

Appreciation of Authority

Series: Requirements for Humanity

by Steve Zeisler

The most intransigent problems we face in our society are found in the deterioration and pain of families. There is a consistent drumbeat about the nature of family life in this country which is frightening and depressing. Despite attention, money, and effort, our system of public education is failing to educate our children properly. There is an epidemic of child abuse and neglect, of children living in situations that are terrifying. Latchkey children face and succumb to temptations young people should never have to face alone. Violence in this country is more likely to be perpetrated on children than any other group, whether it is on unborn children or those who live in poverty. The rising class of poor people in this country is poor families, especially those with young children. The war on drugs that has been proclaimed by the federal government recently is a battle that is being fought to save children. Whether it is crack-addicted babies or young terrorists dealing narcotics in urban settings it is our children who are suffering and paying the price.

Baby-Boomers as Parents

This problem strikes me as ironic on one level because those currently raising children are the "baby boom" generation (those born in the 10-year period after World War II—a generation much larger than those preceding or following them). Baby boomers in the late 1960's rejected the rights of parents to be authoritative figures in their lives. They insisted that no one over 30 could be trusted. They rejected the right of government to govern, renounced the traditions of previous generations, and threw off the shackles of biblical thinking.

These baby boomers are now parents, and they are realizing with shock that the rebellion they chose in their youth is coming home to roost. They do not know how to parent their children and are frustrated because they long to do a good job, but do not know how. The pain and anxiety of the process, the threat to individual children, and the future of this country is grave indeed. We must reassert some of the wisdom that was lost. A good place to start is the fifth of the Ten Commandments.

From our study of the Ten Commandments in previous messages we know that the first four commandments deal with the relationship between God and his people. In the remaining six commandments, we will face the issues that are foundational to healthy human relationships and community. The first of these is the fifth commandment:

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

The apostle Paul notes (in Ephesians 6:2) that this is the first command in the list that is given with the promise that something good will happen if we obey. There are two elements in the promise: (1) that you may live a long and valuable life, and (2) that the nation that you will become will also receive blessing. Thus, the individual and the society will both benefit if we hear and heed the fifth commandment to honor our parents.

What is Honor?

What does "honor" mean in this context? Regarding the fifth commandment, Lewis Smedes wrote, The word does not tell us to like being with parents on camping trips, or to relish having them over for dinner. It does not encourage happy emotional relationships. All that it commands is honor. The ancient word of honor was something like weightiness. (The Hebrew word is 'chabad'). To honor persons you had to respect them as people who carried a great deal of weight in your life, that is you had to let them have influence, dignity, and above all, authority for you. 'Chabad' smacks more of a military academy than a dinner at home on Mothers' Day.

Honoring does not mean that there must be feelings of love between the generations. Those feelings of delight that come from memories, laughter, and anticipation of each other's company are gifts from God, but are not required. Those gifts flow out of choices that are made, but they are not at the heart of the commandment.

We should also recognize that honor cannot be expressed under duress. Men and women who are tyrannized by their parents' rejection, misuse, and neglect may not be emotionally free to relate to their parents. One cannot choose to give respect when independence and maturity have not been gained. Thus, God's command is for free, mature adults to honor their parents regardless of their personal feelings as to whether their parents' behavior has won them the right to receive honor.

A Two-Fold Promise

The promise attached to the commandment has two parts. First, obedience will result in living a long life. That notion in Hebrew thought does not have in mind a large number of years with quantity as the only concern. Rather, the term "long life" means to have experienced a fulfilled, bountiful life from childhood to old age. Abraham was described this way at his death: "Abraham breathed his last, and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years" (Gen. 25:8). Abraham lived a long, adventuresome, wonderful life, and is described in the end as living to "a good old age." The first half of the fifth commandment's promise speaks of personal fulfillment.

The second half of the promise also speaks of fulfillment, but this time to the nation as a whole. In speaking to the Israelites, God's promise meant that the land he gave them in Canaan would be a place of harmony and security. Instead of deterioration at the core of the social structure, there would be inner strength because people would have learned to cooperate with each other. Thus, if we learn to honor our father and mother, we are contributing to our own inner health and security, and that of the society we live in.

It is important to notice that the command is directed to the children rather than the parents. The Lord might have said, "Parents be kind, sensitive, generous, and thoughtful towards to your children." However, I believe that the command is directed to the child because none of us are able to choose the parents or the environment in which we grow up. Whether we are raised in a setting where respect comes easy, or a terrible setting, where it is difficult, all of us can choose to honor our parents.

Indeed, we cannot be emotionally healthy, balanced, and mature people until we have learned to be rightly related to authority. Those who go through life resisting and fighting, being aggressive in relationships, and fearing authority can never be at rest or fulfilled. Similarly, one who is pathologically dominated by authority figures will be diminished and fearful. Fulfillment will come from a proper relationship with authority, learned primarily through honoring the parents we have been given. Obeying the commandment will ultimately make us whole, healthy people with the inner peace and freedom needed to relate rightly to the rest of the world.

Luke 7 relates the story of a Roman centurion who understood the significance of being rightly related to authority. Either through his family or military experience he had learned what it was like to both command and be commanded. As a result, he is one of the most winsome figures in the scriptures. He was a healthy, humble and effective person who loved the truth of God. He showed his love for the Jews in his jurisdiction by building a synagogue. He contacted Jesus out of love for his dying slave whom he could have chosen to discard as a piece of property. He responded to God, people, and life with an inner health. When he came into contact with Christ, he recognized the sheer authority that was in the Messiah, and placed his trust in Christ when given the opportunity. When the centurion's servant became ill he asked Jesus to intervene on his behalf. The statement he makes about authority in Luke 7:6-9 is poignant:

"Lord, do not trouble yourself further, for I am not worthy for you to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and to another, 'Come!' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that was following him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith."

Through his experience in commanding and being commanded, the centurion had learned not to fear those in positions of leadership and authority. As a result, he turned for help to God's Anointed, the one man in all of history who has the right to command nature. I believe that people like this centurion can lovingly bow before God because they have learned a healthy appreciation for authority.

Freedom and Authority

Janis Joplin (of all people) popularized a song that was prophetic for the rebel generation of the '60's. The refrain in the song "Me and Bobby McGee" says: "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose./ And nothin' ain't worth nothin', but it's free." The song was about the inability to sustain commitment in a relationship. Happiness does not come from being free of every restraint and throwing off all authority. If freedom is our only value, and we are unwilling to submit to one another, "then freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. And nothin' ain't worth nothin', but it's free."

The centurion turned to Jesus because he understood his relationship to authority, and thus was able to trust Jesus Christ as the ultimate authority. That is the lesson of the fifth commandment. If we are to become healthy people we must first learn to honor our parents, which will teach us about a right relationship to God.

A Tribute to Parents

In this respect, I want to say a word in tribute to my own parents. My father is a stable man, honest to the core, and has been deeply committed to his family throughout the years. He has high standards and does not deal very well with failure. When I was growing up, he served me most by setting a direction and teaching me discipline. He is a man of principles and commitment, whom I have always respected and loved. My mother is relational, accepting, and nurturing. She is a wise, upbuilding person, who has a great sense of humor. She has helped me believe in myself during times of failure. In thinking about who they are I know I should express my gratitude to God more frequently than I do for granting me parents so worthy of honor.

I have not spent any great length of time in my parents' home since I left for college at 18 years of age. In the intervening years, I have been most influenced in my thinking about parental roles by my peers and mentors at PBC. In contrast to my experience, a great many pastors and elders and people in leadership roles in this church have not had the advantage of having healthy families. It is not required that we have loving, stable, and thoughtful parents in order to become healthy ourselves. It is required that we learn to honor the parents we have, whether we like them or not, whether they earn it or not.

Difficult Parents

I have heard enough of the life stories of the men and women who give leadership to this church to know that not just a few of them had cruel and abusive parents. Cold and distant unconcern, alcoholism, and mental illness in parents were the childhood experience of some who now lead this church. Some were orphaned as children; others were abandoned. Despite the circumstances, I have seen these people respect the generation that preceded them, both parents and parents-in-law. Many have invited aged parents into their homes to care for and support. They learned the lesson of honoring those whom God had allowed to be their parents, whether or not it was easy. As a result, the grown children are godly, healthy people. They are able to break whatever patterns of tragedy were in the past and give health to those around them.

We need to draw some conclusions for those who have been debilitated by a terrible childhood. Among non-Christians and Christians as well, it is a burgeoning phenomenon. People join groups such as Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA), realizing that they share similar tragedy, and thus can support each other in undoing the effects. Although there are no simple cures to a painful childhood, the biblical pattern for recovery begins with honesty. As long as there is dishonesty or misrepresentation of the situation, the journey back to health will not proceed very far. There has to be honesty before God about what has happened.

The second step involves receiving and granting forgiveness. We must receive forgiveness from God for our sins and then forgive those who have sinned against us. Forgiveness is the antidote to defensiveness and inhibition. We must forgive in response to the great gift of God's forgiveness of us in Christ.

New Creatures in Christ

Repair of the past is not God's primary interest for us. Rather, he intends our re-creation. We are new creatures in Christ, not bound by heredity or the environment in which we were raised. We are who we are by virtue of the cross of Christ. Therefore, we must adopt the wisdom of the apostle Paul regarding his own past, as stated in Philippians 3: "Forgetting what lies behind, and stretching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." It is our present reception of the Lord Jesus and the goal of becoming more like him, not our past, that should dominate our thinking about ourselves. That process, as complex as it is, will enable those with painful childhood memories to work through them. Honoring their parents in spite of their worthiness is the most healthy and mature course for the individual to choose.

For those recovering from a painful past I would further suggest involvement in ministry with children. Our society is filled with those children who would greatly benefit from the love, care and godly instruction that perhaps you did not receive. It will yield the wonderful by-product of health and wholeness in your own life as well. We have programs for children in this church that need workers. There is always room for ministry in our Sunday School program for young children. Our high school and junior high youth ministries are in touch with needy kids who could tremendously benefit from your involvement. Christian Service Brigade and Pioneer Girls program reach out to children in the community.

Young Life is starting clubs working with high school youth on the Peninsula. In East Palo Alto we have a ministry to kids who do not speak English, many who are poverty-stricken, or have other tragedy in their life. Part of the process of getting well might include investing yourself in an act of kindness for a child in need.

Being a Godly Parent

Although the fifth commandment is written to children, it nevertheless has relevance to parents. The most helpful thing we can do for our children is to be the kind of parents who are not difficult to honor and respect. The apostle Paul wrote a simple word of advice in Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction in the Lord." There are two parts to that statement. Do not do the negative and do the positive. First of all, do not provoke, ruin, or dominate your children. Then, get involved with your children, care about them, know them, teach them, and walk with them. Do not hurt them, but care for them.

I think the most vivid memories in my life have to do with my children. Parenting has been the instrument God has used most often and most deeply to teach Leslie and me to love, understand and need one another as husband and wife. I recall the overwhelming joy I felt when I saw our first child, Sarah, being born. I will never forget the night I spent in the pediatric intensive care unit, wondering what would become of our son Jeff who had fallen out of a tree onto his head. Would he live, would he be whole? I remember our third child, David, scoring his first soccer goal. There have been arguments, prayers, trips, jokes, and other vivid memories in this process of parenting. For those of us in that process there is probably nothing else about which we worry, pray, or rejoice more than bringing up our children. I long for the Lord to make me the kind of father who will make it easy for my kids to honor their parents. I know if my daughters and sons cannot learn that lesson well, they will struggle all their lives.

The first of the Ten Commandments that instructs us in human relationships is foundational to all the others: "Honor your father and mother." Obeying it will produce mental and emotional health, allowing us to live a long, full life. It is the only hope for any society to succeed. However, the law by itself has never been able to give life. It is a mirror to gaze upon so that we can see ourselves. Looking at it we will see incapacity and failure, and it will teach us to call out to God for mercy. Although it will direct us, shape us, and help us realize what we did not know, it cannot save us.

Children by Adoption

Ultimately, the most important family experience that you and I will have is not the family into which we were born, nor the family we create by marrying and bearing children. The most important family is the one into which we were adopted by the heavenly Father. In the long run, we learn to appreciate authority in order to trust God—to be able to bow before our Father in heaven. It is by the power of the Spirit that these things take place. Paul wrote in Romans 8:14-16:

All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! [that is "Daddy", intimate Father] Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

He who has graciously adopted us as his children wants to give us intimacy with himself and standing for eternity.

We will close with a prayer about family life from Ephesians 3:14-19:

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Catalog No. 4184
Exodus 20:12
Steve Zeisler
Fifth Message
September 24, 1989
Updated January 19, 2001

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.