

The Fifth Commandment HONOUR YOUR PARENTS

“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.” Exodus 20:12

The first four Commandments deal with our duty to God. The last six Commandments deal with our duty to man.

Our Lord Jesus Christ summarised the two tablets of the Law when He answered the question concerning which is the greatest Commandment. Jesus said: ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great Commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two Commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.’”*** Matthew 22:36-40

Grimm’s Fairy Tales includes this story:

Once there was an old man whose eyes blinked continually, and whose hands trembled uncontrollably. As he had no place to live, he moved in with his son’s family. His daughter-in-law hated it when at the dinner table he constantly rattled his silverware and spilled his drinks. In anger and exasperation she insisted he eat his meals alone in the corner, separated from the rest of the family. He began to eat alone, looking occasionally at the family sitting at the table. Then, one day, when his hands were shaking so much that he knocked his bowl onto the floor, his meal spilt onto the carpet. The daughter-in-law screamed: *“If you are going to eat like a pig we’ll feed you like a pig!”* She placed a wooden trough on the floor and told him that he would have to eat out of the trough like an animal. This he did.

Some days later the woman’s young son came into the house excited to show her something he had made: *“Look Mommy! I’ve made a trough to feed you and Daddy out of when I get big.”*

The woman began to cry as she realised what a terrible evil she was guilty of. From that day forward the old man ate his meals at the table with the rest of the family and the daughter-in-law did everything she could to make up for the cruel way that she had treated her father-in-law.

Today in so many ways we see cruel disrespect for elderly parents who are frequently abandoned in old age homes and neglected. One of the first ministries I had was preaching in Old Age Homes. Many complained to me how they *“never”* had visits from their children.

“Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old.” Proverbs 23:22

Thomas Watson articulated the Puritan tradition in his exposition of the Fifth Commandment, by distinguishing between five categories of parents that we need to honour: political fathers, ancient fathers, spiritual fathers, domestic fathers and natural fathers.

1. By *political fathers* he meant kings and princes, governors and mayors, municipal, provincial and national leaders.
2. By *ancient fathers* he meant our fathers in the Faith, either of Biblical times or in Church history. (This would include Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, the

prophets and Apostle Peter and John, the Early Church fathers Polycarp, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine; The missionaries: Patrick, Columba, Boniface, William Carey and David Livingstone; and the Reformers: John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, Ulrich Zwingli, William Farel, John Calvin, John Knox and Heinrich Bullinger. The Evangelist George Whitefield, the pastors Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Murray and Charles Spurgeon).

3. By *spiritual fathers* he meant the pastors, teachers or mission and ministry leaders we are answerable to. (In my life this has included Rev. 'Doc' Watson, Francis Grim, Rev. Erlo Stegen and Rev. Bill Bathman.)
4. By *domestic fathers* he meant employers, our teachers, or our boss. (In the military this would be your Sergeant Major and Commanding Officer).
5. And by *natural fathers* he means of course our own parents and grandparents.

According to the *Westminster Larger Catechism* the Duties Required in the Fifth Commandment are defined as "*the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors or equals*" (Question 126). There are people we are inferior to, people we are superior to and people we are equal to. The *Westminster Catechism* carefully distinguishes between our duties and responsibilities in each of these relationships.

These Duties Required include: The duty of honour to superiors ("*The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is all due reverence in heart, word and behaviour*" Q127).

"You shall rise before the grey-headed and honour the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord." Leviticus 19:32

The duty to pray and give thanks for superiors: ("*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications and prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty.*" 1 Timothy 2: 1-2)

The duty to imitate their virtues and graces ("***Remember those who rule over you who have spoken the Word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.***" Hebrews 13:7)

The duty of willing obedience to the lawful commands of our superiors ("***Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother which is the First Commandment with promise...bond servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye service, as men pleasers, but as bond servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men.***" Ephesians 6:1-7

"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." Hebrews 13:17

"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it

patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God." 1 Peter 2:18-20)

The duty of due submission to correction (*"Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of Spirits and live?"* Hebrews 12:9)

The duty of faithfulness to superiors (*"Exhort bond servants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."* Titus 2:9-10)

"You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this (civilian) life, that he may please him who enlisted him (his commanding officer) as a soldier." 2 Timothy 2:3-4)

The duty to defend superiors (*"So David said to Abner, are you not a man?...as the Lord lives you deserve to die, because you have not guarded your master."* 1 Samuel 26:15-16)

The duty of bearing with the infirmities of the superiors, covering them with love (*"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh."* 1 Peter 2:18)

The duty of superiors to love, pray for and bless inferiors (*"Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them."* Colossians 3:19; *"That they (older women) admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children."* Titus 2:4)

"Moreover, as for me, far be it for me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way." 1 Samuel 12: 23)

The duty of superiors to instruct inferiors (*"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."* Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." Ephesians 6:4)

The duty of superiors to reward inferiors when they do well (*"Then the king said: 'what honour or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?'"* Esther 6:3)

The duty of superiors to reprove and chastise inferiors (*"The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother."* Proverbs 29:15)

The duty of superiors to give a good example to inferiors (*"The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderous, not given to much wine, teachers of good things – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, home makers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the Word of God may not be blasphemed."* Titus 2:3-5)

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* lists under the Sins Forbidden in the Fifth Commandment:

The sin of neglecting the duties required of inferiors (*"For God commanded, saying, 'honour your father and mother'; and, 'he who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'* But you say, *whoever says to his father or mother, 'whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift*

to God' – then he need not honour his father or mother. Thus you have made the Commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.” Matthew 15:4-6

“But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God.” 1 Timothy 5:4)

The sin of rebelling against superiors (*“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of the city...and they shall say to the elders of the city, ‘this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones so that you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.”* Deuteronomy 21:8-21;

“...and elders were not respected.” Lamentations 5:12

“Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father.” 1 Timothy 5:1)

The sin of cursing or mocking superiors (*“Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.”* Deuteronomy 27:16; *“The people will be oppressed...The child will be insolent toward the elder. And base toward the honourable.”* Isaiah 3:5; *“There is a generation who curses it’s father, and does not bless it’s mother...the eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valleys will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.”* Proverbs 30:11, 17 *“Whoever curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in deep darkness.”* Proverbs 20:20).

The sin of neglecting the duties required of superiors (*“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed their flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves of the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost, but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.”* Ezekiel 34:2-4).

The sin of superiors who commit unlawful actions (e.g. King Nebuchadnezzar setting up the gold image for all to bow down and worship. Daniel 3:4-6; and the Sanhedrin commanding the disciples not to speak in the Name of Jesus - Acts 4:17-18).

Some people will inevitably say: But surely this Commandment cannot apply to me. My parents were horrible and abused me while I was growing up. Surely God cannot expect me to honour evil parents?

Actually, Yes, God does required us to honour our parents no matter how bad they may have behaved.

Genesis 8 to 9 gives an example of men who honoured a parent who was behaving badly. Soon after the Flood, Noah planted a vineyard. When the grapes were ready, Noah made wine and got so drunk that he passed out in his tent. He was in a shameful condition when one of his three sons, Ham, saw him. The Bible tells us that Ham immediately went out and told his two brothers. But Shem and Japheth honoured Noah by taking a blanket and walking backwards into their father’s tent to cover him up. The Scripture informs us that Ham and his descendants were cursed for failing to honour his father, even though Noah’s behaviour at this time was clearly dishonorable. The relatives of Shem and Japheth were blessed by God because of how they had honoured their father.

Those children of famous people who write “*tell all*” books which put their parents in a bad light disgrace themselves and displease God.

Parents are commanded to teach their children to honour all lawful authority, starting with their own parents. Children who are not disciplined and taught to honour their parents while they are young, will not honour them when they are older.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary teaches that the Fifth Commandment: *“Includes: 1. A decent respect to their persons, an inward esteem of them outwardly expressed upon all occasions in our conduct. 2. Obedience to their lawful commands...Ephesians 6:1-3 ‘Children obey your parents,’... 3. Submission to their rebukes, instructions and corrections; not only to the good and gentle, but also the harsh, out of conscience towards God. Endeavouring in everything, to be the comfort of their parents, and to make their old age easy to them, maintaining them if they stand in need of support, which our Saviour makes to be particularly intended in this Commandment (Matthew 15:4-6)...that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.”*

Commenting on the Fifth Commandment, Dr. James Kennedy observed that in his decades of ministry he had seen numerous people fired, but *“poor job performance was very rarely the reason. In most cases, the problem was one of attitude, a rebellion against authority. Why? Because they never learned respect for authority at home. ‘Why has my life been so miserable?’ they ask. ‘Why do I have so much trouble in so many different areas?’ Because they never learned to honour their father and mother. They have no respect for any type of authority, they are not thankful for anything they have been given and ultimately they will bring the entire nation to ruin. There are many historical examples:*

“Persia became the first of the great world empires because Persians trained their children to be obedient. But eventually things changed, because the Persians had grown wealthy, which brought about a relaxed discipline, which led, in turn, to sin, and then to the downfall of the nation.

“Then came the Greeks whose discipline was legendary. The Spartans, for example were so strict that when a young man entered the army he was given a shield and told: ‘Come back with it or on it, but don’t drop it and flee and don’t surrender. Either fight till you die or gain the victory.’” Thus it was that just 300 Spartan soldiers were able to hold the line against hundreds of thousands of the Persian enemy at the Battle of Thermopylae.

“But the Greeks became self-satisfied; they failed to teach their children the importance of honouring their parents, and thereby faded into history.

“The Roman Empire was the next to rise, due principally to the Patria Potestas – the absolute total rule of the father over the son – which was enforced as long as the father and son should live....that iron discipline enabled the Romans to conquer the entire known world. But then, like the Persians and Greeks before them they forgot all about the importance of honour and respect for parents and produced such monsters as Nero.” Nero who murdered his own mother. *“Rome was swallowed up by God’s judgment in history.”*

Shamefully, the first sin I committed after surrendering my life to Christ was to dishonour my parents. It was 3 April 1977. I had attended an evangelistic rally at a cinema in Pinelands. As the preacher proclaimed what Christ had done for me he asked the question: *“What have you ever done for Him?”*

I was stunned and ashamed. I'd never done anything for God. My family was Secular. We never attended church services. Sunday School had never been part of my life. We did not even pray before meals. Like my father, I described myself as an "Agnostic."

Now, all of the arguments I had picked up over the years against God and Christianity seemed awfully puny as I bowed before the Creator of the universe. I realised that I was lost and there was nothing I could say in my defence. I knew that if I died that night, I would go into an eternity separated from God – in hell. I was a selfish, self-centred, ungrateful creature. I had never even so much as thanked God for the life He had given me, and for His many evidences of grace in my, and in my family's, life.

There was no way I could possibly deserve God's love, but I felt this absolutely overwhelming compulsion to stand up and go forward and make a public commitment of my life to Christ. The very least I could do was to thank God for all that He had done in Christ for me.

They were singing "*Just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me*" as I walked down the aisle and bowed down in prayer at the front of that cinema in Pinelands. It was the most exhilarating experience. There could be no doubt whatsoever. God was reaching down and putting life within me. I had been deaf, dumb, blind and dead in my trespasses and sins. For the first time my Spiritual eyes were being opened. For the first time I could consciously sense the presence of God. In fact I was absolutely overwhelmed with a sense of the presence of God, His love and His mercy. I trembled before His holiness and power even as I reveled in the joy of knowing that my sins were forgiven. I was a new creature in Christ!

I wanted to jump and leap and shout and proclaim what God had done. This was a completely new experience for me. With a German mother and an English father, we Anglo-Saxons didn't particularly go much into expressing emotion about anything. But as I walked and skipped on the way home from that cinema that night, all kinds of emotions were bubbling up within me. What was I to say at home? I couldn't wait to tell my parents what God had done.

However, as I opened the door, I saw that someone had beaten me to it. A friend of the family, who had also been at the rally, had rushed over to inform my incredulous parents that their son had gone forward at one of these "*Billy Graham things!*" Jeers and scorns greeted me.

"*So, you have become a born-again Baptist like Jimmy Carter!*" That really stung. As a patriotic Rhodesian, I despised everything that Jimmy Carter was doing in betraying our, and so many other, countries into the hands of Marxist revolutionaries. To us Jimmy Carter was the epitome of an hypocrite and a traitor. Shamefully I lashed back with razor-sharp tongue defending my conversion and disassociating from everything that Jimmy Carter stood for. Like my parents I was an argumentative type and rose to the challenge with characteristic verbal aggression.

Later that night, as for the first time in my life I bowed in prayer at the side of my bed, I was ashamed that the very first witness I'd given to my parents had been to dishonour them and argue. I despaired at the sinful desire to justify myself rising so quickly out of the heart of one who had, at that very hour, given his life to Christ. I did not yet have a Bible. But I knew that I had sinned against the Lord in my attitude and in my words and actions towards my parents that night.

Equally shamefully within a year of my conversion I was dishonouring and criticizing the pastor under whom I had been converted and discipled, Rev. 'Doc' Watson. When, approximately a year after my conversion, I testified of being filled with the Holy Spirit, the pastor and deacons warned the congregation about the danger of "*Pentecostalism.*" I was bewildered. I had no idea what Pentecostalism was. I'd read in the Book of Acts of disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit, and

I had experienced an overwhelming, exhilarating, overflowing of God's Holy Spirit and had testified of it. At that stage I had never attended any other church. I did not even know of any Pentecostals, and had never anticipated the controversy that my testimony would engender.

Soon I found myself part of a clique of highly critical youth who came together to criticise the church leadership. We would literally listen to the sermons of Rev. 'Doc' Watson in order to find something to complain about. We even convinced ourselves that our pastor had committed "*the unforgivable sin*" in blaspheming the Holy Spirit! After months of disgraceful backbiting, the Lord brought great conviction of sin upon me. As I realised the evil that I was guilty of, I went to 'Doc' Watson, confessed and committed myself to being in submission to his leadership, and obeying his instructions. Soon it became clear to me that there was nothing wrong with 'Doc' Watson, the problem was within my heart and soul.

From these very unpromising beginnings, 'Doc' Watson became my mentor. And shortly after founding Frontline Fellowship, he became Chairman of the Board of our mission. From 1985 through to his death in 2002, Doc Watson always took a keen interest in our mission. He applied his critical mind to our work and many were the constructive criticisms that I, and our mission benefitted from. I will always be grateful for the time and energy which 'Doc' invested in discipling me and guiding our mission, particularly in its formative years. He was a great and effective evangelist and pastor. I regularly remember the self-deception that blinded me to this. And when I took seriously the command in Hebrews 13:17 "***Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.***" I came to realise what tremendous blessing I was denying to myself by failing to honour this Command.

By God's grace I had the opportunity to honour and support my parents for many years. Only once did I miss Christmas with my parents. It was December 1983 and I was on a mission trip to Mozambique and Zimbabwe. I later felt convicted that I should have rearranged my mission schedule to ensure that I was with my parents over Christmas. After that I never again missed celebrating Christmas with my parents. After my father died in 1986 I endeavoured to visit my mother as often as possible and to have her around to my home for Sunday lunch as frequently as she was willing. When my mother lost her leg and invalided, Lenora and I gladly took her into our home, and built a flat at the back of our property to house her. It was a joy and privilege to have my mother for the last three and a half years of her life staying in our home, being involved in the schooling of our children, and joining us for family Devotions and Sunday worship.

The Lord also revealed to me ways in which I could honour my Spiritual fathers. I wrote letters of appreciation to Francis Grim of International Hospital Christian Fellowship, thanking him for the example he was, and what he had invested in training me for Missions. As my first mission trip, to Mozambique, had been under his leadership while I was part of Hospital Christian Fellowship, I dedicated the book *In the Killing Fields of Mozambique* to him.

As Dr. Fritz Haus had first introduced me to the doctrines of the Reformation while I was a theological student at the Baptist Theological College, I requested him to write a Foreword for *The Greatest Century of Reformation* book, and to be an honoured guest speaker at its launch. I invited Dr. Fritz Haus to be an Honorary Member on the Advisory Board of Frontline Fellowship, and to minister at various of our Biblical Worldview Summits, and at our mission house.

As Rev. Erlo Stegen has been a Spiritual father and example to me, I requested him to write the Foreword to the *Biblical Principles for Africa* book and dedicated *Putting Feet to Your Faith* to him.

It was also a privilege to dedicate my book *Faith Under Fire in Sudan* to Rev. Bill and Harriett Bathman, and to arrange special fifty years in Marriage and Ministry celebrations for them in South Africa, and even to take Bill Bathman to Sudan in 2001. In 2002 Rev. Bill Bathman was made the Chairman of Frontline Fellowship.

Over the years I've had several occasions to honour my political father, Ian Smith, who was Prime Minister of Rhodesia when I was growing up. Whenever he came under attack in the media, no matter what my deadlines and time pressures were, I always pushed them to one side in order to write letters in defence of Ian Smith, and to counter the slander and disinformation in the media. To get more of his message out, I interviewed him on Radio Tygerberg, and wrote articles that would place in context his courageous stand against communism in the Cold War. When Ian Smith died last year, I wrote articles and tributes in honour of him and published one of these in Frontline Fellowship News.

Shamefully, as a new Christian, I picked up a hostility to Reformer John Calvin and ignorantly repeated some outrageous accusations that I had heard others say. However, as I learned more of our church history, I realised that I had been taking part in the dishonouring of a Spiritual father. Since then I've had numerous opportunities to put the record straight and to honour the accomplishments and integrity of John Calvin. Lenora and I named our youngest son after Calvin, and I've written numerous articles, and produced different PowerPoint lectures on the life and teachings of John Calvin.

Our William Carey Bible Institute correspondence programme is named after the Father of Modern Missions, William Carey. Our mission headquarters is named Livingstone House after the great Scottish pioneer missionary David Livingstone who opened up Africa for the Gospel and exposed the Islamic Slave Trade.

It was to honour our fathers in the Faith that I wrote *The Greatest Century of Missions* and *The Greatest Century of Reformation*. The Reformation Society was launched in order to honour the courage, integrity and achievements of our ancient Fathers in the Faith.

The health of the individual family hinges on obedience to the Fifth Commandment. However, much more is at stake here. "*As goes the family, so goes the nation.*" If children do not learn to respect their own parents, they are not likely to respect any other kind of authority later in life. Those who do not learn to respect their parents at home, are not likely to respect teachers at school, and when such people graduate, they are unlikely to respect the law.

This Commandment does not require us to always **obey** our parents, but we must always **honour** them. This speaks of our tone of voice and attitude of heart which should communicate respect and honour. The Bible warns of serious judgment on those who dishonour their parents:

"The eye that mocks his father and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out and the young eagles will eat it." Proverbs 30:17

Honouring parents (especially unreasonable, unbelieving parents) does not involve giving in to all their various schemes to draw their offspring away from dedication to God. If parents are overly possessive, overbearing and domineering, their adult children are not obligated to invest undue time and energy pandering to their dictates and manipulations. Our first and primary duty is to honour our Heavenly Father, the Lord God, our Creator and Eternal Judge. Our responsibility to honour our parents comes second to our duty to God. Devotion and honour to our parents must not in any way undermine our devotion to God.

The Fifth Commandment protects young people from pride and arrogance by calling for respect for elders and preventing the younger from doing just as they want. The Fifth Commandment offers protection against the anarchy and instability of youth. The Fifth Commandment gives stability by protecting us from impulsiveness, rashness and inexperience. Obeying this Commandment is a pathway to blessing.

“The Lord said...Be holy because I, the Lord your God am holy. Each of you must respect his mother and father...I am the Lord.” Leviticus 19:1-3

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