Honor Parents

Today’s video featured two people from our church on opposite ends of the age spectrum: Chrissy, age 9 and Mayo, age 90. We asked them to reflect on how their parents expressed love to them. Chrissy spoke about the affection her parents lavish on her. She measures her father’s devotion to the family in terms of shoveling heavy snow from the driveway so her pregnant mom can make it to the hospital in time to deliver her sister. Mayo’s mother was suddenly confronted with raising five children as a single mom, after the death of Mayo’s father when he was two years old. Thank God for mothers (and fathers) who are devoted to their children!

Tony Compolo is a popular Christian author and speaker. Tony’s wife, Peggy, worked full-time at home raising their children. When they were out in public, people often asked Peggy what she did for a living. She tired of people’s condescending reactions when she announced her decision to be a stay-at-home mom, so she began to answer the “What do you do?” question with these words: “I’m socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation. So what do you do?”

Today is the day Hallmark and FTD florists have been waiting for. Mother’s Day is an emotionally charged holiday. Some of you are expectant mothers; some of you are new moms. Seven new mothers (and fathers) are having their children baptized today. Some of you would desperately like to be mothers. Some of you are single, yet long to be married and have children; some of you are married but struggle with infertility. Some of you will be visiting your mothers today or calling them. More calls are placed on Mother’s Day than any other day of the year. Some of you honor the memory of your deceased mothers. Some of you are estranged from your mothers. Some of you are adopted and may not know the identity of your birth mothers. The fact that we’re all at different life stages makes Mother’s Day sermons especially difficult to preach.

Last Sunday, we began a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. We started with the first command, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Obeying this command serves as the catalyst for keeping the ten commandments. When we love God exclusively, the remaining nine commandments become easier to keep. You’ll notice we’re not preaching these commandments in numerical order. By rights, I
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The fifth Commandment begins with the word “honor.” “Honor your father and mother” (Deuteronomy 5:16). I like the word honor. In a wedding service, a bride and groom present rings to each other accompanied with the words, “I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow. With all that I am and all that I have, I honor you.” Would that couples would take honoring each other more seriously!

The last line of the Declaration of Independence reads, “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge our lives, our Fortunes and our Sacred Honor.”

Several of our Virginia universities and all U.S. military academies are governed by honor codes. Take the honor code pledged by West Point cadets. “A cadet will not lie, steal, cheat or tolerate those who do.”

The Hebrew word for “honor” means “to weigh heavy.” To honor someone is to give their counsel weight. When I honor someone, I prize them highly. To honor our parents is to prize them highly. Incidentally, the Biblical word placed in opposition to honor, curse, means to regard someone lightly.

This fifth commandment is addressed to children of all ages but let’s first consider this commandment in relationship to younger children and their parents. Although this fifth commandment doesn’t use the word obey, obedience is one component of honoring. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (6:1). As young people navigate adolescence, obedience is still called for, although obedience is now tempered with negotiation.

Honor connotes appreciation. Expressing appreciation is one way we honor our parents.

The portion of Deuteronomy known as the Great Shema reads, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away; when you lie down and when you rise” (6:4-7).

In Deuteronomy, the primary task of children is honoring their parents and the central role of parents is teaching their children. To teach our children “when you are at home and when you are away; when you lie down and when you rise,” is the equivalent of looking for teachable moments with children.

The primary Christian institution in our society is the family, not the church. The church’s role is to assist parents in raising children to
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become disciples of Jesus. But, far too many parents abdicate their role as Christian educators. Parents say, in effect to the church: here are our kids. We’re bringing them to you for religious instruction. See what you can do with them. Some parents check out! If what we teach in church is not reinforced at home, you can just about forget it!

Parents tell me repeatedly, “I just want my kids to be happy.” Whatever happened to wanting our kids to be believers?

Children learn by doing. Example is the best teacher. Parents, ask yourselves, what are you teaching your children? The Christian faith is more often caught than taught. If we want to train our children in the way they should go, we’d better go that way ourselves!

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was once talking with a man who said he didn’t believe in giving children religious instruction. His theory was that children’s minds should not be prejudiced in any particular direction. Children should be permitted to choose their religious opinions completely for themselves.

Coleridge said nothing in response but invited this friend to visit his garden. They visited a portion of Coleridge’s garden that wasn’t yet cultivated, where only weeds grew. The man was surprised by this weed-infested garden. “Why, this is not a garden,” he said. “There’s nothing here but weeds.”

“Well, you see,” answered Coleridge, “I did not wish to infringe upon the liberty of this garden in any way. I was just giving the garden a chance to express itself and to choose its own production.”

This fifth commandment is not addressed primarily to children; it’s directed to adults, who are instructed in turn to teach these commands to their children. These commands are given principally to adult children with older parents.

Throughout our lives, we are commanded to honor our parents. As adults, we are not obliged to obey them. Regardless of whether or not we follow our parents’ counsel, God calls us to honor our parents. To honor our fathers and mothers is to prize them highly!

Our culture does not value older people; Americans place a premium on youth. We could learn a few lessons from Asian cultures on revering older people. We would do well to heed the law from Leviticus: “You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old” (19:32).

Americans value productivity. We prize what people do for a living. Family values are not based on utility alone. The very young and the very old have no means of being productive. We value people in families, whether or not family members can be productive.

There is a rider attached to this honor our father and mother command, “So your days may be long and it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is
Be nice to your kids, for they will choose your nursing home.

giving you.” This fifth commandment is significant enough for Paul to reference in his Ephesians letter, “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” (6:2-3).

“That your days may be long,” is a Hebrew idiom referring to the rich blessing of a society that lives in harmony with the divine order. Whenever a culture honors its aged members, it creates a social climate that enlarges and elongates human life. Said another way, be nice to your kids, for they will choose your nursing home.

Should we honor our parents if they did a lousy job at parenthood? This commandment is not based on merit. It doesn’t say honor your father and mother if they did a really good job. We honor our parent’s role, whether or not we can support their parenting skills.

The language of the Heidelberg Catechism from 1562 is instructive in this regard. In response to the question, “What does God require in the fifth commandment?” the catechism answers, “That I show honor, love and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all who are set in authority over me; that I submit myself with respectful obedience to all their careful instruction and discipline, and that I also bear patiently with their failures...”

Perhaps you’ve heard of David Letterman’s Top Ten List. God assembled the original Top Ten list and “Honor your father and mother” is number five on the list!

Can you imagine the transformation that would take place in families if we resolved, from this point forward, to honor our families. Honor our fathers and mothers, our siblings and extended family. If we did so, our days would become long on the Earth.

Merciful God, there is no place harder to be Christians than in our families and there is no place where we need your grace more than in our families. Help us to honor and not to curse. Let us show honor to our parents and all in authority over us. Give us courage and new resolve to teach your commands to children. We need more honor in our families. To you, almighty Lord, belong all honor and glory, now and forevermore. Amen.