

# It's All Relative

Readings: Proverbs 23:22-25; Ephesians 6:1-4; Luke 2:

It all seemed so simple really, a sermon on honouring parents. However the more I thought about it the less simple it became. It was like one of those annoying puzzles that you get given every so often where the idea is to take it apart and then back together, it looks all so simple but soon it becomes apparent that it is anything but, you just can't seem to put it together.

For once we start to talk about people's parents there are all sorts of difficulties. Some of us may have wonderful parents but they are no longer with us, others may have had parents that we find it very difficult to honour. Those of us who are parents may not consider ourselves worthy of honour. Or perhaps we may feel that our children do not honour us as they should. This command concerning families is going to have a different impact depending on our circumstances. To use the awful pun, it is all relative. The puzzle once it is back together is going to look different for each of us.

Perhaps the best way forward is to look at the overall shape of the puzzle, the commandment itself, and then consider various parts of the puzzle, how we are to obey it in a variety of different circumstances.

## UNDERSTANDING THE COMMANDMENT (EXODUS 20:12)

### HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER ...

With this the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment we come to what is called the second tablet of the commands, where we move from the vertical to the horizontal, from God focused commands to those aimed at relationships with neighbours.

The very first of these commands is about our closest neighbours, our family.

We perhaps take this for granted so that we don't realise how surprising it is. If you were to look at other ancient law codes they usually have some religious stuff at the beginning but then the commands are about obeying the king and paying taxes. Such a view of society is based around for want of a better word, *government*, the Bible focuses on *family*. In fact the whole of the Bible is the story of families, firstly that of Adam, then Abraham, ultimately of God. We should never underestimate how important the idea of family is in the Bible. The fundamental relationships in Biblical thinking is familial and so it is no surprise the central place family has in Biblical ethics and view of society.

Parents are to be honoured, which comes from the Hebrew word for weight, we are to give them their due weight, treat them for what they are worth, to treat them honourably with due respect. We should also note, again quite radically in the cultural context, that both parents are to be given equal honour. Throughout Scripture it is both mother and father who are to be honoured.

### ... SO THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG IN THE LAND

Then, as Paul points out, there is a promise attached to the command, about living long in the land the Lord has promised to give them. In this land they are to keep their covenant, their agreement with God and it is parents who are given the responsibility in Deuteronomy to teach their children the basics of the faith and the commands (6:7) and to explain that the commands are to be kept because God has saved them (6:20). The people of Israel were to learn how to keep the covenant on their parents' knees. If the children did not honour their parents, they would not listen to what

their parents taught them and they would be putting the covenant in danger because they would not be following in the ways of the Lord.

This helps us understand why breaking this commandment could be punishable by the death penalty (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). It was not just the parents' pride that was at issue, the covenant and the land were at stake if children did not honour what their parents taught them. Whereas if they did they would be taught in the way of the Lord and so keep the covenant and enjoy the blessings.

## APPLYING THE COMMANDMENT

This then is the command, the basic shape of our puzzle: the value of family and honouring of parents, and the passing on of the faith. It is a command that Jesus endorses (Matthew 15:4-6) and Paul applies directly to Christians (Ephesians 6:2), so what are we to do with it?

We could perhaps fruitfully consider the theological and sociological importance of the family as God's design for human society. It is certainly right that the church does all it can to support families and encourage legislation that facilitates good family life as well as teaching about godly family life.

Yet the command is not "discuss good social policy" but "honour your parents". It is a command that has relevance to us all for while we may not all be parents we all have parents and we are called to honour them. Parents, we also should note it does not say "Remind children to honour you" but rather "honour your father and mother."

Now this is going to take a different form for different people and at different ages, the different parts of our puzzle.

### CHILDREN

Firstly, for children, honouring parents most clearly means to obey them. Paul says "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." (Ephesians 6:1 see also Colossians 3:20). This is balanced with "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4). This obedience is tied to being taught the faith.

As children get older this can be difficult, as they start to think that they know more than their parents. Mark Twain once quipped that "When I was fourteen my father was so ignorant I could hardly bear him, but by the time I was twenty one I was amazed how much he had learned in seven years."

Yet we have a wonderful example of Jesus who despite from childhood having to be about his heavenly Father's business we are told was obedient to his parents and grew in favour with God. (Luke 2:51a, 52). God desires children to be obedient to their parents. There will be difficulties and conflicts but children should never fail to honour.

### ADULTS

As we grow into adulthood our relationship with our parents changes. All too often the relationship changes from one of honouring parents to humouring parents, keeping in touch only when necessary, "Yes Mum, no Mum, talk to you soon Mum." Many of us have to consider whether we are truly honouring our parents.

Jesus had some very stern words to say to Pharisees who had some good, even religious reasons, why they weren't caring for their parents as they should. Yet the fact of the command remained (Mark 7:9-13). We may have lots of reasons why we don't honour our parents as we should, distance, time, money, relationship difficulties yet the command remains.

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(See Exodus 20:1-21) 06-04-2012  
DID YOU HEAR THAT? DID YOU? HONOR THY FATHER AND MOTHER, SUCKER!!! AH HAH HA HAH HA HAH AH HAH

We should note there is a danger if we do not care properly for our parents as we get older. Joy Davidman, a Christian writer, best known for marrying C.S. Lewis wrote the following story in her book on the Ten Commandments *Fire on the Mountain*

Once upon a time there was a little old man. His eyes blinked and his hands trembled. When he ate he clattered the silverware distressingly, missed his mouth with the spoon as often as not and dribbled a bit of his food on the tablecloth. Now he lived with his married son, having nowhere else to live and his son's wife was a modern young woman who knew that in-laws should not be tolerated in a woman's home. 'I can't have this,' she said, 'it interferes with a woman's right to happiness.'

So she and her husband took the little old man gently but firmly by the arm and led him to the corner of the kitchen. There they sat him on a stool and gave him his food. One day his hands trembled rather more than usual and the earthenware bowl fell and broke. 'If you are a pig', said the daughter-in-law, 'you must eat out of a trough.' So they made him a little wooden trough and he got his meals in that.

These people had a four-year-old son of whom they were very fond. One supper time the young man noticed his boy playing intently with some bits of wood and asked him what he was doing.

'I'm making a trough,' he said, smiling up for approval, 'to feed you and mamma out of when I get big.'

The man and wife looked at each other for a while and didn't say anything. Then they cried a little. Then they went to the corner and took the little old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him in a comfortable chair and gave him his food on a plate, and from then on nobody ever scolded him when he clattered or spilled or broke things."

We teach our children how to honour us as we honour our parents. The story also reminds us of the possibility of elderly parents living with the family. It is not always possible but I had the wonderful privilege of having my Nana live with us for over 10 years. It was wonderful even if sometimes bemusing and frustrating to have her with us but it was well worth the effort.

Even if that is not possible to have parents live with us do we include our parents enough in our family events? Do we remember their important anniversaries? Do we talk with them, really talk as they probably long for us to talk? One thing I have to keep reminding myself is that my parents have never been old before, they are going through new experiences, often not pleasant and they need friendship and companionship and a listening ear. What do we do to call them to mind?

I have different cuff links on this week, they are ones that I was given by my parents on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. I wear them in thanks for all that have given me, and I pray that in years to come when my children will wear my *Star Trek* cuff links in the same way.

In all this I want to encourage those of you who do so much for your elderly parents and honour them despite difficulties, frustrations and anxieties. It is something the Bible clearly says God is pleased and follows the example of Jesus who even as he died his thought was for the well being of his mother. (John 19:26-7)

#### **THOSE WHOSE PARENTS HAVE PASSED ON**

But for many of us the problem will be that parts of the puzzle are missing, as our parents have died, what do we do in such a situation. Firstly we can give thanks to God for them and all they have given and taught us. We can also bring honour to them by the way that we live. It may also be that we can teach the generations that come after

us of their lives and their struggle and so honour them in memory. There is a reason that the Bible is full of genealogies, we are all part of a bigger story and family.

### **PARENTS WITH ADULT CHILDREN.**

Lastly in this list I would like to say a few things to parents who have grown up children. I wonder if you have spoken with your family as to how you would like to be honoured. There are often difficult decisions that need to be made about arrangements as we get older it is important that these are talked about openly and sensitively with your family. Older parents can often feel bullied by their children but the children may be at a loss as to know what to do. Can I encourage you to talk with your family about how you want to be honoured as you get older.

### **GOD'S FAMILY**

Finally and all too briefly I am well aware that what I have said so far assumes that puzzle when put together is of a smiling happy family which sadly is far from true for too many in our society and even within our church. Families can just seem all too hard. The pieces of puzzle are too sharp and they cut and hurt, and we want to just throw it away.

Yet the importance of family is ultimately vindicated in that it is the primary way in which God wishes us to think of our relationship with him. We should never get over the enormous privilege it is that we can say "Our Father in Heaven". It could have been, Our Lord, or Our Master, but God wants to be known as our father, he welcomes us who trust in his son as his adopted children. This is our ultimate family, a family which takes precedence over any earthly family as Jesus radical call reminds us (Matthew 10:35-37; 12:47-50).

But being part of this family also reminds that we stand only because of God's grace and forgiveness and this is a forgiveness that is to be extended to others. We need to act with grace towards those in our family even when it is oh so difficult.

For this ultimately is how we honour our heavenly father, let us be like him as we honour our parents.