

OVERVIEW

The fifth of the original “Ten Commandments” says we are to honor our mother and father. This commandment had a specific original meaning. But Jesus reinterpreted all the commandments in ways and made them central to our lives today. Just so, the original application was to support the role of father or mother in leading the family. Jesus extended the application to families in which fathers and mothers are no longer able to lead.

KEY INSTRUCTION

Parents should lead young families with faith and compassion. Adult children must rely on compassion when helping aging parents.

COMMANDMENT V – “Jesus and the Father”

The 5th of the Ten Commandments is a familiar one that relates directly to every one of us who was raised in a family. Honor your mother and father.

If we look at this commandment before and then after Jesus, we will see again what a world-changer Jesus was.

Let’s begin with the original understanding of this commandment. It was given to Moses by God at a time before there was much written law to be obedient to, before there were police and lock-ups to limit misbehavior, and before there were medical treatments to prevent mood swings and violent or self destructive disorders. In other words, society did little to control individual behavior. And what society did do was ham-handed. If any member of a city family misbehaved, the local elders could give a death sentence by stoning but usually would apply a fine against the offending family so both the guilty party and all their innocent relations would suffer. Or, if blood had been spilled, or dishonor caused, the injured family would take violent revenge, sometimes on innocent people related to the guilty person.

There is an example of this in Genesis. Israel had a daughter named Dinah. She caught the eye of a young man from a nearby settlement and he forced himself on her. He then begged Israel to let him have her as wife. Israel agreed but his sons snuck into the settlement and killed all the males, guilty and innocent alike. Then they plundered the settlement taking the women, children, flocks, and possessions. This was the result of one family dishonoring another.

This kind of vigilante justice made social harmony impossible. To prevent this each family was made responsible for controlling its own members. There was no one else to do it. And so the family leader was given power of life and death over members of the family. And, if a family member disobeyed the leader, the punishment could be death.

That was better than having another family do the punishing and starting a blood feud. Our first scripture makes it clear that in Jewish law, children could be executed for disobeying or mistreating their parents.

This was how the 5th commandment was originally understood. Obedience to the family leader was demanded by God. This made the family very hierarchical. The father and the mother had the power and authority of rulers.

This model of ruling authority was also attributed to God. Before Jesus, God was to be feared and disobedience was punished. Punishment could be severe and affect the innocent as well as the guilty. Draught, famine, pestilence, and invasion were seen as due to God's punishing wrath.

So God was seen to rule over Israel and parents were expected to rule over the family.

This was before Jesus.

Jesus brought about some remarkable changes.

Jesus referred directly to the 5th commandment in the 15th chapter of Matthew. Let me read verses 4 through 6 again. Jesus is giving judgmental religious leaders an example of their own bad behavior.

⁴ For instance, God says, 'Honor your father and mother, and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.'

First Jesus quotes the commandment and how it was interpreted.

⁵ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.' ⁶ In this way, you say people don't need to honor their parents. And so you cancel the word of God for the sake of your own tradition.

Let me explain this. In Jesus' day, a law allowed a person to make a promise to give money to the temple. Today we might think of remembering the church in a will. But today, such bequests are made from what is left after family members are cared for. And wills can be changed. In Biblical times, specific amounts were pledged and, once pledged, were grounds for refusing all other claims.

Therefore it meant that the person pledging could refuse to help an aging parent and the religious hierarchy would back the person up. It's unlikely this happened often, but it must have happened often enough for Jesus to be aware of it. I can imagine a family feud where a child wanted to cut off his parents. The key is that the religious authorities said this was OK even if the parents were old and infirm.

Jesus stated that this was disobeying the 5th Commandment to honor father and mother.

Think about this. Before Jesus, the commandment was intended to give ruling authority to parents to control children. After Jesus the commandment was intended to ensure compassionate treatment of parents by able children.

Jesus valued compassion so strongly that he finished his complaint against the judgmental religious leaders saying,

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

If you don't have compassion, you don't understand Jesus and whatever you put in place of compassion is just selfishness. As He did so often, Jesus changed the interpretation of this commandment from obeying a rule to enacting love.

Jesus not only made the Commandment more compassionate. He changed our view of God in the same way.

Before Jesus, God was often seen as an authority figure, as one so forbidding and mighty that it was unacceptable even to pronounce His name. People believed they could not speak to God directly and their closest contact with God was with His presence inside an isolated chamber that only a ritually pure high priest could enter.

But when Jesus talked about God, He did not talk about a ruler. He talked about His Father. Nor did Jesus say God was remote in an isolated place. Listen to what Jesus said in John 14:23.

²³ Jesus [explained], “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Direct, close, personal relationship with God is possible for all of us who believe and obey.

Where does the 5th Commandment lead us today?

Depending on life situation, children are asked to be obedient and compassionate.

Obedience. Parents no longer have power of life and death over children. But their guidance is essential. Here is a specific example. People are dying daily of opioid overdoses. Parents are the front line of defense against risk taking opportunities and behaviors. Children, please accept your parents efforts to protect you.

Compassion. This example is one of the most troubling we face these days. We are living longer than ever before. Many of us are seeing our parents become infirm. We are faced with the choices of letting parents live at their home or with us or in some form of assisted living. We are faced with deciding if compassion is doing what parents ask or doing what is safest and healthiest for them. This has been or is or will be a heart rending experience for many of us. And we will play both roles, protective children and infirm parents.

There is no easy answer. What we have is our compassionate God, described by our world-changing Savior. We are never alone in trying to honor our mothers and fathers as the Commandment teaches.

Amen.