

Exodus 20:12

<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.

We move today to the second tablet of the law that deals with how we treat others. It contains some of the key ingredients to the command in Leviticus 19:8 to love our neighbor as ourselves, with a love that is shaped and formed in the primary relationship, the family, and then spreads from there into the world.

This commandment evokes a range of emotions within us and is as complex as a family itself. And we know today that families come in many varieties, some traditional and some less so. This is further complicated by the fact that many of us no longer have living parents.

Sometimes our families, even the best of them, can make us crazy, for they are our primary relationship and the basis of all other relationships we form. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the first commandment addressing our relationship with neighbors is the command to honor our father and mother. It is family-directed.

The basic term, “honor,” is the same as it was for the sabbath; it means to make heavy, or in our idiom, “don’t take your parents or those who function as parents lightly.” We are to show them honor in word and deed.

I grew up thinking that this was all about teaching young children to behave and treat their parents with respect. This can be treated as present here, but the commandment to honor father and mother is not primarily aimed at small children, but instead at adult children who can proclaim their love and show respect for their parents by what they say and do. They show their love and respect by caring for ageing parents. In some sense, the way we treat our children can come back to reward or haunt us.

So, this command is not a catchall with which to harangue children. It is not an excuse to teach blind obedience. It is not to be used to impose our will on our children indiscriminately. Nor does it permit verbal or physical abuse of children. Parents are expected to live in a way that fosters respect and honor in their children. It is the responsibility of parents to raise children who honor them. Parents are to raise children to show respect, in word and in deed.

Indeed, we can and do ask children to honor father and mother, and those acting in their place. Just remember the Hebrew people; this commandment applies primarily to adult children and their care for elderly parents, and by extension, to other vulnerable people in society.

Parents are to raise children to live a life that is pleasing to God, one that shows honor and respect for parents as well as serves others, as they transition from the family circle into the wider world. Or as the old song goes, “Teach your children well.” We know it does not always work, and some of us carry wounds and scars where this intention has failed.

The family is the training ground for this commandment, then and now. Although it may be more complex now, families are often spread out, making things more challenging. Nevertheless, parents are expected to be role models of care for older people and others who are vulnerable in society. I learned the term elder orphans this summer as aging folks with no spouse, no designated caregiver, and no family nearby. Caring for these people is a natural outgrowth of this commandment. I know many of you already do this.

So, where does one begin in raising these future adults today? One of the primary ways to engender children to live a life pleasing to God is to bless them, let them know they are loved and treasured. We should be sure to bless our children regularly and not be like Isaac in the Bible. Isaac only blessed Jacob and not Esau, despite Jacob having cheated Esau by tricking his father into believing he was blessing Esau.

We must also not be like Abraham, who could not really affirm his son Ishmael and, instead, cast him out of the family with his mother, basically to die. You may want to read these stories in Genesis 21 and 27. If you ever want to read about a family with issues, read the stories of our patriarchs and matriarchs from Abram and Sari to Joseph, all in Genesis.

It was left up to God to provide the blessing for Ishmael and Esau. In the stories, God makes them both great nations. This serves as a valuable reminder for all of us. It is not enough to brag about our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to others; we need to let them know of the joy they bring us. We must bless them, often.

The love that parents show their children teaches children to love and honor their parents. While we know many good people care for aging parents who have been less than loving, the basic trajectory of the commandment is that **love of children produces children who love** and, in turn, care for their parents. It is not always that way, as we all know, but that is the intention of God. Two Bible grand stories shed light on the importance of honoring parents. One story of honoring the father is the story of Joseph. Again, this is found in Genesis. He was Jacob's beloved son, his favorite son. Because of the partiality of his father and Joseph's own arrogance, he is almost killed but ends up being sold into slavery by his brothers, out of jealousy. He ends up in Egypt. After a time in prison, he rebounds to become the Vice Regent of Egypt due to his ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He was a real comeback kid. When a famine comes to Jacob's land, Jacob sends Joseph's brothers to seek out food in Egypt, not knowing that Joseph is alive and oversees the food supply.

After some intrigue, as Joseph is not recognized, Joseph invites the whole family to live in Egypt, where they avoid a several-year famine. Joseph honors his father. When Jacob dies, Joseph attends to his burial according to Jacob's wishes. This, too, is honoring the parent, respecting and caring for the father.

Another Bible story extends this honor even further. This one is found in the book of Ruth. Naomi, a Hebrew, has two sons who have Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. Remember, the Moabites were hated.

Naomi's husband dies, and the sons also die. This leaves Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi destitute and defenseless. So, Naomi tells her daughters to go home to their families because there is no way for her to care for them, and she is unable to provide another son for her daughters-in-law. A brother to her deceased sons would take responsibility for the care of Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi.

Orpah goes home. She doesn't go until after first refusing to go and trying to stay to honor her mother-in-law. It is important to note that Orpah is not condemned in Scripture. It was recognized that she had no way to support her mother-in-law, so she returned to her people, the Moabites. She couldn't see any way to help Naomi by staying, and for this, she is not to blame.

However, Ruth stays and utters one of the most well-known statements in the scriptures:

Ruth 1:16-17 New King James Version (NKJV)

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth said:

“Entreat me not to leave you,  
Or to turn back from following after you;  
For wherever you go, I will go;  
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people *shall be* my people,  
And your God, my God.

<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die,  
And there will I be buried.

The LORD do so to me, and more also,  
If *anything but* death parts you and me.”

They return to Naomi's Jewish land, where Ruth the Moabite supports Naomi the Hebrew by gleaning, picking grain that the harvesters are commanded to leave behind to care for people experiencing poverty. This is one of the ways the Hebrew people ensured food for those experiencing poverty; they left some for those in need, rather than maximizing profits without concern for those in need. She gleans the fields of Boaz. Later, Ruth ends up marrying Boaz, who fulfills his duty as a relative of her husband.

This is another way the Hebrew people worked to care for the poor and defenseless. Ruth and her husband, Boaz, now care for Naomi and show her honor. As an aside, this despised Moabite Ruth is the ancestor of David, earning Ruth, this Jew by Choice, high esteem in Jewish tradition.

Ruth, a Moabite, an alien foreigner, expands the concept of honoring a parent by honoring an in-law in many ways. This, too, is an act of honoring father and mother. How we honor them in a caring way has many options and they can be difficult to discern, but it is our calling to find ways to show honor.

Adult children must fulfill the commandment to honor both our father and mother. They are to do what they can to provide for and care for their parents. Honoring parents implies an obligation, and it can often be challenging to figure out how to fulfill it. We parents can be difficult people. And yes, I know that some parents make it nearly impossible to show honor and respect. One of the most challenging aspects many of us will face is learning how to allow our children to care for us and show us honor.

So how did Jesus treat this commandment?

One scripture has him arguing with the Pharisees, saying they allow gifts to be given to religious purposes that should be used to help aged parents. He accuses them of violating the command by following their tradition to circumvent the commandment.

There is the childhood story from Jesus' trip to Jerusalem as he studies with the religious leaders of the people, time passes, and his parents start to return home, thinking he is in the procession somewhere. But he is not. They panic as they search for him. He worried his parents, Mary and Joseph, to death: "Where is he? Has something happened?" They find him studying with the teachers of the law. And in what sounds like an affront to Joseph, Jesus says, "I must be about my father's business." But in another sense, he is doing something that honors God, and by extension, honoring God honors Joseph as well.

Luke adds an editorial that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, obeying and honoring his parents. He achieves this by growing up in a manner that ensures the trajectory of his life is one that his parents can be proud of. His studying the law honors his parents, as he is a child taught to love learning and the ways and teachings of God.

Mary, too, seems to have a rough time with him. Remember when he is at a wedding at Cana of Galilee and his mother tells him the wine ran out. He tells his mother, "Be quiet, I'm not ready for this; it is not my time, and it's not our worry that the wedding party has run out of wine." But then Jesus does what his mother asks and remedies the situation by turning water into wine. A lot of wine, a lot of high-quality wine. The pull to honor his mother overcomes even his own plans and timeline.

And again, Jesus restores to life a widow's deceased son so that the son might care for his mother. He does not insist that the young man now leave everything behind and follow him; instead, he restores him to life that he might be of service to and honor his mother.

And finally, in the end, Jesus, right before he dies on the cross, takes the time to care for his mother and place her in the care of the Beloved Disciple. Even the most significant test of his loyalty to God, the cross, did not distract him from his duty to care for his mother, who needed to be cared for after he was gone. One of his last acts is to honor his mother as the commandment intends by seeing that she is cared for. He does this from the cross.

As I said at the beginning, this is our first relationship beyond ourselves that involves a neighbor. The way we care for others is rooted in the way we care for our parents, and even more so, in the way our parents and grandparents care for us. We can find it in church as we seek to care for one another in ways that show honor and respect.

The command to honor our parents is the bedrock on which our personal and social lives are built. It is a matter of individual morality and social justice.

And it reflects the type of society we strive to build—a society in which people are treated with honor and respect. Especially important is how we treat our aging and vulnerable population. They are to be treasured, not seen as a burden or turned into a political football. Honoring father and mother forms the bedrock of the kind of life we live and experience, and the society we try to build. And as we uphold this commandment, we honor God.

12 Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the Lord your God is giving to you.