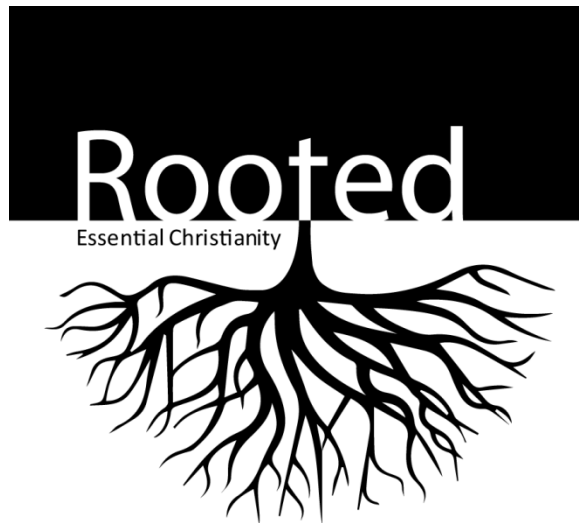




The Ten Commandments

Part 7 – “Honor Authority”

Exodus 20:12

While God’s moral law may be understood as being structured in two tables – Commandments 1-4 (table one) govern our relationship with God and Commandments 5-10 (table two) govern our relationships with our neighbors – the structure should not be overwrought. That is, each of the commandments ought to be applied both to our relationship with God and our neighbors. For instance, while the Fifth Commandment addresses a child’s responsibility to honor parental authority, there is a far broader application of the commandment extending to all God-ordained authority. These authorities are

ultimately an extension of God’s authority for it is God who establishes them (Rom. 13:1). In this we see that being rightly related to man cannot be easily separated from being rightly related to God.

God classifies disobedience to parents as a particularly grievous sin. It is placed alongside sexual perversion and violence as a sign of the “terrible times” of the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-2). In the former days, those children guilty of incorrigible disrespect toward parents were subject to capital punishment. That seems harsh to us. And certainly we are not to seek to re-institute those temporary civil laws governing Israel in the past. But God treats disobedience to parents in such serious ways because 1) it is ultimately a rejection of God’s authority and 2) it is a rejection of a key principle for the ordering of a healthy and decent society.

Main Idea: God blesses his people as they show proper honor to his established authorities beginning in the family.

1. The Command

“Honor your father and your mother...”

- Ours is an essentially anti-authoritarian culture. We are an independent lot taught to question authority at every turn. Certainly we want to challenge tyranny and not blindly obey every person who presents himself as an authority. But our discomfort with the idea of authority often manifests as disobedience to the very authorities God has established. The Fifth Commandment teaches us about the vital importance of obedience both to the health of the family but also to the health of a nation. Like all of the Commandments the command for children to honor their father and their mother upholds the authority of God.

a) The Immediate Focus

- Parental authority, having been established by God, is the most basic and essential form of human authority. God classifies disobedience to parents as a particularly grievous sin. It is placed alongside sexual perversion and violence as a sign of the “terrible times” of the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-2). In the former days, those children guilty of incorrigible disrespect toward parents were subject to capital punishment (Lev. 20:9; Deut. 21:18-21). That seems harsh to us. And certainly we are not to seek to re-institute those temporary civil laws governing Israel in the past. But God treats disobedience to parents in such serious ways because 1) it is ultimately a rejection of God’s authority and 2) it is a rejection of a key principle for the ordering of a healthy and decent society. So disobedience to parents was a form of treason which not only rejected God but also threatened the security of the nation.

b) The Broader Application

- Romans 13:1-7
- All authority is established by God. Even unbelieving rulers are instruments used by God to carry out his sovereign purposes. So in honoring earthly authorities we are honoring God. Obedience to earthly authorities must be consistent up to the point that those authorities require disobedience to God.

2. The Hard Cases

There are good and important questions to ask as we seek to apply the Fifth Commandment.

a) Abusive parents / authorities

- An abusive parent must never be protected through a misapplication of the Fifth Commandment. Jonathan rightly disobeyed when his father Saul sought his help in murdering David (1 Sam. 19:5). The church, in rightly submitting to the civil authorities, is obligated to report all instances of abuse and to cooperate fully with the civil authorities in seeking justice.

b) Unbelieving parents / authorities

- Believing children are as obliged to honor their unbelieving parents as are those with Christian parents. The only time we may disobey a parent (or any other God-given authority) is when they require that we disobey God. And in those rare occasions we must do so with respect. Daniel's respectful disobedience to the laws of Darius' kingdom is an example (Dan. 6).

c) Caring for aged parents

- Parents must not be abandoned in their old age. It is true that an adult's relationship with his parents changes from the time of childhood. Honoring our parents shifts from daily obedience in their household to a responsibility to ensure that they are well cared for in their old age (Matt 15:1-7). "Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (Prov. 23:22).

3. The Promise

"Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

- Paul points out in Ephesians 6:1-3 that this is the first of the Commandments with a promise attached. The promise spoken to the Israelites gathered at Sinai referred to their peace and prosperity in the Land of Promise. It was a promise for a particular moment in redemptive history. We cannot take that same promise out of context and assume it can be read to mean a long lifespan in America.
- However, we can be certain that God blesses obedience. And that we can fully affirm without falling off the cliff of prosperity teaching. We cannot command the particular ways that God will bless our obedience. But we can be sure that by God's own providence, obedience is always better for us than disobedience.
- Jesus was the only example of life-long perfect obedience the world has ever seen. Though he was the eternal and everlasting God of creation, in his incarnation Jesus obeyed those earthly authorities of which he himself was ultimately the source. As John Fesko writes: "A Christ-centered approach to the fifth commandment teaches us that we, the people of God, who are being remade in the image of Christ, must honor our fathers and mothers and any other God-instituted authority because we are to reflect the perfect righteousness and love of Christ" (The Rule of Love, 76).