

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
October 26, 2014  
©2014

## Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments V. Fertility, the Future, and Family Systems

Exodus 20:12 The Message Honor your father and mother so that you'll live a long time in the land that God, your God, is giving you.

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

“Honor thy father and thy mother.” How many millions of people over the centuries have memorized those words from the way the King James Version translates them? And for many, probably most, of those folks, those words would fit the what the Psalmist wrote about when he said 2500 years ago of God’s instructions and teachings: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103). For many, maybe most, adults would be able to say – from the perspective of adulthood, far removed from the fights and frustrations of the teenager years, time having faded whatever conflicts there may have been that hurt and abraded – that indeed one’s parents are deserving of honor, not simply for giving life but for teaching wisely, for caring unconditionally. Folks who would say this would understand and smile in recognition at Mark Twain’s wry line that “My father was an amazing man. The older I got, the smarter he got.... When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have [him] around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much [he] had learned in seven years.”<sup>1</sup> They might well also agree with Abraham Lincoln’s words: “I remember my mother’s prayers and they have always followed me. They have clung to me all my life.”<sup>2</sup>

But I am also sadly, painfully, aware that there are others, too many others, for

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.toinspire.com/author.asp?author=Mark+Twain>

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.nj.com/parenting/index.ssf/2012/05/this\\_mothers\\_day\\_think\\_about\\_h.html](http://www.nj.com/parenting/index.ssf/2012/05/this_mothers_day_think_about_h.html)

whom these words about “honoring” one’s mother and father are at best bittersweet and, at worst, something that seems morally outrageous. These are the folks whose fathers – or occasionally mothers – may have abused them in ways that stunted and hurt and which left scars that remained decades and decades later. These are the folks whose fathers – or occasionally mothers – abandoned them, leaving them to psychically suffer for years and years and years wondering, even when their adult minds told them this wasn’t so, what it was they did to cause the parent to walk away from them. These are the folks whose parents may have been incapable, for one reason or another, of truly fulfilling the role of protector and nurturer and so much too quickly the child in reality became the one who had to take on the parenting role for siblings and even for the parents themselves, leaving a lifetime of resentment and a longing for what never was.

“Honor thy father and thy mother.” What shall we say about these words, this fifth commandment, and how are they – as the overall title of this series has it – “words to the wise”? What can be said about them that isn’t either platitudinous or which ring false to too many people? Well, in order to begin to try to evoke the wisdom from these words, I suggest we must make a crucial distinction between two related but nonetheless very different meanings of the word “honor.” The first sense of the word is indeed a positive and lovely one. We honored our Shiprock Mission Trip participants as we blessed them for their journey and lauded the important things they were going to do. We honored our high school and college graduates a few months ago for their wonderful achievement of successfully concluding one chapter of life and learning and embarking on another one. Earlier this month our Elders called on us to remember “Clergy Appreciation Month” by giving thanks for how a pastor at some point in our lives made a difference, honoring that pastor for his or her wisdom or faithfulness. In all of these examples, “to honor” someone is to give them praise, to laud them for their good traits, to commend them, or compliment them on their achievements.

But there is a second sense of “honor” that, while related, is distinctively different. A store you deal with may or may not honor second-party checks. The U.S. Constitution says that each state must honor the decisions of other states. The place where I take my car for its oil change will usually honor their competitors’ coupons. A couple of years ago United Airlines chose to honor the tickets of folks who purchased fares to Hong Kong that their website mistakenly had priced at nine dollars. All of these uses of the word “honor” have nothing to do with compliments or praise; no, they simply mean, more or less, “to recognize.” They imply that the person or organization doing the honoring is simply recognizing the existence of some condition, some trait, some state of affairs. In this sense of the word, “to honor” to simply to realize and affirm that something exists – and then to act accordingly.

*And then to act accordingly.* That phrase is the key to understanding what this commandment may be trying to teach us. Did you notice the crucial words that the Common English Bible’s translation has in this verse: “on the fertile land that the Lord your God is giving you.” From the beginning of the Hebrew Bible to the last words of the New Testament, the story of God’s dealings with humanity is the story of how God wants transformation, creativity, and new life to blossom for each and every one. In other words, God is indeed the God of **fertility**. And that word doesn’t just mean biological growth or offspring; no, it means blessed **bounteousness** in every aspect of life.<sup>3</sup> God wants you and me to live lives that are purposive, lives where we use our best talents and traits to better ourselves and this world. But here’s the thing: You can’t do that if you can’t **recognize** what the past has given you. If you deny it or hide from it or pretend it doesn’t exist, then the soil of your life just won’t be nearly as fertile for the transformation and new life that God hopes for you. A writer by the name of Ezekiel Emanuel recently

---

<sup>3</sup>I never talk about this rendering of the Hebrew Bible’s message without deep gratitude for Professor Emeritus Gerald Janzen of Christian Theological Seminary who first introduced me to this meme and who talks of it far more eloquently than I.

penned these poignant and wise words:

Unless there has been terrible abuse, no child wants his or her parents to die. It is a huge loss at any age. It creates a tremendous, unfillable hole. But parents also cast a big shadow for most children. Whether estranged, disengaged, or deeply loving, they set expectations, render judgments, impose their opinions, interfere, and are generally a looming presence for even adult children. This can be wonderful. It can be annoying. It can be destructive. **But it is inescapable....**<sup>4</sup>

Every adult of whatever age knows these realities. And the truth is unless we “honor” our parents in the sense of **recognizing** these things, our lives will simply be less than they could be – and we will make decisions based on things that aren’t the case but we *wish* were the case, and such denial will lead us willfully mis-remembering the past which will play havoc with our futures. Do you remember how, in the story of the Hebrew people’s flight from Egypt, after the frantic exhilaration of their freedom had worn off the people began muttering and complaining and saying things like “If only the LORD had let us die in Egypt! There we sat by our pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted!” (Exodus 16:3, God’s Word translation). Was that actually the case? No. The reality was that they had been enslaved, persecuted, starved and having genocide committed against them. If Moses had given into and himself participated in this false perception, this refusal to recognize the truth, to honor it, how very different the story of mothers and fathers in the faith would have been.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman is one of the founders of what has come to be known as the “family systems approach” in counseling and psychology. It’s chief insight can be stated this way: whenever there is one person who is displaying behavior that is wrong, hurtful, or destructive, it is very, very likely that his behavior is only the most overt of a

---

<sup>4</sup>Ezekiel Emanuel, “Why I Want to Die at 75.” *The Atlantic*, September 17, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/09/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/> Emphasis mine.

whole “family system” of behavior. In less abstract form, for example, the family of an alcoholic typically also has behaviors that reinforce the behavior of the alcoholic. Or, a spouse may say he or she wants wife or husband to stop being such a workaholic, stop putting work first, change her or his priorities, but when examined actually does things that reinforce and enables the workaholism. When the Hebrew people complained that it was Moses who was the villain and had brought them to such an awful place when they had been just fine in Egypt, it was not Moses who was the sole issue. The entire “family system” was caught up in believing in a false picture of the past that threatened to stifle their future. They were not, in our second sense of the word therefore, actually “honoring” the reality of what had been their situation, and for them like for all of us, not acknowledging the truth of the past and not recognizing how sometimes our friends and family are caught up in similar misapprehensions, can doom us to failing to have that fertile future that God wants for us. Philosopher George Santayana’s line has become a cliché, but it remains so often so true: “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

So how shall we move forward to appropriate the wisdom of this commandment? I want to suggest three things. First, pray to God that you would have a clear recognition of who your parents are, their strengths, their weaknesses, their foibles, their flaws – and the good and lovely things about them. But know this: this can be very hard to do all by yourself. If you find that it is difficult, scary, hard to take this kind of objective look, share your need with a friend you trust, who can help you gently, lovingly, but honestly know how to “honor” who your parents are or were to you in the sense of recognizing them candidly. For sometimes when your own situation with your parents is such that such a task seems too hurtful, you may feel like you fit novelist Leo Tolstoy’s famous observation that “Happy families are all alike; [but] every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Know this, though: you are much less alone than Tolstoy’s remark implies

and indeed that there are others who have been through what you've been through and there are others who can help you honestly recognize the reality of your situation.

Second, if you find it oh-so-hard to move to that other sense of “honoring” – to laud and give thanks for – then I would invite you to pray for the ability to forgive that and those who have hurt you. Not in the sense that that means that all is now well and good, all hurt and pain glossed over, but in the sense that those hurts will not control you anymore. Writer Anne Lamott says that the secret to being a mature Christian is to stop wishing that you'd had a different past.<sup>5</sup> In her forthcoming book, Small Victories, Lamott talks about forgiveness; hear some of her words: “Small is how blessings, healing, progress and increase occur” and part of those small blessings, those small victories involve forgiveness –

...which is the hardest work we do.... Forgiveness is difficult--it just is! It's a natural response to avoid more pain.... But the willingness to change in any real way usually comes from the pain of not forgiving. You have to ask yourself, “Would I rather be right or happy?” Life is incredibly short, and a lack of forgiveness makes us toxic. So we lurch along for awhile in this toxic state, until we are desperate for restoration and mental health and a new Life.<sup>6</sup>

Nelson Mandela once said, “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”<sup>7</sup> But it doesn't; it only gives them more power over you.

So, if the first two steps to appropriate the wisdom of this commandment are to seek to have a clear recognition of who your parents are, be they biological or folks who have functioned as parents to you, and the second step is with the aid of others to seek

---

<sup>5</sup>Quoted from memory. If anyone has a citation, I'd be grateful. Also quoted in a previous sermon: [http://www.firstchristiancos.org/library/sermons/sermons2013/4-21-13\\_Doubt.pdf](http://www.firstchristiancos.org/library/sermons/sermons2013/4-21-13_Doubt.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2014/10/22/anne-lamott-offers-sneak-peek-forthcoming-book/>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.learningpeace.com/pages/LP\\_10.htm](http://www.learningpeace.com/pages/LP_10.htm)

to be able to forgive what wasn't what it should have been, then what's the third step? Well, just this: We sometimes think that these words about parents are only about earthly parents. But they're not. Every teaching in the Bible is always about both us and God. Yet we sometimes let the worst of our human experiences trick us into thinking that that is what God is like. When we experience life, or experience too many other people, as bitter and vengeful and hateful, we sometimes project those things onto God. But when God says "Honor thy father and mother," we need to finally hear this as a reminder that it is in fact **God** who is the Father and Mother of us all, and we must never dishonor God by ascribing things to our Heavenly Parent that we would not count as good in a human parent. God ever and only and always wants for you what a good parent does: that your life be purposive, full of meaning, suffused with hope, motivated to make a difference for the good. God is a tender and loving parent whose affections never grow weary, whose counsels never fail. Do not, this commandment says, ever dishonor God by either failing to recognize these things or by attributing to God the worst of human experience, rather than the best. Do not make God into a God of one party or one point of view, of one nationality, of one race, of one orientation – for all of these things are both wrong and they indeed dishonor the God who loves each and every creature and wants justice and hope and peace for each of those creatures as well. Do not make God too small.

In all these ways you will indeed honor God and be better able to honor those who are your earthly parents as well; in all of these ways you will be ever so much more able to receive the blessing and the bounty that God wants for you in that fertile land and life that God indeed seeks for you. For this very good news, thanks be to God indeed. Amen.