

Honour Your Father and Mother

by Robert Griffith

*"Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land
the LORD your God is giving you." (Exodus 20:12)*

Have you ever wondered why 'Honour your father and mother' sits right next to 'Do not commit murder' in the Ten Commandments? In fact, if you agree with those Biblical scholars who attribute a priority order to this famous list of directions from our Creator, then honouring our parents is even more important than not committing murder!

At the very least, God decreed from almost the beginning of human history that murdering someone and dishonouring your parents should be viewed with the same seriousness. Why is that? Could it be that the impact of breaking both these commandments is equally devastating?

I am sure most people would struggle to see how dishonouring your parents could be viewed in the same way as taking someone's life in murder ... with the exception perhaps of those parents who have felt the knives of judgement, contempt and disrespect from their children later in life.

Yes, if you are one of those parents who have devoted the best years of your life to bringing children into the world, feeding them, clothing them, educating them, teaching them, making countless personal sacrifices for them, most of which they will never be aware of, and loving them the best way you know how as the imperfect parent you are ... only to have your child or children tell you later in life in a moment of 'honest reflection' just how wrong they think you got it and how messed up they are now because of you, not because of their own choices ... then you will fully understand why those two commandments sit side by side in the Ten Commandments – the foundation stone of our legal system and our society. For it may actually be kinder for your children to put a gun to your head and pull the trigger than tell you how bad you were as a parent .. when you can do very little to change that now.

Do you find it interesting that God placed dishonouring your parents and murdering someone side by side from the beginning of time ... and yet if you look at the laws of our land today and the 'professional' advice flowing from counsellors, therapists and sadly, even the Christian Church in many places – those two issues could not be further from each other? The prevailing pop psychology points every troubled soul back to the past to find answers to all their problems and because our parents fill so much of our past and had such a huge part in our growth and development as people, it is SO easy to find lots and lots of issues and shortcomings and we now have millions of people with 'daddy' issues or 'mummy' issues and no personal responsibility for their own lives because someone has cleverly deceived them and convinced them that they are a victim of the influence of others in the past and thereby are not in control of their own personality or choices in the present or future. Once upon a time this was just called a curse, but now someone will charge you \$100 an hour to give you this as sound advice and a professional diagnosis.

Even in the most dysfunctional part of our western society today – murder is still seen by all people (even murderers) as fundamentally wrong and incredibly bad for the health of all communities. This is why that commandment from God has remained enshrined in secular law and respected by 99.9% of our society. However, when was the last time you heard a politician or community leader or law enforcement officer or lawyer or Church leader for that matter, stand up and call society to account for not honouring our parents? If they did, they would be laughed at or shouted off the platform and yet when our Creator took centre stage thousands of years ago and told us through Moses what the most important foundation stones were for humanity, honouring our parents was towards the top of the list. So what happened?

We all know what happened. That cornerstone of humanity got shot to pieces by a new age dominated by individuality, freedom of speech and a new self-serving 'honesty' which must now 'tell it like it is' - no matter what the cost or who we destroy. That foundation stone of a healthy society and healthy church fell victim to the rampant disease gripping our society which I simply call 'blame-itis'. This disease occurs naturally in immature children but if not dealt with early in life, it slowly grows in us as adults and is now fed by the media, the latest magazines and actively encouraged by the majority of counsellors and therapists in our western world. This disease becomes so chronic and so engrained that we don't know we have it until it controls our whole thought process like an invasive cancer can grip our bodies.

This disease simply causes us to look everywhere we can for an explanation for our problems, our disappointments, our personality defects and our pain *except* in the mirror. Everyone *else* is to blame for our troubles today: our teachers, our schools, our universities, our governments, the tax department, our boss, our workmates, our family and of course at the top of the list for most people – our parents.

Welcome to the new age – the ‘enlightened’ times where humanity has ‘matured’ and broken free from the old fashioned shackles of the dark ages where honouring your parents was foundational but now we bask in the freedom of a new society where dishonouring your parents is actually taught in schools and actively encouraged by professionals and is even considered therapeutic (but not for your parents).

Can parents get it wrong and have a negative impact on their children? Absolutely! I despair at how easy it is to get the hardest job in the world and how poorly so many children are treated by their parents. I would never suggest for one second that the wounds which can be inflicted unintentionally (and sadly for some, intentionally) by parents on their children are not very significant and very damaging.

I would also never deny that when many children become adults they may carry significant scars from the shortcomings of their parents. We probably all do to some degree - even those who cannot think of any major problems in their childhood, they will still have been impacted by their parents negatively in some way. Now do you think God knew that when He set such a high bar and asked us to honour our parents regardless of their performance in that role? Do you think He knew in advance that parents would get it wrong a lot of the time and may even inflict horrible wounds upon their children along the way? Of course God knew that ... and yet He did never said, “Honour your father and mother if they are deemed worthy of honour by you.”

God expects us to honour our father and mother because they are deemed worthy of honour by God. No discussion. No interpretation needed. We simply can’t get past this one.

However, God knew before we were even born, before our parents or their parents or their parents were even born, that we would find that impossible to do at times. So He gave us Christ and the new Covenant in His blood and a whole new life which is free for the taking anytime we decide to believe Him and trust Him. That new life is characterised by a whole new way of approaching everything and everyone. In this new life we are empowered to forget what is behind and press on to take hold of what Christ died to give us. In this new life we are empowered to forgive as God forgave us, love as God loves us and keep NO record of wrongs, especially the wrongs of our parents whom God calls us to honour. In this new life all things are new, every day, the old has passed away. Every day is a new day without the baggage of yesterday (ours or someone else’s) weighing us down. His mercies are new every morning for us to enjoy, regardless of what happened yesterday or last month or last year or when we were ten years old. In this new life WE are responsible for ALL our choices and those choices determine how we act and how we react to the actions of others. We don’t blame anyone for our struggles, no matter how much someone has hurt us or disappointed us. Christ came to fulfil the law of God for us, in us and through us. We are now empowered in Him to put ‘honour your father and mother’ back up where it belongs alongside ‘do not commit murder’ and all the other high and holy standards of God. Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God has enabled us to fulfil the high and holy calling He has placed on our lives and one of the most important expectations He has of each and every one of us is for us to honour our parents.

Just stop here for a minute. Go back and read the last paragraph again – several times. It contains some of the most powerful Biblical truths and foundational principles of New Covenant Christianity. If I was to insert Bible references alongside each of the phrases I used there, that one paragraph would probably have over a hundred references! It is so very important that we understand the heart of the Christian gospel and the new life which God has given us in Christ. Without that reality dawning in our lives afresh every morning, we will be powerless to live up to the expectations of God. It is God Who is at work in us and through us to fulfil God’s purposes ... we don’t and we can’t do this alone.

Now of course we will might carry scars into our adult life from our childhood – some of them small scars and some of them not so small, but scars are *healed* wounds from the past and nobody in their right mind would take a knife to a physical scar years later and re-open it into a painful, bleeding wound again. However that is exactly what well-meaning counsellors and therapists are recommending every day across this nation as emotional scars which were healed and in most cases not even identified, but totally forgotten ... are brutally cut open and transformed into fresh, festering wounds again. Sadly, when that happens later in life as an adult, some of those wounds never, ever heal again.

In my 20 years in Pastoral ministry, I lost count of the number of times I had to try and re-teach some basic theology to Christians who had been totally screwed up by delving back into their past to try and understand the present and find some hope for the future. It sounded like a great idea at the time, and it is certainly the prevailing practice of our time ... but it has devastating consequences - but it also is opposed by everything new covenant Christianity actually teaches (or should teach!)

So with that rather heavy introduction as a backdrop, let me ask you: Do you honour your parents? Do you give them the respect, courtesy and honour which God expects and the whole fabric of the Church and society so desperately needs? How do you speak to your parents if they are still with us? More importantly, how do you speak to others about your parents? Have your actions and comments behind their backs always honoured them before God and others? Have you publicised their faults, sins and shortcomings or overlooked them and allowed your love, honour and respect for them as your parents to always extinguish any axe you may think you have to grind over their parenting or actions towards you?

As an adult now, what have your siblings, your spouse, your own children or friends heard from you about your parents? Have they only ever heard respect and honour? Or have you dishonoured your parents by speaking against them, undermining their God-given position or exposing their short-comings to others? It doesn't matter how old you are .. how old your parents are ... or even if your parents are still alive .. the question is a very serious and important one.

Have you made a deliberate choice to honour your father and mother all the days of your life .. well beyond their time on earth, but especially whilst they share this life with you? This is a life-time choice. This is not a word for young children only. God did not ask us to honour our parents until the time we leave home ... then pay out on them later when we get the courage! There is no use-by date on any of the Ten Commandments. In fact, when reviewing the whole counsel of God across all of Scripture, it is very clear that God is concerned that we honour our parents until the day we breathe our last on this earth. I would even go so far as to say that how we honour our parents when we are mature adults is far, far more important than how we may or may not have honoured them when we were growing up.

In this 'enlightened' society around us, I am saddened to observe an ignorance, a neglect and in many cases, an outright contempt for this commandment of God. Disrespect and dishonour towards parents is certainly not a new human trait - it has been part of our sinful, rebellious DNA since the fall of man. However, any study of western society over the past 50 years will reveal a significant change in the level of disrespect and dishonour towards parents from young children, teenagers and sadly from those same people when they mature into adults.

We only need to watch a few hours of television, view a few modern films or read a few of the latest magazines around to see how far we have strayed from this Godly command and if you really want to blow it off the pages of the Bible forever, you can pick up a modern psychology text book! The degree to which we have departed from this Biblical principle is mind-boggling in fact. Disrespect and dishonour towards parents is not just a growing problem in our society, it is celebrated, encouraged and taught without apology to each new generation as they unpack the shortcomings of their father and mother and parade them before therapists and Pastors and their own children and family!

Under the guise of celebrating our 'independence' and 'freedom' and 'rights' as an individual, we are taught directly and through an increasing number of influential role models, to reject the ways of our parents and find our own way in life. What used to be just a teenage rebellious spirit which passed with a patient, firm, loving hand from parents, has now become something far more sinister, far more systemic and far more dangerous .. and the condition of the Church and our society has deteriorated accordingly.

God has made it clear in His plan for humanity that it's a normal and healthy part of growing up and maturing into an adult for us to develop our own values and beliefs and become independent from our parents as we prepare to become parents ourselves. This is all a healthy part of human growth if done at the right time and in the right way. However, at NO point has God ever suggested that this healthy 'leaving and cleaving' process cancels or annuls His clear instruction to us all to honour our parents all the days of our lives.

Somehow in this 'eye for an eye', 'tit for tat' world in which we find ourselves, we feel justified in our disrespect and dishonour towards our parents because of their own shortcomings and sin or their poor treatment of us or others. Somehow in our twisted thinking we have replaced "Honour your father and mother" with "Honour your father and mother while ever they live up to your expectations."

I need to pause once again at this point and stress that I am fully aware that some parents are abusive, manipulative, destructive and harmful towards their children and there are times when we need to separate ourselves and our families from a parent like that for a season, and sadly sometimes for life. I acknowledge that ... but I would suggest it is still possible, indeed imperative, that we honour our parents even under those circumstances and not use that as an excuse to stand in judgement of those whom God calls us to honour at all times.

If circumstances are serious enough or dysfunctional enough for us to have no contact at all with a parent, by their choice or ours, that is not dishonouring to them in itself. We only dishonour them if we see fit to tell others why that has happened and disparage them in any way. We can yell and scream and cry and complain all we like to God – He can handle it and it is not dishonouring to your parents to tell God how you feel and after all, He is the only One in the universe Who may be able to help you with such issues anyway.

There is a lot of conjecture about what 'honouring' our parents means and I will offer some instruction in that regard here. However, let me tell you what it is NOT first. 'Honour' does not equate to 'agree with'. You may have radically different views and values to your parents but that is not dishonouring to them until you allow those differences to impact the way to speak to them or about them.

Christians with antagonistic non-Christian parents are prime examples here. They have made radically different choices and are travelling down a very different path to their parents, but they are called upon to honour their parents regardless and if they ever have any hope and expectations of their parents embracing the Christian faith one day, then honouring their father and mother in spite of their differences will be the best possible bridge for God to use to lead them to Christ.

Honour also does not mean you put up with abusive behaviour which is destructive towards you and your loved ones. Honour refers to what you say to and about your parents through those tough times and indeed throughout the good times too.

I recall counselling one young woman in her mid-twenties many years ago who had some major issues with her parents and even with the high view I have of parents and the need for them to be honoured and respected, the circumstances in this case led me to encourage this woman to move herself and her new family away from her parents for a season and to respectfully minimise contact with them and pray that God would help her parents face some of the issues which were causing them to act in such a hostile way.

At no time during my session with this woman did I hear her dishonour her father or mother. She was an amazing example of someone who understood what God means when He asks us to honour our parents. She did not defend, condone or justify her parents poor behaviour in any way, but she respected them, honoured them and did not offer one critical word towards them as people. Our entire discussion was about their actions and then her subsequent response. Her parents' honour and authority remained intact.

That counselling session was a gift from God. In that one session years ago, God showed me convincingly that it is possible for us to fulfil our Godly calling and honour our parents in EVERY situation in life. I didn't say it was easy – far from it, in fact - but it is possible.

So now back to you ... If you are still with me here ... and haven't run from this challenge ... then maybe God wants to address this important issue in your life by affirming you in your honouring of your parents, or challenging you to take stock of your actions and words in recent times.

Think back over the past few years, reflect on your comments to and discussions with your family, your siblings, your friends and even your pastors and counsellors and ask God to show you ways in which you have dishonoured your parents. Not to make you feel bad .. but to show you how easy it is to fall into the world's trap and become critical of those to whom God expects you to show the highest honour and respect for the rest of your life. Don't think that things said in the privacy of a counselling session or a marriage partnership are somehow less destructive and dishonouring than things said in a public forum. Certainly in the human realm the latter is far worse, but in the kingdom of God, both are equally damaging.

There is no such thing as a 'private' conversation. We have a lot of company in the spiritual realm each time we open our mouths or write our letters or emails.

So before you say or write a single word about your parents, you need to assume that somehow spiritually or through the broken trust of another person, your parents will read or hear your words. If they don't in the flesh, they will in the spirit. Of that I am sure.

As we turn to the Scriptures we need to understand that this command to honour our parents is not just an old covenant law which was fulfilled by Jesus on our behalf. The finished work of Christ most certainly gives us all the power to fulfil this and all Godly requirements and His salvation removes all judgement and condemnation from God for the times we fail ... however, let's never forget that Jesus cannot honour OUR parents FOR us. That is something only we can do. Which is why this foundational directive from God was carried over into the New Covenant intact.

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother," which is the first commandment with a promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."" (Ephesians 6:1-3).

The word 'honour' means to place a value on something, to consider it a prized possession. In the original Hebrew, as found in Exodus 20:12, the word 'honour' has very interesting roots. It comes from a Hebrew word which means 'to be heavy.' The word is used to describe someone who was heavy with wealth; someone who is considered important and impressive.

The word is used to describe Samuel in I Samuel 9:6, *"And he said to him, "Look now, there is in this city a man of God, and he is an honourable man; all that he says surely comes to pass. So let us go there; perhaps he can show us the way that we should go.""*

So what does it mean to honour one's parents? In Ephesians 6:1 Paul tells children to obey their parents and proves his point by quoting the command to honour your parents. Therefore, honouring your parents means obeying them. Such obedience is pleasing to God. *"Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord"* (Colossians 3:20).

By obedience, we are not talking about selective obedience where we chose the things we want to obey. *"My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be a graceful ornament on your head, and chains about your neck"* (Proverbs 1:8-9).

Children honour their parents by listening to their advice and obeying their instruction. Godly parents are a treasure to a child. They have a wealth of experience which they can pass down to their children. The importance of listening to your parents is so emphasized that even when a child is being disciplined, they are encouraged to pay attention. *"A fool despises his father's instruction, but he who receives correction is prudent"* (Proverbs 15:5).

Being grateful is another way that a child can honour his parents. *"There is a generation that curses its father, and does not bless its mother"* (Proverbs 30:11). Such a generation is not giving honour. Honouring your parents means that you do not mock them or treat them scornfully, even with a mere look. *"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). Quite a vivid picture, isn't it? Mistreatment of our parents will come back to haunt us in later years.

Honour is even shown in our body language. *"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). Older people, including our parents deserve respect. The idea of honour or reverence even includes a bit of Godly fear. *"Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father"* (Leviticus 19:3). 'Revere' is the same word used when the Bible tells us to fear and respect God.

"Whoever curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in deep darkness" (Proverbs 20:20).

The word 'curses' means more than a child who uses profanity at his parents. Such is wrong because it shows the contempt the child holds for his parents. Yet, 'curses' literally means to make light of one's parents or to treat them with contempt. Hence, it includes much more than use of profane words. Whenever a child treats his parents as if they really don't matter, he is cursing them. When they tell him to be home by midnight and he responds with "whatever," he is treating them with contempt. *"And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death"* (Exodus 21:17).

A death penalty for cursing one's parents seems ridiculous today - but there is a reason behind this law. A child who holds his parents in contempt, will hold other forms of authority in contempt as well. If a child believes he can ignore his parents as he pleases, he will assume that he can ignore the laws of society and the laws of God as well. A child who curses his parents is a disaster in the making and we now have several decades of proof right before our eyes. Parental respect and honour is truly the foundation of ALL respect and honour in a healthy society.

Parents represent authority to a child. To strike back at authority cannot be tolerated in a Godly society. A child who thinks he can overrun his parents will destroy himself. *"Whoever robs his father or his mother, and says, 'It is no transgression,' the same is companion to a destroyer"* (Proverbs 28:24).

Honouring your parents also means seeing to their needs.

"Honour widows who are really widows. ... But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. ... If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (I Timothy 5:3, 8, 16).

Your parents cared for you when you were small and helpless. Even as you grew to be able to provide for yourself, your parents frequently stepped in to ease your burdens. Now, when they have grown old and frail, it is your turn to return the favour. Honour them by making sure they are comfortable in their declining years.

Let me re-visit an earlier point here – for it is SO important. Honouring our parents is not conditional.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger, in her book *The Ten Commandments*, rightly notes that:

"This commandment is not qualified. It does not mean:

- Honour only if the person is personally perceived as deserving
- Honour only if the person always reciprocates
- Honour only if it is pleasing to you to do so
- Honour only if you get compliments for doing so
- Honour only if it "feels right"
- Honour only if other people also do so."

Consider David's words to Saul as Saul was pursuing David in order to kill him,

"Look, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD delivered you today into my hand in the cave, and someone urged me to kill you. But my eye spared you, and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD'S anointed.' Moreover, my father, see! Yes, see the corner of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the corner of your robe, and did not kill you, know and see that there is neither evil nor rebellion in my hand, and I have not sinned against you. Yet you hunt my life to take it"

(I Samuel 24:10-11)

Saul is David's father-in-law, but that didn't stop Saul from wanting to kill David. But did you catch how David addressed Saul? He called him 'father' even when the man was trying to kill him, David treated him with honour and respect.

Honouring your parents does not mean you blindly follow them into sin. A parent's authority is granted to them by God. If a parent violates the laws of God, then a child must follow the higher authority. In other words, a child's respect for his parent must not exceed his respect for God. You can honour your parent without participating in their sins.

Jesus told his followers,

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' 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" (Matthew 10:34-37)

Interestingly, while there are several passages which command parents to love their children, such as Titus 2:4, there is no equivalent command requiring a child to love his parents. The child is told to honour and obey his parents, but there is no command saying he must love his parents. Perhaps such a command is not needed because children naturally express their love for their parents. Or, perhaps God understands that there are parents who act in ways which repels the love of their children in time.

I will be forever grateful that I was born in 1958 and not 1998 ... for the world changed so much over those forty years. I grew up in a family and in a society where honouring your parents was never a guarantee by any means, but it was more common than not; it was culturally acceptable; it was not 'uncool' for most of us. In fact it was still culturally mandated in most parts of our society ... and still is in many cultures.

My parents were not perfect. They made mistakes. They had issues to deal with. There were circumstances in their lives about which I knew very little (although as an arrogant young person I am sure I thought I knew a lot). However, I truly believe I have been able to honour my mother and father throughout my life.

I say this not to brag, but simply to demonstrate that it is possible when you allow this to be part of your character and makeup to honour them. It came easy to me ... because as a growing child and maturing adult, the society of which I was a part encouraged that attitude. I have never been conscious of a struggle in honouring my parents. Not because I had nothing to criticise or complain about – not because they were perfect parents by any means – but because I grew up with a strongly developed Christian worldview which made honouring my parents much easier than it is for many people today who have not been taught this as young people.

Even my Father, who passed away suddenly at only 54 years of age, has been honoured by me after his death. I have never knowingly exposed his shortcomings or sin. I have never initiated or participated in any criticism of him from others. I have never undermined his authority in my life even though he is no longer with us.

The same is true for my Mother. She is not perfect. Her actions towards me have not always been welcomed. That's normal for every child and parent. However, none of that will ever knowingly be exposed by me or discussed or allowed to undermine my total respect and honour for the woman whom my Heavenly Father chose to bring me into this world and give me life and love and a foundation for all that I have now enjoyed as an adult.

How about you? Can you say the same? It's not a competition .. there is no comparison here ... we all fall short and are on level ground before the cross of Christ ... but the question still needs to be asked. In fact it is one of the most urgent questions which needs to be asked in today's Church and society. Do you honour your father and mother in word and deed – be they dead or alive? Do you look past their annoying or hurtful idiosyncrasies, their sin, their short-comings in your eyes ... and into their heart and the heart of God in them?

Do you 'cover their nakedness' and hold them in the highest esteem simply because they are your parents and God has asked you to do so or do you expose their sin and 'nakedness' as you give in to the destructive forces of resentment and bitterness? Do you judge them without really knowing them? Do you make assumptions about what they are feeling and thinking without having much idea at all about what they have really experienced in life and what has been done to them or endured by them to make them the people they are today?

We all think we know our parents really well because we have known them all our lives. But we are naïve, for we have not known them all their lives and even our true knowledge of them in the time we have known them is shallow at best for most of us. And yet we can make some pretty heavy judgments based on our flimsy knowledge and without regard to the many, many experiences our parents have enjoyed and endured over their long lives.

I truly believe that the commandment to honour our father and mother is by far the most ignored, the most neglected, the most despised and misunderstood of all the commandments and so much of the erosion of the very fabric of our society we have seen in recent decades can be traced back to this one issue.

When we get this one right - the Church and society will change before our eyes.

When we get it wrong – we all pay the price for many generations to come ... as indeed we are right now.

As in all situations, the Church of Jesus Christ ... believers like you and me ... are the ones who MUST lead the way on this important issue ... and that won't happen whilst preachers pussy-foot around this topic and don't deal with it because of their own insecurities as a parent or child or because of their own screwy theology.

By God's grace, it is never too late to start honouring your parents. The power which will come from God as you walk in His will on this issue will undo years of neglect and falling short in ways you never dreamed possible.

Honour your father and mother from this moment forward ... and watch with amazement as God empowers what could be the most important choice you have made in many years.

© 2002 Robert Griffith