

Honor Your Parents *God's Gift of Ten Words 3*

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from the pulpit of
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Exodus 20:12

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Mark 7:1-16

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but

their hearts are far from me;⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

⁹Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

While planning this sermon series on the Gift of God's Ten Words I had to make choices. Ten Commandments and five Sundays of Lent before Holy Week, and simple math may have suggested considering two a week. However these Ten Words did not march in and out of the Ark of the Covenant two-by-two! They were given together as a gift of God's wisdom to lead a holy people with God's values; to help build up civil community; to manifest the goodness of God through how people treated one another. The Ten Words are ordered from allegiance to God to ethical behavior toward others. So I clustered the first three together: the Liberating Lord of the Exodus is God alone; we have no need for idols or any other god; we make no vain, trivial use of God's name because that name carries power beyond our grasp and understanding. In a similar way, we will consider the last four commandments on the fifth Sunday because each speaks to how we treat our neighbor.

But those in the middle are occupying our attention one by one, because they serve as a bridge between love of God and love of neighbor. Last week we considered how Sabbath keeping allows for intentional worship of God; and requires we grant other people a day of rest. Next week we will probe how the commandment *You shall not murder* is directly related to God, the giver of life, who prohibits taking the life of another. Today's consideration of *Honor Your Parents* is the center of this three commandment bridge between a Word about honoring God and living responsibly with neighbor.

Old Testament scholar, Patrick Miller, said the *bridge* function of Honoring Parents is evident. He wrote, "The starting point of life with the other is with those with whom one is already related and upon whom one has some dependence. One may have no other kinship relations, but one always has a parent." The Fourth Word commands us to live as those who know our very being is a gift. Our lives are not self-derived. The so called "self-made" man or woman is a lie."¹

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation commentary, p. 169.

How we ought to live with one another, beginning in families, is derived from how we worship God. Now, to understand this commandment, we have to ask what age of child is being addressed, and tackle the misuse of the commandment head on. You do not need to know much about the reality of child abuse in our world to know that the command to honor one's parents is more complex than showing respect for one's elders. Strict Christian communities have misused this commandment as a cover for all manner of horrible behavior toward children; and apart from any warped religious rationale, child abuse and neglect is a staggering problem. This commandment does not license harmful punishment of children or youth. It actually confronts abuse that could be found justified in ancient patriarchal culture. Wherever tribal clans were organized around strong men, and the patriarch could rule as he pleased, where property and wealth were passed solely from father to son, this Fourth Word is a new life-giving law.

As a matter of fact, given the power of patriarchy into which this word of God is spoken, the inclusivity of *Honor your father and mother* shatters old human expectations. As pastor and writer Eugenia Gamble points out, "In a patriarchal society where men's words, stories and worth were dominant and usually unquestioned, extending the command to honor mothers is breathtaking. Here, God acknowledges women as instruments of God's creative power on par with men and worthy of the same reverence. Life is sacred and all who play a role in bringing us to life are to be revered."²

The commandment, therefore, presumes a functioning relationship between father and mother and child... and focuses on the mature child's dealing with older and frailer parents. Being a child puts one in a relational category, not an age category.³ In essence, this Word proclaims care and compassion in down-to-earth economic realities.

² Eugenia Gamble, *Words of Love*

³ According to Pat Miller, (p.6)

Remember, this was a time when there were no Individual Retirement Accounts – no 403-B's and no Social Security. Aging parents, as well as elderly people without family to care for them, could be left destitute.

There was – at that time - even a practice where the elderly might be escorted or carried up to the Temple in Jerusalem during pilgrimages, and left there, abandoned, with the presumption that they might receive alms.

That is why our gospel lesson recounts Jesus' absolute fury at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. In our Gospel reading Jesus has been performing healings and working miracles, setting the religious authorities on edge, and tension is mounting as the action-packed gospel speeds toward Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Here, the Pharisees begin picking on the disciples for not observing strict purity laws about clean food and eating utensils. When they invoke the tradition of "the elders" Jesus lashes out at their hypocrisy: *You abandon the commandment of God* in order to keep your human money-making tradition.

You see, the religious leaders had created a way around keeping the commandment to honor father and mother, by creating a special offering to God, through the Temple, that relieved the obligation to care for one's parents. Jesus invokes this particular commandment: *For Moses said, Honor your father and mother...* and then Jesus condemns this abusive practice by saying, in effect, by your made-up substitute offering, which is lining your own pockets, you no longer require support of father or mother, thus you make void the word of God. Then to put a point on it, Jesus further says, "And you do many things like this." Time and again, Jesus is called out for breaking the Laws, but in actuality Jesus is continually clarifying the meaning of the law. Jesus brings us back to the clear social concern this commandment intends.

The word, *honor*, means to revere, to carry weight, to give something its due weight or importance. Here's the bridge part; worship of God leads to carrying the vulnerable. You could say this is the commandment that Jesus himself kept to the very end, when he looked down from the cross,

saw his disciple and mother witnessing his crucifixion and with his last breath said to his mother, *Here is your son*, and to his disciple *here is your mother... and from that hour the disciple took her into his home.*⁴ Jesus' last act in his life was giving his mother into the care of another. He was enacting this commandment, this fundamental vision of God for human flourishing, where people bear social responsibility for the vulnerable, the frail, the infirm, the elderly. You cannot have genuine, viable community without this multi-generational concern for those in need.

Did you notice that this is the one and only commandment that also includes a promise? ¹²*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.* In the words of one leading rabbinic scholar, "Gratitude for all that our parents have done for us is a stepping stone to recognizing the goodness of God and all the blessings that flow from the Holy One."⁵ We are called to tend to the aging in order to have a future for ourselves, for our children and our children's children. According to God's promise of *long days to live* the honoring of our parents actually shows us how to live by giving us a future.

One of my Old Testament Professors from seminary wrote eloquently about how paying attention to the full life of our parents can be a source of wisdom for us as we all inevitably age. Even after they are gone, we can recall their memory in this life lesson. With this commandment in mind and the weight of honor which it intends, Sib Towner remembers his parents as they aged: "For decades my mother and father lived in a nice six-room house with a finished basement, a two-car garage and a lovely yard. From their headquarters they used to sally forth into an open and inviting world of prairies and mountains, seas and bees and people galore. They visited exotic places, participated in civic affairs and had friends for dinner and games of bridge. When my father had died, in her

⁴ John 19:26-27.

⁵ Maimonides quote from *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves*, ed. Rachel Mikva.

80's my mother's world shrank to a two-room apartment with a kitchenette and balcony and no car. In her 90's, down to a room and a hall leading to a common dining area. The books that were once her window on the world, the TV, the telephone that formerly connected her with friends, fell victim to her failing sight and hearing. In short, the dimensions of her world had shrunk, and for her as with other aging persons, the once broad and free world became a more narrow and limited one."

Then Sib Towner makes this profound observation that I think bears witness to the beautiful complexity of human flourishing in multi-generational community. While aging may lead us to be more dependent upon others for our care, the wisdom younger generations can glean from honoring our elders is still priceless. What he learned from his aging mother, Towner wrote is "that a more narrow and limited world can also be a deeper and wiser one. I am not about to supply a happy ending to the story of age-shrinkage," he said, "But I do see an opportunity for advanced preparation here... If you stock up for the inner journey in advance, you have a chance. If shrinkage of the outer physical scope characterizes aging, how about enlarging the inner scope to compensate? How about following the lead of grandfathers and grandmothers everywhere who recognize that every intimate moment with a child is a precious gift? We learn these things by honoring our parents. How about learning beloved poems and psalms by heart now? How about starting to write memoirs, to make a record of your adventures, to recall and to tell your most treasured stories? While we still have a chance, let's stock up for the coming years." Towner concludes, "Then, when our bodies let us down good and proper and we are confined to a few hundred square feet, our winged spirits may still range far and wide in their search for truth and beauty. That's not shrinkage anymore! That's growth!"⁶

⁶ Sib Towner, *The Gargoyle Speaks*, Union Presbyterian Seminary alumni magazine, date unknown.

Friends, in a communal, religious life, of many gathered generations, rehearsed in prayer and reflection, and God's Ten Words, we become well equipped for old age. And together, with our elders we are actually able to go deeper and deeper into the vast goodness of God as we regard one another with honor.

AMEN.