

The Ten Commandments 5. Honor your father and mother

Honor your father and your mother,
that your days may be long
in the land which the Lord your God gives you

Exodus 20:12 (RSV)

Questions, Issues, Topics

Arrangement of topics largely from chapter 5 in **Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves**. Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999.

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2. The relationship between child and parent
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4. Honor and fear / revere
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1. The Fifth Commandment

1.1. Text

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”
(Exodus 20:12 NRSV)

“Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”
(Deuteronomy 5:16 NRSV)

“You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.”
(Leviticus 19:3 NRSV)

1.2. Synopsis

- 1. Command:
 - honor / revere your father and mother
- 2. Motivational Clause, Promise / Benefit:
 - your days may be long
 - it may go well with you
 - in the land the LORD is giving you

2. The relationship between child and parent

No inter-human relationship is more basic.

- A fundamental order of creation
- Every person is a child of parents throughout their life

Note the implied equality of father and mother.

- remarkable in a patriarchal Israel that both are equally to be honored

The Commandment speaks to:

- the “valuing of the life-world of the parents by the children”
- importance of continuity between the generations

The authors of Exodus are particularly concerned with the safe transmission to all generations of the story of God’s liberation of his people from bondage in Egypt.

3. Why does God care how we treat our parents?

There are three partners in the making of a human being:

- father
- mother
- God

God is involved!

God often describes his relationship with us in filial terms:

- Exodus 4:22
- Jeremiah 31:20
- Hosea 11:1
- Malachi 1:6
- Isaiah 64:8,
- Isaiah 66:13
- The Lord’s Prayer

Command may in part reflect the God’s divine concern and authority exercised through the parent

4. Honor and fear / revere

4.1. Honor versus Fear/Revere

honor (Exodus and Deuteronomy versions) - Hebrew *kabed*

revere or fear (Leviticus version) - Hebrew *tira'u*

4.2. Honor

honor (*kabed*):

- wide-ranging verb; no one specific behavior is commanded
- children may respond in multiple ways to honor parents (respect, esteem, concern for, affection, love, consideration, appreciation, nurture, forgiveness. . .)
- involves positive acts to help them, bring them joy, improve their lives
- “obedience is not at the center of what it means to honor”
- command directed primarily at adults (to protect parents from being driven out of their home / abused when they could no longer work)
- includes among its meanings “be heavy” suggesting “give weight to.” Parents should be treated with seriousness.

The New Testament "transposes" the relationship of the Fifth Commandment, emphasizing the mutuality, the give and take of the relationship between parent and child. In the Angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will have a son John:

“With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17 NRSV)

Part of this mutuality is implicit in the notion of honoring:

“ ‘Honor’ is a more delicate, transitive maneuver, whereby both parties grow in dignity through the process” (Brueggemann)

4.3. Fear and Revere

fear/revere (*tira'u*):

- do not take our parent's place/position
- do not diminish the esteem due them from others

4.4. Father / mother versus Mother / father

Talmud:

- Exodus / Deuteronomy: “honor your *father* and *mother*”
- Leviticus: “fear/revere your *mother* and *father*”

Our tendency is to honor mother (who tends to be more nurturing), fear/revere father (who tends to be more authoritarian). This ordering emphasizes we should also *honor* our father, *fear/revere* our mother

5. Why are we promised our days will be long?

Not really a “promise” or a “warning” (note language “may”: It “may” go well with you, your days “may” be long).

Possibilities:

- improved relationships among the generations will *tend* to improve our lives
- quasi-legal note that retaining inheritance of the land requires or at least is more likely if we honor our parents

6. Extension of the commandment to other authorities

The Reformers extended the Fifth Commandment to other authorities; in particular, state and judiciary. Their argument was based on two passages:

Proverbs 24:21:

“My child, fear the LORD and the king, and do not disobey either of them. . .” (NRSV)

I Peter 2:13-17:

“For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors. . . Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (NRSV)

The validity of such an extension is controversial. The argument is perhaps strongest when such authorities take on “parental” role (care of the elderly and mentally handicapped parents, for example)

7. Obligations of a parent for a child

7.1. Parent and child: a mutual relationship

The New Covenant (see quote from Luke 1:17 above) contains both:

- the child's honoring of the parent
- the parent turning his/her heart to their child

This mutuality of relationship is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament. Ephesians 6:2-4:

“ ‘Honor your father and mother’ -- this is the first commandment with a promise. ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’ And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (NRSV)

A child's honoring of his/her parents should evoke a response of the parent to be worthy of the honor of their child.

7.2. Tasks of "Honorable" Parents

The tasks of “honorable parents” (from Timmerman)

- to *love* (unconditional love for who they are)
- to *direct* (Proverbs: training a child in the way he/she should go. Giving guidelines for right living)
- to *nurture* (guidance and support for his/her special needs/gifts)

To perform such tasks without failure would require a godlike wisdom and discernment. We all fail. Marion Wright Edelman (head of the Children's Defense Fund) wrote this letter for forgiveness of those inevitable failures to her sons (quoted in **Broken Tablets**):

"I seek your forgiveness for all the times I talked when I should have listened; got angry when I should have been patient; acted when I should have waited; feared when I should have been delighted; scolded when I should have encouraged; criticized when I should have complimented; said no when I should have said yes and said yes when I should have said no... I often tried too hard and wanted and demanded so much, and mistakenly sometimes tried to mold you into my image of what I wanted you to be rather than discovering and nourishing you as you emerged and grew."

8. How far does it go?

Matthew 10:35:

“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 . . .” (NRSV)

Certainly part of what this disturbing passage tells us is that:

- Our honor is first directed to God
- Our responsibility to God comes first

9. What if our parents are not worthy?

What if:

- our parents are not worthy? not “honorable”?
- there is on-going hurt and pain in the relationship that is detrimental or even harmful to us?
- there is a history of child abuse?

There is no simple answer to how we should "honor" our parents in such situation. In such a struggle, we should keep in mind:

- honor is a wide-ranging verb; no one specific behavior is commanded. It is open-ended.
- The commandment to honor our parents is not based upon what our parents deserve, but rather on God's direct command: “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you. . .” (Deuteronomy)
- Maimonides: “It is possible for a man to honor and revere and obey those whom he does not love.”
- On a first level, "'Honor' speaks to filial behavior, not to filial judgment or sentiment” (Leonard Fein in **Broken Tablets**)

In such a situation, honor can still involve positive acts to help them, improve their lives, to the degree we are able. Revere/fear can still involve not interfering with the esteem due them from others.

Honor may also involve *forgiveness*.

10. References

- Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves.** Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Introduction by Lawrence Kushner. Afterword by Arnold Jacob Wolf. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999
- Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments? : A Fresh Look at God's Laws of Love & Changing Perspectives.** John H. Timmerman. Augsburg Fortress. 1997.
- Exodus. (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.)** Terence E. Fretheim, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991
- The Book of Exodus.** Walter Brueggemann. In: The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994