

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Ten Commandments, Session 6: Commandment 5 – Putting Parents in Their Place

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 6, Commandment 5: Putting Parents in Their Place.

And this brings us up now to the fifth commandment, where we're starting to make this transition.

We started off with the commandments about the obligations of human beings to God. Then we have this kind of broader one on the Sabbath day, which talks about the environment. Now we're shifting over to our obligations to fellow human beings.

And where do we begin? We put parents in their place, and they come at the top of the list of our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. I think this is a very appropriate topic to address in our day and age. We have a kind of shifting perspective, I think, in our society and parents.

You think back, you know, to the 1950s and maybe 1960s. And we have the wise father who knows best, who would be able to tell us how to live our lives and give us sage advice. But now, of course, we have a father who knows nothing and Homer Simpson, who is disrespected by his children and abused by his boss, and altogether seems to be a total loser kind of character.

And, by the way, if it seems to you that dads are not faring real well in commercials, and that maybe is not as much as they used to. Studies have shown that it is the case that dads or husbands are typically shown as being kind of foolish, and their wives or their kids are constantly outsmarting them. So, and that's a funny thing, because, of course, now we're living in a day of disrespecting authority, and who could who could represent authority more than parents.

So, yeah, so looking at the Ten Commandments to say three that are talking about God, one that talks about not only God, but also the environment, and to some extent our fellow human beings, and very broad that that Sabbath day command. Now we are moving into several here that will be directly addressing how we treat fellow human beings. An interesting thing, it doesn't begin with murder, which would seem to be the most obvious place to start.

You know, you have to represent somebody or have to respect somebody else's right to live before you can respect their right to their own property. But that's not where the Bible begins. It begins with this 5 command, which is, first of all, a positive

command, you know, and unlike all these negative commands to come, this is a positive one.

And it seems to be something that we in our society would probably give very little thought to, and very little weight to the idea of honoring father and mother. You may wonder if God wasn't peaking some 3500 years into the future, knowing what was coming up, and anticipating Homer Simpson gave us this command in the Ten Commandments. But it just seems like a strange place to begin.

So, some big questions that we might wonder about regarding this commandment. First, of course, what do we mean by honor? Let's say we would talk about the ambiguity of some of these Ten Commandments. How do we honor parents? And another big question here, why parents? It's interesting, a number of years ago, while I was doing some research on the Ten Commandments, one of the commentaries, a pastoral commentary, which in the first comment that he made, the first observation that he made about this particular commandment was, if this had been written in our day and age, it would probably say something more to the effect of parents honor your children.

And, you know, reading through that comment, it was sort of like the author was trying to say that we live in a day when children are not receiving the proper respect. And so we must honor children. And I was rather perturbed that somebody would have such a lack of understanding of what it means to honor and what the importance of honor was in the ancient world, and that somebody would be putting a pen in their hand and writing them a contract and letting them write a commentary.

Clearly, the person had not done the proper background work. And then, of course, one more big question is how honor is to be manifested? How is it that we are supposed to honor our parents? One of the interesting features of this comment of this commandment is that it includes a threat. You know, in the New Testament, St. Paul calls this the first commandment with promise.

You know, honor your father and mother so that you may long live in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Well, actually, it's more like an implied threat, because, of course, the converse inverse, I guess, of that would be if you don't honor your father and mother, then you won't be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. So there certainly is the implication there that God might be bringing a special punishment on you if you don't do this.

And this is the first one, the first time that this kind of thing is mentioned in the Ten Commandments. Now, we know that in the prophets and in the historical books, in the Deuteronomistic history, as it's called, there's a big emphasis on the worship of

pagan gods, and not so much about the honor of parents. And the reason why the Israelites were kicked out of the land was because of their worship of pagan gods.

But here in the Ten Commandments, we see the implied threat attached to failing to honor parents. And so that's an interesting question. Why here? Why with this commandment, is that threat brought forth, which, of course, anticipates that time when the people of Israel will be kicked out of their land and taken into exile.

So one of the things that we need to understand, in order to appreciate this commandment, is to recognize the difference between an honor and shame culture versus a merit or guilt culture. The difference between honor and shame cultures and guilt cultures, I kind of use the word merit here as well, because I think that fits well in this context. But this has been explored extensively by anthropologists and has become an area of great research.

Western cultures, like most of us who are in Western culture here, most of us who speak English are part of Western culture, we tend to be inclined toward ideas of merit and guilt. What does that mean? Well, merit is achieved through good works, you know, merit is earned by doing good stuff. And those achievements that we do will be rewarded, and we will receive standing in our society.

Guilt is an internal sense that you have done something wrong, something that you shouldn't have done, or maybe failed to do something that you should have done. Guilt is internally directed. Typically, we can feel guilty, even if nobody knows that what we've done is wrong.

And so a lot of people in our Western society deal with issues of guilt about matters that are private and secret, that nobody knows anything about. This is quite different from an Eastern culture, which would tend to be more inclined toward the honor and shame axis, rather than the guilt and merit axis. Honor is about a public face that is attained both by your actions and by your position.

So, if somebody does something particularly meritorious, and it is recognized by people, then they have obtained honor. If somebody reaches a certain age, they are to be given a certain amount of honor. If they receive a position, they are to be given a certain amount of honor.

In those societies which are driven by the notion of honor and shame, everybody kind of knows the honor that is due to them, the way that they should be publicly acknowledged. You know, this is kind of a driving theme in the book of Esther, of course, is that Haman, who has become the vizier of the Persian Empire, is expecting to receive a certain amount of public acknowledgement. And then you have this man Mordecai, who is refusing to honor Haman as he expects to be honored.

Now, personally, I might be a bit of a minority here, but I think Mordecai was in the wrong. In that society, in those days, a person who had attained the position that Haman had received, whether you liked him or not, was irrelevant. The thing was, his position demanded a certain amount of honor.

And to deny him that honor was to ask for trouble. And, of course, Mordecai got it in spades. So, honor is achieved both by your actions, by the things you've done, but also by your position, by the place that you find yourself in society.

Shame is public honor denied. So, this is different from guilt. Guilt is an internal thing and secret.

Shame is a public thing. Shame is when your honor is forfeited by something you've done or something somebody within your close circle has done, or when it has been denied to you by somebody who just refuses to give it to you, as in the case of Mordecai refusing to give Haman the honor which his position really demanded. So yeah, in traditional cultures, everybody knows their place.

Everybody knows how they are to be treated based on the honor that they possess. So, our understanding of honor in our society, in a Western society, is really quite shallow compared to the concept of honor that they have in many Eastern cultures. The Hebrew word for honor, by the way, kavod or kaved, to honor somebody, means to treat something as significant or weighty.

And we kind of do the same thing in our society. We talk about somebody whom you have to give respect. We call them a heavyweight.

So, a very similar kind of usage of the imagery there. But honor will be associated with who somebody is, even more so than what somebody has done. So if somebody lives long enough to become an elder, they're going to get honor.

All they had to do was not die, which is kind of cool. But yeah, obviously, you could have somebody who's a war hero or something of that sort that could bring them a certain amount of honor. Somebody who obtains a good wedding or a good marriage or something of that sort.

And these things would determine your place in society. If your family was an honorable one, for various reasons, like maybe their good bloodlines or something that their ancestors had done, then you could expect to get a good marriage because you would be marrying somebody who has a similar level of honor, a similar level of public acknowledgment. So if, on the other hand, somebody has brought shame upon themselves or upon their family, then their marriage prospects, their prospects for jobs and position, all that, of course, is going to be damaged.

Honor will bring privileges to a person. The place of honor at the table, Jesus speaks about that in one of his parables, right? That somebody who's given the seat at the right hand of the host is being treated with special honor, a very public acknowledgement of their position. An important issue, of course, for many people in the ancient world, and even to our own day, an important thing for helping us to understand even some of the headlines that we read is the fact that honor can be considered more important than life itself.

Literally, when we hear death before dishonor, we might think of the Klingons or maybe ancient Spartans or something of that sort. The idea that somebody would bring shame upon themselves would have repercussions for not only themselves, but also for their kids, for their grandkids, maybe for their family for generations. And so death before dishonor was a very real kind of consideration for people in those days, that it was more important to maintain your honor than it was to maintain your life.

So, significantly different from our understanding of guilt and merit, you know? To us in our society, if we have achieved a certain amount of merit, then we hope to be able to enjoy it, you know? If we're feeling a certain amount of guilt, well, oftentimes we'll just deal with it. We'll bear with it, maybe go get some counseling or something. But the idea that we would take our lives because of a public scandal, which makes headlines in our society.

In some other societies and other kinds of cultures, that would be accepted and expected. Interesting case I saw a few years ago, I guess it was, Mubin Rahu shot his 18-year-old sister. Why? Because she had married a Christian.

Now, what would the family think? Their father and mother have just been deprived of a daughter, and their son is being sentenced to prison and is taken away from them. What did the parents say? Remarkably, the father said, My family is destroyed. Why? Because of the son? Even after death, I will be destroyed because of this shameful girl.

His daughter was the one who destroyed his family, not his son, who killed his sister. No, his son did the honorable thing because his daughter had brought shame upon the family. This isn't just a Muslim thing; we think of this as something that maybe Muslims would do, but no, this is typical of honor and shame societies.

It was not at all unusual for somebody to choose either death for themselves or to kill in order to preserve honor. A family could pay for generations because of the shame brought upon them. So what does it mean to honor parents, then, with this understanding of honor and shame in traditional cultures? That might help us to throw a little bit of light on the meaning of this fifth commandment.

Honoring our parents means treating them in ways that their position demands. Parents, because of their role and their place in society, are irrelevant if they're good parents, irrelevant if they're bad parents, as parents, there are certain expectations on how they are to be treated, how they are to be respected due to their role in the family and in society. So, why parents? Why are we separating out parents here? Why not say, honor thy king or something of that sort, rather than why, particularly parents? Obviously, there are a lot of people in positions of authority in the ancient world, and people who could have considered themselves worthy of honor.

So why are we now picking specifically on honoring parents? I think there are a couple of good explanations for this. Some of this is actually upheld by the Bible, some of this is kind of my own opinion, but I do think that really one of the major issues here is, for us as human beings, the first people we interact with in this world, the people who give us life, are our parents. And in that sense, our parents not only give us life, of course, they protect us, they nurture us, they feed us, they care for us, and in those senses our parents are the most God-like people, as far as their influence upon us, that we are going to encounter in this world.

They are, in a way, God's surrogates. Even if they're not necessarily great parents or great people, their role in our lives is ideally very similar to the role that God should have in our lives once we grow and become independent. So our parents are, I believe, the reason why they're in this position, in the Ten Commandments, at the top of the list of people to whom we are to give various kinds of deference, I really believe the reason that they're there is because of their deep influence and their God-like role within our human society and human relations.

You know, there's a reason why the Bible refers to God frequently as our father and occasionally even as our mother. With all that parents do for us, you would almost think that it would come naturally for us to want to give them honor because of that position. So, how then is honor to be demonstrated? Again, how do we carry out this honor? And here's another bit of ambiguity that will be fleshed out later.

Well, to some extent, it's going to depend upon the relationship. And for children, you know, this is going to mean obedience. And this is one thing that both the Old Testament and the New Testament make clear.

Children are to obey their parents. It raises a kind of collective moan from younger people, you know, there's got to be something easier I can do than actually obey them. You know, come on, Dad.

Come on, Mom. The story I heard a number of years ago was that there was a man who won a raffle at his office, and he won a video game. Well, he's got three kids at home, and he knows that he can't give the video game to all three of them.

He wants to give it to one of them, hoping, of course, that they'll share. But he thinks that this is a good opportunity to teach his kids a lesson. And so he comes home with this video game.

The kids see it. Now, of course, they're excited. And he says, you know, I'm going to give this video game as a reward to the child, who is always the most obedient child in the family.

And the three kids looked at each other, and he said, Well, OK, he asks, who's the one who never talks back to mother? And the three kids kind of look at each other sheepishly, and then he says, Who always does what Mom says? And the three kids look at each other, and then they all kind of nod, and then one of them finally says, OK, Dad, you get the video game. Yeah. Honor entails obedience for children.

Children are to do what their parents say. And again, this is something that the Old Testament takes very, very seriously. According to Old Testament law, a disobedient child could be stoned to death.

Now, does it happen very often? Again, I kind of have my doubts. There's no record in the Old Testament of every child having been stoned to death. But the threat was there.

You know, if the child mouths off to Mom and Dad habitually, Mom and Dad could bring the child before the town elders and say, This child of mine is disobedient. They mouth off to me constantly. And then the town could stone the child to death.

Wow. Yeah. Yeah.

That seems pretty harsh. But again, in that society, honor was more important than life. And so a child who was disobedient and brought shame upon their parents was considered not only a danger to their parents, but also a danger to society.

You know, I rather again, I kind of doubt that this was something that was carried out very often, but I also suspect that disobedient children were much more of a rarity in those days than they are today. But even thinking about this, we've got to recognize that the fifth commandment was not primarily written for children. The fifth commandment was primarily concerned with adults and how adults are to honor their parents.

And again, there was an expectation that even adult parents would obey adult children rather than their parents. And we see this occur frequently, though there is a kind of a shifting of relationship as the parents grow older. And there seems to be in some of the Bible stories, more of a sense of collaboration, I guess, between the eldest.

But typically, the eldest member of the household, the patriarch, typically, you know, was considered to be the most honorable person in the household. And they're being honored, also typically meant that what they said was to be the law. It seems that there was a tendency among the elders to use that power a little less frequently.

You know, it's wisdom would dictate that you start letting your kids make their own decisions and let them have their own kind of lives. But sometimes, theoretically, at least, it seems that the eldest, the patriarch, could pull rank in the entire family and say, This is what I expect to be done. And if the kids refused, they could bring them before the town elders and have them stoned to death.

So, obedience is part of this. Support is definitely another part of this. And this goes back to the ways that families were structured, and the way that wealth was transferred from one generation to the next.

And this one figures really prominently in the New Testament. Jesus had very harsh words for people who tried to violate the fifth commandment. Jesus replied, why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? God said, honor your father and mother.

And anyone who curses their father and mother is to be put to death. But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is devoted to God, they are not to honor their father or mother with it. Thus, you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

You hypocrites. Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, saying, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain.

Their teachings are merely human rules. So, what is Jesus talking about here? Now, this is a legal, you might call it a loophole, that was exploited by the Pharisees and figures quite prominently actually in the Jewish tradition later on. And so we can know a lot about this just from what we read in the Mishnah on the Talmud, the Jewish holy books.

So typically, you know, the way that the family worked in those days is that I think about the story of the prodigal son, you know, the father has two sons, the son comes to a younger son comes to him and says, Father, give me that inheritance that I am owed. This was not unusual for the parents to give their kids their inheritance while the kids were still alive. Okay.

The oldest son would get a double portion, twice the money that the younger kids would get. If you had like four sons, then your oldest son gets twice as much as the other two sons. You divide it into, you've got four sons, you divide it into five, you

give the oldest son a double portion, you know, and then the other kids each get a portion.

Daughters, they typically weren't included in this. That's why in the book of Job, at the end of the book, it says that Job included his daughters and gave them an inheritance because that was not typical. Typically, daughters were expected to be supported by their husbands.

But anyway, so say you divide up your money and you give it all to your sons. What are you going to live on? Well, the kids then support their parents. And this is kind of a lovely thing when you think about it, because you're giving the money to the kids when they need it most, when they're trying to start out in life and they're trying to build a business and raise a family.

So you give them their inheritance, and then they use that money to support you in your old age. This was a beautiful system in its way, but unfortunately, a system that was ripe for abuse. And abuse that could be legally sanctioned.

So what happened was that the Pharisees came up with this policy that was actually written in the Talmud that somebody could declare the money that they had received from their parents to be korban. Korban, what does that mean? Korban comes from the Hebrew verb, which means to present or to bring close. Korban means devoted, devoted to God.

And so what they would do is they would say something to the effect of, oh, this property is korban. It's devoted to God. Don't touch it.

There have been excavations of graves in Israel where they found that there have been notes placed in the grave saying things to the effect of, anything that one finds in this grave that might be of value is to be regarded as korban. Don't touch it because God's going to getcha if you do. So here's how they use this to get around supporting their parents.

So Dad gives Junior his inheritance. And Junior says to Dad, Oh, Dad, all that money you gave me, it is now devoted to God. It is korban.

And for the next 30 years, yeah, for the next 30 years that money will be korban. Well, of course, by that time, Dad is going to be dead. And so the parents would be left with no support while the kid is sitting on this money, maybe puts it in the bank, lets it grow.

Remarkably, they could even declare it just korban with regard to certain people. Like if you didn't like your son-in-law, you could give your daughter some money and tell her that it's korban with regard to the son-in-law. You had to depend upon the

people being a little superstitious, or maybe we might call it pious, but I call it superstitious, you know, thinking that God's going to get them if they actually take this stuff.

But apparently this was quite a common practice, and it was endorsed in the Talmud as being a pious thing to do, to deprive your parents of support. And that's what Jesus was so angry about. He says, you have a fine way of setting aside the commandments of God just to fulfill your traditions.

So, yeah. Greedy kids can now explain away their greed for the sake of piety, in a way. Obviously, in New Testament times, the idea of treating parents with the proper respect was taking a beating.

And, of course, it continues to take a beating, even in our own day. Emotional support, I think, is another part of the command here that is required of those who would honor their parents. This can be a difficult one.

You know, the fifth commandment is about, for kids, obeying their parents, even for adults, maybe, to obey their parents to some extent, to treat them with the respect that they are due, to support them with the physical needs that they need. But also, something that we're coming to appreciate, of course, a lot more in our day, is to give them the emotional support that they need as well. Today, people are living longer than they ever have before, and so it's very significant in our society, which is so mobile today, that people are not there for their elders, for their parents, the way that they might have been in earlier generations.

A lot of times, we are willing to entrust our parents to strangers, and to entrust their care to people who don't really know them. Now, sometimes, of course, that is the most loving thing we can do. Sometimes, our parents have needs that we simply don't have the physical, financial, or emotional resources to be able to meet those needs.

And it's understandable that we would need to seek help in those kinds of things. But even in those circumstances, that can be something we can do to honor them, in a way, by helping and placing ourselves in those circumstances. But we mustn't forget the need for emotional support.

This number here, I have seen these statistics very wildly, but it seems like one of the most reliable statistics I have seen says that 40% of nursing home residents do not receive family visitors. And that's kind of frightening when you think about it. Some studies say that the average child will visit their parent twice a year in the nursing home.

Average. Now, obviously, there are some who are much more committed than others. I have known many people who visit their parents every week, sometimes two or three times a week.

But many others have been heavily neglected. 30 to 45% of nursing home residents suffer from some form of depression, often because of loneliness. But I remember, back a number of years ago, when I was a younger pastor, and when I would do some nursing home visitation, and I came into a facility one time, and it was on Dementia Ward, and as I was starting down the hall, there was a lady sitting in a wheelchair in the hallway, and she grabbed my hand as I walked past, and I smiled at her, and she said, Are you my son? Are you, are you my Joey? And I said, No, ma'am.

I said, I'm a minister. And I offered to pray with her, and she just kind of turned away and didn't even respond after that. And I asked one of the nurses about it, and the nurse said, Her son has never been here.

All the time that she'd worked there. That is not honoring our parents, obviously. That is a heartbreaking reality of our society today.

We need to maintain those connections. We need to provide them with the support and the dignity that they need. That's how we, that's, I mean, so it's such an important way to honor our parents.

Another important way to honor our parents is by preserving their traditions and passing them on. This was something which was so valued in ancient times, and still today in many traditional societies. The idea that we, that we pass on those, the wisdom, the knowledge, of course, you know, in the scriptures, the parents are told that they have a responsibility to teach the children about the laws of God and about the traditions, to recite the great acts of God from one generation to another.

Sometimes, of course, parents fail in that responsibility. Sometimes the kids just don't want to hear it. Sometimes, and increasingly in our day, the young people are rejecting the values and the traditions of their parents.

Obviously, not all those values and traditions are good. There are some things that we do well to reject. But on the other hand, there are many things that must and should be preserved and passed on.

And by doing so, we honor those who have come before us. We honor their wisdom. We acknowledge their experiences.

And this brings us to that question of that, of that warning, you know, what Paul calls the promise. What is this business about? If you don't do it, you might get kicked out of your land. Well, this sin, the sin of not honoring our parents, it does tend to be

under-emphasized in those prophetic writings where they talk about how the people have failed to worship only the Lord, their God.

Maybe that's why there's a special emphasis here. Maybe that's why it is singled out in this particular list of commandments. Individually speaking, we can see that dishonoring one's parents could be punished by removal from the land of the living, you know, that those who refuse to give honor to their parents could be cut off from, well, if somebody took those commands seriously about the child who dishonors their parents being stoned to death, then certainly their lifespan will be cut off.

And that is one way that they could be removed from the land. But yet another way is the corporate removal of the people led from the land by the exile. We can take here the example of Noah's son, Ham.

I think this is a kind of apropos illustration. You might remember the story that after Noah came out of the ark and with all of his family that he planted a vineyard and he became a man of the ground, a man who was a farmer and he made himself some wine from the grapes that he planted and then he drank his wine and he became very drunk and he was lying inside of his tent naked. And his son Ham comes and looks into the tent and sees Dad lying there naked.

Okay, so far no harm, no foul, you know, he made a mistake. But then he goes out and he tells his brothers, Hey, guess what, guys? Dad's lying in the tent and he's naked. This was bad.

This was very bad because he was bringing public shame on his father. It was expected in traditional societies that elders were not seen naked by younger people.

That is a no-no. That is taboo. Even to this day, I was teaching a graduate class one time, and I was talking about this story.

And a lot of people have very interesting explanations for why this was considered so severe. One of the famous ones is that Ham tried to homosexually molest his father. No, come on.

The Bible doesn't shy away from telling us about those kinds of things. But no, it's not that. This graduate student, who was from Africa, told me that even in his village, even to this day, the young people were not allowed to see the elders naked.

And even after they had died, only other elders would be allowed to prepare the bodies for burial. For a younger person to see an older person naked was considered to be bringing shame upon them. So, for Ham to have simply averted his gaze, ducked out, and kept his mouth shut, probably everything would have been okay.

But no, he has to go and tell his brothers about it. And when Noah wakes up and he learns about what has happened, he curses Ham's offspring and says that they shall be landless. They will be servants of their brothers, and essentially, they'll be dispossessed because they have shamed their parents.

So yeah, that's something that could have perhaps been in the mind of those who put the final touches on the Ten Commandments, that shaming that could lead to exile. People who dishonor their parents fail to pass on their hereditary values. You know, oh yeah, mom and dad were Methodists, but we had never forced that on our kids.

You know, they're failing to pass on the values. They're leading to a spread of iniquity, the forfeiture of their inheritance, and eventually that leads to the breakdown of society and to the judgment of God upon the people. And you know, does this kind of idea still apply to us? And particularly the warning, you know, Paul brought this up in the New Testament because he thought somehow it was still relevant.

For some reason, Paul thought that it was relevant that this commandment of honoring fathers and mothers has this notion attached that if you want to stay in the land, then you need to honor your parents. And you've got to wonder, sociologically speaking, I know of course that the Ten Commandments were not written for modern America, but you've got to wonder sociologically even a culture that forgets its traditions, a culture that loses its moorings, and a culture that dishonors its elders must be especially abhorrent in some ways in the nostrils of God. And you have to wonder how much further it can go, how much further we can push, how much more the younger generations can be sure that they are smarter than anybody who's ever come before.

How long can that go on before the axe of judgment falls? I do think that this is a warning, and I do think that there is some relevance for the warning, even for us today, that we need to remember that the elders are not simply old hat that can be pushed aside. They're not an embarrassment to us in spite of the way they are so often portrayed in society today, that they should be given the honor that they are deserving as people who have striven, who have experienced, who have wisdom to share, if anyone is willing to listen.

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