fathers – exasperate their children to the point that they lose heart (Col. 3:21, LSB).
4. By showing honor to the authorities God has appointed over you. Set them a good example. “It makes children despise parents, when parents live in contradiction to their own precepts...Oh if you would have your children honour you, teach them by a holy example!”
5. PRAY much for them. Never forget, that they are not by nature, they may become by grace. Pray, that as they bear your image in their face, that they may bear Christ’s [commandment obeying] image in their heart. “Not only lay up a portion [of material necessities] for them, but lay up a stock of prayer for them.” Pray that your children may be preserved from the evil contagion – the despising of authority – of the times.

Conclusion:

Alistair Begg writes,

Parental authority is indispensable to a stable society. Through the ages, virtually all civilizations have recognized this truth. From the beginning, God place mankind in families, establishing this relational unit as the building block of society. Parents were to be responsible for their children, and children were to submit to the authority of their parents. It is no small

exaggeration to say that the well-being of a person, people, or nation begins in the home.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, the family has come under attack, which is literally undoing our very civilization as we know it. It is only as we recover and once again “walk” in God’s “ancient paths” that there is any hope for this world. Contrary to what most believe, heart-felt, love-inspired obedience to the Ten Commandments will not sink our nations, but buoy them; for to live contrary to the law and order He instituted in creation is moral and cultural suicide.

By His grace, our Christian families will become, in the words of Jesus, a preserving agent in this moral rotting world, and lights that help wandering ships avoid shipwrecking upon the rocks of an eternal hell.²⁰

As we “keep and do” God’s commandments, this will be our “wisdom” and “understanding” in the sight of the peoples (Deut. 4:6), which will give us gospel opportunities (4:7) to explain to them the great love and grace of Christ, the God who Himself is holy and makes His people holy...and then blesses them!

Soli Deo Gloria!!

¹⁹ Alistair Begg, *Pathway to Freedom* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2021), 122.

²⁰ Cf. Matthew 5:13-16. Again, notice the context of commandment keeping in 5:17ff.