

THE HONOR CONFLICT

(The Fifth Commandment, continuing the series: Ten Commandments Revisited)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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Matthew 10:34-39

The fifth commandment opens up a kettle of worms. At first reading, "Honor your father and your mother" seems quite innocuous until you begin to explore its ramifications.

The fifth commandment is the bridge commandment, connecting the God commandments to the neighbor commandments. Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two: Love God and love your neighbor. The bridge between the two is the fifth commandment.

This is the first commandment that contains a promise. "Honor your father and your mother so that you may have long life in the land that God has given to you." A good life, a long life is promised to those who fulfill their family obligations. Family relationships are, therefore, of great consequence. They affect the rest of life. Get the family relationships in order and the other relationships will fall in line. The early church evidently had several widows for whom the church felt responsible. Thank God we live in a country that has social welfare programs for the elderly, the widowed. But, in that day, Christians took that responsibility. In I Timothy, instructions are given; the church is responsible for widows who have no family, but widows with family are the responsibility of the family. Hear this strong statement in I Timothy 5:8, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." If you cannot take care of your family obligations--honoring your father and your mother--you are not a worthy member of the church, says Timothy.

On the other hand, we have Jesus' surprising and perplexing statement which was read in the Gospel lesson this morning. In our journey through the commandments, we have now reached the point where Jesus begins to reinterpret the commandments, sometimes adding to their meaning, sometimes changing the meaning, as in this case. Hear this emphatic command given by Jesus in Matthew 10:35-38, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.... He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." How is that statement reconciled with the commandment, "Honor your father and your mother?"

There is an honor conflict. How many of you are parents? How many of you are children (one or both parents still living?) How many of you have been children? How many of you are both parents and children? That is not an easy position. It has its benefits, but it also is difficult to be both a parent and a child. I suspect that when the parent/child relationship is discussed, we find unresolved feelings and a lot of guilt. The old conscience bothers many of us because of the honor conflict. Do you have guilt such as, "I don't do enough for my parents.....I promised my mother.....I told myself I would never put my parents in a nursing home.....I know I'm not being fair to my kids or to my spouse, but my parents.....Now that my mother is in her second childhood, I find myself relating to her as she related to me when I was a child, and I always vowed that I would not repeat her mistakes." Yes, this commandment stirs up feelings, guilt, unresolved issues. For there is conflict.

Take the question: How do you honor, how do you respect your parents when they did not honor or respect you? In one of my former churches, we all worked with Brad, a teenage boy who was beginning to drift to the street. He was thinking of quitting school. He was hanging out with the wrong crowd. He seemed to have a very low opinion of himself. His mother encouraged him to go out for football. I encouraged him. Brad was a big

fellow who had never shown any interest in athletics, but he decided to give it a try and surprised himself by liking it. Football, or any team sport, has helped many a person find support, identity and an improved self-image. Brad was doing fine until one day his father jeered, "You make the football team!! Ha, ha!" A few days later, Brad "conveniently" sprained his ankle so he had to drop football. It's amazing how we can get our body to cooperate. In his father's eyes, Brad didn't amount to much, and he was trying to prove that his father was right. There are very few things in life more important to a boy than the belief of his father in him. How does Brad now honor/respect his father? For we all learn how to honor by being honored. We learn by how we were done to!!

At the other extreme, and also examples of disrespect and dishonor, is the parent who dominates, stifles, smothers his/her child. The child is not allowed to make decisions or think, unless given permission. The child is not respected. Sometimes this manipulation extends through adulthood and even into death. Have you known persons who are still controlled by their mothers, who still run those old tapes in the mind, even when the mother is no longer alive? How does one respect, honor parents when they were not honored or respected by their parents? How do you resolve the conflict?

There is another question which illustrates the honor conflict. Which honor, which duty, has higher priority--a duty to parents or a duty to children and spouse? What do you do when you are torn between your parents and your children? Or, what do you do when there is a conflict between honoring parents and living out God's will for your own life? When I graduated from seminary and was appointed to four churches in rural Minnesota, I was part of a cooperative larger parish. One of the other ministers was a single woman minister named Mary, actually Mary Jr., for her mother who lived with her was called Mary Sr. Mary Jr. helped pave the way for women ministers and she had a style all her own. She owned only two or three dresses, all black. She wore her hair in a pug. She wore no makeup and had rimless glasses. She was an excellent minister who put up with no monkeybusiness. With a Bible under one arm and the Methodist Discipline under the other, she attacked her churches with enthusiasm and determination. Then her mother became ill. Mary Jr. decided to take an extended leave from the ministry and took Mary Sr. back home to Philadelphia. A sister earned the money for the family and Mary Jr. took care of Mary Sr. Ten years later, Mary Jr. died and Mary Sr. lived on. The doctor said Mary Jr. died of a virus which began taking over her body probably about ten years previously! Jesus' words ring in my ear when I think of Mary Jr., "She who loves mother more than me...Whoever puts her hand to the plow but then turns back..." To whom did Mary Jr. owe her first loyalty, her ministry or her mother?

These are not easy questions, for, on the other hand, are those persons who escape into their church or work and, in the name of God, escape their family obligations and responsibility. I know ministers who have children with messed-up lives and unhappy, lonely wives because they lose themselves in the causes to which they believe God is calling; but you can't help wondering if it isn't career advancement, or fear of failure that motivates them. Can you not get so involved in activities and work that you evade your responsibility and then sanctify the ~~evasion~~^{evasion} by calling it God's will? A mother told her little boy not to bother his father for father again had to bring work home which he couldn't get done at the office. The boy observed, "Why don't they put him in the slow group?"

How do we honor our father and mother? How can we be the best parents and the best children we can be? Clarify your objectives. What is your objective as a parent? What do you hope for your children? My objective for my children is that they will become adults who are independent (able to make their own decisions), with good self-images, who love God and neighbor, and are sensitive and concerned with justice, peace, and human needs. Is that your objective as well?

Now ask yourself, as a child what is your objective for your parents? What do you hope for your parents, especially when they advance in years? Isn't it the same objective you have for your children? That they will be senior adults who are independent (as long as they are physically and mentally able), have a good self-image, love God and neighbor, and live socially constructive lives? Now, with that objective in mind, how best is it achieved?

We can be the best parents and children by remembering we are people of the covenant. You are in covenant with God. God is your God. You are not alone. God is with you. Your part of the covenant is to live as God's people, beginning with the first commandment: God is #1. Jesus' demand that we love Jesus more than father, mother, or child means that God is #1. God then shows us how to honor when we have our priorities straight.

I believe that Jesus' strong words are intended to urge us to be detached. Detachment is a lifestyle. Detach yourself from parents and children; let them go. Extricate yourself from the feelings, ties, bonds, manipulations, guilt; step aside and get the family relationships in perspective. Perhaps you need to talk with an outsider--a minister or counselor--to get this perspective. But, we all need to be extricated, released from emotional responses and reactions. You cannot be the best child or parent you can be if you are acting out of guilt; or manipulated by old tapes in your head or by those old vows and promises which are no longer valid; or anger or resentment over the way you were treated. Get detached, step aside, be objective as you seek to attain your objective.

I do not presume to offer any easy answers or resolutions of the honor conflict. In our house we are right in the middle of this dilemma. Each of us works out our own way. I do preach, however, that you can be your best and do your best as a parent and as a child when you take the covenant relationship seriously and live out God's lifestyle, which includes honoring your father, your mother, and your children.

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