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THE HIGHEST OFFICE

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Honor your father and your mother.

What does this mean for us?

We are to fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and others in authority, but respect, obey, love, and serve them.

God has really turned the tables. Instead of teasing you with rewards or bullying you with threats to make you swing a deal, God has come straight out and told you the whole story. In three short commandments, God has announced his decision about you in Christ, his name, and the decision he's made about the whole earth. God has said, "I'm going to be your God and make you and the whole creation new."

Now, what are you going to do in the meantime? Some people, once they hear what God has decided, think there's no point in doing anything. It doesn't seem to matter what we do anyway, they say, so why not just eat, drink, and be merry until the end.

Other people say that since God is going to write the end of the story, we'd better get busy and do some really good and



pious things to prove that we are religious enough to deserve what God has in mind. That's how the old self reacts.

But what does God say? After giving you the word about your future and telling you what the end of the story is going to be, God says, "Honor your father and your mother." Then God adds a beautiful promise to this commandment: "that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). God doesn't leave us alone in the meantime but goes to work to make sure that we will enjoy long and happy lives until the new day comes.

God begins where life begins for us, in our homes. There God sets parents, guardians, and children apart for the highest offices in the creation: the offices of parent, protector, and child. Then, having protected us in our homes, God goes on with six more commandments to make sure that life and everything we need to live will be protected as long as we live.

Representatives in your house

The promise God has attached to this commandment is the tip-off to its purpose. God wants to spread an umbrella of honor over you and your family to make sure that you get a good start in life. God wants to be sure, too, that your home and community are protected and kept in order. When there is an honor among parents, authorities, and those being cared for, that's what happens—the old self is restrained and there is justice and order so that you can live a long life.

Maybe you haven't thought of *father* and *mother* as names for offices. But they are offices just as much as the offices of mayor, president, or prime minister. In fact, they are even higher offices. Parents have the highest office in the creation, because through them, God gives life. Giving life, through them, God puts parents in charge of caring for and protecting their children.

Your parents, whether you became their child through birth or adoption, received their office before you were born. God gave it to them to make sure that you would have food, clothing, a place to live, and other necessities. But that's not all. Through your parents, God has been at work to make sure that you are loved, taught, trained, and given his word and promise.



Through them, too, he's been at work to prepare you for the day when you will start out on your own.

Because the office of father and mother is so important, God has given a high office to children, too: the office of son or daughter. And just as parents and guardians have important work in their offices, God gives children a great responsibility to go with theirs. Children are to honor their parents. Does that sound like a fancy way of telling you to listen to your folks? It might, but there's more here: There is only one kind of relationship that God has set apart for something as special as honor.

You've heard that word many times before. If you get the best marks, win a contest, or earn some recognition for a project, it's an honor. As we use the word, it points to someone set apart or special.

When God uses the word, it means even more. To honor someone, as God says it, is first of all to love that person. This is where honor starts. When you love other people—your mother and father, brothers or sisters, a special friend—they become important to you. You appreciate and enjoy them, you are willing to do whatever you can for them, and you prefer them to others.





But honoring is more than love. It includes the deepest kind of respect, respect that makes you say, "I wish I could be like him," or "If she were here, things would really be different."

A large target

You can see, then, how important God considers parents. In all creation, parents, guardians, and those who support their work are the only ones God commands us to honor. They are God's representatives in your house. You can see, though, what a huge job you have and what a large target the old self has to shoot at in your home.

The old Adam or Eve isn't just the old you in you—it's the old you in your parents, too. They're the first target. Because they have such a huge job to do, the old self has plenty of opportunities. It is easy for them to become grudging or impatient, nosy, short-tempered, hard to get along with at times, or stricter than they need to be.

What do you do when the old self causes trouble in parents? "Honor your father and your mother," the commandment answers. Two wrongs never make a right. Even when you are wronged, the best answer is always to try and make things right.



Dale D. Gehman



But God knows, too, that the old self can take hold of this command and use it like a club, insisting that parents be honored when it's trying to get away with the wrong. So God has put both a safety valve and a limit on his command.

The safety valve is other authorities God provides. When parents become downright mean, intolerable, or dangerous, it is the job of other authorities to help you—authorities like your teachers, your pastor, or if necessary, police officers or judges. If a difference between you and your parents becomes so important that it requires help from others, one of these people will give it. If you wonder whether the difference is worth talking to other authorities about, one of your friends can probably help you.

The one limit God has set on this commandment is simple: God is more important than parents are. That is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 10:37: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Your parents are God's representatives in your house, but they don't take God's place.

The old Adam or Eve doesn't only attack parents, however. It's the old you in you, too, and you probably don't need a long list of tricks to know how it operates.



Jim Whitmer



One of the old self's favorite tricks is to close children's eyes to all that their parents have done for them, so that they begin to think their parents haven't done anything or don't care. Another is making children act as if their parents and family exist to serve them and them alone, as if they were kings and queens living in a house full of servants.

There are any number of tricks that can be used to fool, anger, and annoy parents until finally they surrender. When this happens, it's not long before the house is filled with angry and shouting parents and equally angry children. The love, care, and protection that God promises to give through the home is then lost.

Because the old self attacks from both sides, the Fourth Commandment is a two-way street, running both ways to control the old you in both your parents and yourself. Paul explains it this way in Ephesians 6:1, 4: "Children," he says, "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Parents "do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

When the commandment works both ways, both parents and children are helped and protected.

Parents' helpers

Maybe it sounds ridiculous to call the president or the prime minister one of your mother's and father's helpers. Usually we think of it the other way around: heads of state are the really important people, while parents are insignificant people in comparison. But that's not the way God orders things. No matter what country or kind of government, parents come first. The other authorities are to help your parents care for you.

Though your parents can provide most of the important things you need, there are some things they can't do. Most parents lack either the time or the training to give their children a full education. While all Christians can speak God's word and promise to their neighbors and children, God also sends preachers and teachers to each community. Governments are needed, too, to keep order, provide for justice, and defend the citizens.



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Because these authorities help your parents, they come under the protection of the Fourth Commandment, as well. To do their jobs, such authorities—including teachers, principals, pastors, government representatives, police officers, judges, and others—need the respect and allegiance of the people they are supposed to help. Without it, they can't keep order or give the help and protection they are called to give.



The old self, of course, attacks schools, churches, and governments with as much vengeance as it attacks parents and children. As it takes hold, these authorities may become irresponsible or power hungry. When that happens, voters have the right and the responsibility to elect new officials who will do their jobs properly.

The second table

You can begin to see, now, how far God goes to make sure that each of us is taken care of properly. God wants to make sure that we can all expect to live long and happy lives while we await the new day. So, beginning with our parents, God surrounds us with people who will help to care for us in the meantime—not only authorities, but friends and neighbors.

To make sure that we can live together with friends and neighbors in peace and harmony, God has given the remaining commandments. In them, you will see how God extends a protecting hand over all that we and our neighbors need: our lives, relationships, property, names, and the hope that we need to live each day.

These commandments, from the fourth through the tenth, are called the second table of the law. In the first table, the first three commandments, God tells us about our relationship to him. Now, in the second table, God tells us about our relationship with our neighbors, commanding us to love them in every way.

These commandments aren't going to make new people out of us. That's not their purpose. But they will protect us from the old Adam or Eve and drive us to the promise. Making the new you and the new creation is a job God won't give to anyone else; that's a job God does alone.