

An elderly Italian man lived alone in New Jersey. He wanted to plant his annual tomato garden, but it was very difficult work, as the ground had become too hard. His only son, Vincent, used to help him with the garden, but now he was in prison. The old man wrote a letter to his son and described his problem:

Dear Vincent,

I am feeling pretty sad, because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. I know if you were here my troubles would be over. I know you would be happy to dig up the ground for me, like in the old days.

Love, Papa

A few days later the father received a letter from his son:

Dear Pop,

Don't dig up that garden. That's where the bodies are buried.

Love, Vinnie

At 4:00 A.M. the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived and dug up the entire garden area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. The same day, the old man received another letter from his son:

Dear Pop,

Go ahead and plant the tomatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances.

I love you, Vinnie

That was funny. I don't know how much it applies to my message about honoring our parents, but I just couldn't pass it up.

We are still working our way through the Ten Commandments, and if you recall when we began our study, I explained that the Ten Commandments are divided into two parts – the first part, the first four Commandments, are focused on man's relationship to God, and the second part, the last six Commandments, are focused on man's relationship with one another. So, the Ten Commandments are divided and yet they are connected.

Do you remember when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment?

I touched on this a little bit last week, but in **Mark 12**, beginning with **verse 29**, we are told,

²⁹ Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; ³⁰ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

In His answer, Jesus summed up the entire Ten Commandments in only two. The first four were summed up with His words, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”* and the last six Commandments were summed up with the words, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Jesus gave two separate commandments but He linked them together. **What does it look like to love God whole-heartedly – with all your being?** It looks like loving others. Loving your neighbor is the practical application of loving God. That’s what it looks like. Our love for God is measured by our love for others.

If you recall in **Matthew 25:31-46**, which is a parable about judgment, Jesus said,

“I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.”

In his parable, the people being judged did not know what Jesus was talking about. They had not seen Jesus in these conditions, they had not cared for Him in the way He described, and they were confused, but then Jesus said to them,

“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

So loving others is the practical outworking of loving God. It’s all connected. Loving others is what it looks like to love God, and to love others starts at the most basic and foundational of all human relationships – the family, and that brings us to the fifth Commandment found in **Exodus 20:12**, which states,

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged on the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

Now to introduce this commandment, I thought I would share a Bible story with you found in **Jeremiah 35**.

Is anyone familiar with the Rechabites? There isn't much known about the Rechabites, but they were descendants of Rechab, and their family roots seem to go all the way back to Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. So, they have a distant family tie to the Israelites.

In the days of King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel, Israel was experiencing some very dark and evil days under their leadership, and Baal worship had taken over the land, sponsored by Ahab and Jezebel. A man named Jehu led a revolt against them, and one day, Jehu was riding in his chariot and he meets this guy named Jonadab – the son of Rechab. Jonadab is asked which side he is on, and he answered he was with the Lord and he joined Jehu. They then ride off together to the capitol, killing the sons of Ahab and Jezebel, slaughtering all the prophets of Baal, and destroying their temple.

Apparently, this warrior Johadab liked the simple way of life, similar to our modern-day Amish, and he and his people became nomadic – like gypsies, and to preserve their way of life, Jonadab established some strict rules for his family. For example, they were to live in tents – not walled cities, they could not plant vineyards or fields so as to settle in somewhere, and they could not drink wine.

Now fast forward nearly 300 years to **Jeremiah 35** where God's people are once again living in disobedience to God, in essence they had violated the first four Commandments, and God had a message – better yet an object lesson for them.

The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah to invite the Rechabites to the temple for a public ceremony. They are taken to a side room in the temple – it seems that something important is going to happen here, and bowls of wine are set before the Rechabites. Then Jeremiah invites them to drink up.

It was a public ceremony, Jeremiah, the man of God was there, and the pressure was on to drink, but the Rechabites refused the wine, just as God knew they would, because their forefather Jonadab said they couldn't drink wine. They remained faithful and honored the command given by their forefather nearly 300 years prior.

And here was the object lesson for God's disobedient people. The Rechabites honored and obeyed their forefather Jonadab – a mere man, and yet God's own people would not honor and obey God Himself. **Was it wrong for God to expect the same honor from His own people?** Of course not.

Then we come to **verses 18-19** and we are told,

¹⁸ Then Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites, “This is what the LORD of armies, the God of Israel says: ‘Because you have obeyed the command of Jonadab your father, kept all his commands, and done according to all that he commanded you, ¹⁹ therefore this is what the LORD of armies, the God of Israel says: “Jonadab the son of Rechab will not lack a man to stand before Me always.”””

Despite God’s judgment at the hand of the Babylonians, a remnant of the Rechabites would be preserved. They would always have descendants – a continuing line of those who would worship the Lord.

The Rechabites honored their forefather, so God honored them with an everlasting blessing, and I think that is somewhat consistent with what is expressed in the fifth Commandment. Again, back in **Exodus 20, verse 12**, we are told,

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged on the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

This seems like a fairly simple and straightforward commandment, easy to understand and easy to follow.

In this commandment, God tells His people to **honor** their father and mother, and it’s important to point out that God was talking to anyone and everyone with parents, regardless of their age. This commandment to honor parents was intended for children, for youth, and for adults.

So, what does it mean to honor our parents? That word “honor” is the Hebrew word “*kavod*” and it literally means “*to be heavy* or *to be weighty*.” We might say that mom and dad are *heavyweights* and that has nothing to do with Jenny Craig or Weight Watchers – at least in this context. When I say they are *heavyweights*, as opposed to being *lightweights*, it means we are to give them the greatest possible weight in terms of respect and value.

Because of the heaviness of their position, and the heaviness of their authority over their children, parents are regarded as being worth their weight in gold, and as such, they are to be treated with a high regard. They are to be honored, and respected, and valued.

Now, I want to point something out in this Commandment that you may not like and it may not seem right to you. This Commandment to honor your father and

mother does not include conditions. It's not based on your parents' success or failure as your parents. It does not say, "Honor your parents if they deserve it." It does not say, "Honor your parents if they treat you right." And it does not say, "Honor your parents if they are good parents." It simply says, "**honor your father and mother**" – period.

As I said earlier, this seems like a fairly simple and straightforward commandment, but for some, this Commandment may seem nearly impossible to obey, because some people come from dysfunctional and fractured families where the parents are broken. In some cases, a parent is absent, and maybe even unknown by the child. In some instances, there may be substance abuse problems in the home – drug use and alcoholism that impact how a parent interacts and cares for their children. Maybe parents are cruel and abusive and neglectful towards their children. I could go on and on, and surely any of this would impact a child's relationship with their parents and their ability and most certainly their willingness to obey this Commandment, but with that said, the central truth does not change – we are to honor our parents whether they were good parents or not.

David Simmons, was a former cornerback for the Dallas Cowboys, and he spoke of his childhood home. His father was extremely demanding, rarely saying a kind word, always pushing him with harsh criticism to do better. His father decided that he would never permit his son to feel satisfaction from his accomplishments, reminding him there were always new goals ahead. When Dave was a little boy, his dad gave him an unassembled bicycle, with the command that he put it together. After Dave struggled to the point of tears, his father said, "I knew you couldn't do it." Then he assembled it for him. When Dave played high school football his father was unrelenting in his criticisms. After every game, his dad would go over every play and point out Dave's errors. Dave said "Most boys get butterflies before the game; I got them afterwards. Facing my father was more stressful than facing any opposing team." When Dave entered college, he hated his father and chose to play football at the University of Georgia because it was further from home than any school that offered him a scholarship.

After college, he was the second-round draft pick of the St. Louis Cardinal's. Joe Namath was the team's first round pick. Dave said, "I telephoned my father to tell him the good news and he said, 'How does it feel to be second?'" Despite the hateful feelings he had for his father, Dave began to build a bridge to him. Christ had come into his life during college, and it was God's love that made him turn to his father. During visits at home, he spoke with him and listened with interest to what his father had to say. He learned for the first time what his grandfather had

been like--a tough lumberjack known for his quick temper. Once he destroyed a pickup truck with a sledgehammer because it would not start, and he often beat his son. This new awareness affected Dave dramatically. "Knowing about my father's upbringing not only made me more sympathetic for him, but it helped me see that, under the circumstances, he might have done much worse. By the time he died, I can honestly say we were friends."

This is a powerful story because there are many people who find it very difficult to honor their parents. It is easy to honor parents who loved and nurtured you. It's easy to honor parents who made sure they were always there for you when you were hurting. It's easy to honor parents who raised you in a godly home. These parents are easy to love, and respect and honor – but not everyone has these kinds of parents.

We live in a fallen, sinful world, and many people live this out in their parenting, and as a result, there are many hurt and damaged people who find this Commandment to honor their parents nearly impossible to obey, and yet that is what God has said to do.

Now, before I go any further, I do need to say up front that this Commandment never says that we have to submit to abuse or neglect by a parent. We don't have to put ourselves in harm's way to honor them, and maybe to honor them only done from a safe distance – both emotionally and physically.

I also want to say at the onset that just like any other authoritative relationship, you don't have to do something they tell you to do if it is outside the will of God. For example, King Saul had a son named Jonathan. Jonathan valued and respected his father and fought by his side, but King Saul wanted David dead, and instead of obeying and helping his father, Jonathan warned David of the plot to kill him which led to his escape. So, honoring a broken parent does not mean blind obedience, especially as children become adults.

So, how do we honor a parent who is broken?

I understand that situations are very unique and there isn't a "one size fits all" answer, but I think there are some gospel-centered truths that might give us some helpful insight, or said in another way – maybe we should first look at Jesus, and our own struggles with sin, and consider what Jesus has done for us, before we deal with our broken parents. Let the truths found in the gospel guide our feelings, our actions, and our responses.

So, consistent with the gospel, when honoring a broken parent, we can still be gracious. We can give grace because God has been gracious to us – giving us what we do not deserve. That’s the gospel, and giving grace does not mean we give someone a free pass for their behavior, instead it is acknowledging their behavior and humbly going out of our way to help restore them – giving them what they may not deserve. That’s grace, and its grace, not hatred, that can lead to repentance and a changed heart.

We can also be forgiving just as God has forgiven us. That’s gospel as well. I like what Mark Driscoll had to say about this. To forgive broken parents does not mean we excuse or tolerate their bad behavior, and it does not mean we allow it to continue to impact us. But what it does mean is that we release the bitterness and the resentment and even the hatred we might have for them. We release the debt we may feel they owe us, and we release the desire to get even with them for the wrongs they may have caused. Instead of trying the case in our own heart, we give the case to a higher court. We release them into God’s hands to deal with in His own time and in His own way.

This is important for us, because if we cannot forgive, if we continue to live in bitterness towards our parents, it blinds us to any good and any positive contributions they may have made in our lives. We only see the bad. We only see the negative, because quite frankly, that’s all we are looking for. We get fixated on it. That’s what Satan does – he stalks us like a sniper constantly pointing out every single bad thing we do.

We can’t be like that, rather we should look for the positive and find ways to be grateful for our broken parents. **Is there something you appreciate about them? Is there something to be thankful for?** Anything you can be grateful and thankful for is something to honor and build upon. It may not change them, but it may change you and free you from your bitterness and from your past.

We are holy and righteous in Christ. That’s the gospel truth, and because we are holy and righteous in Christ, we need to act like it. We need to act like who we are, and just as Jesus set an example for us, we need to set the example others, especially as parents of our own children. As a parent, if you are always complaining about your broken parents, degrading them, humiliating them, and making disparaging remarks about them, you might be setting up your own children to treat you the same way in the future.

In Grim's Fairy Tales there is the story of an older man who lived with his young son and his son's wife. They also had a 4-year-old boy. The old man's eyes blinked; his hands shook, and when he ate food, the silverware would rattle against the plate. He often missed his mouth when eating, spilling food on the tablecloth. This upset the young wife, and she appealed to her husband to do something. They decided to move their dad to a corner at meal time away from the family. He would set alone in the corner eating out of a bowl, sitting on a stool. The old man would look sadly at the others as he desired to be with them.

One day the man dropped his bowl and broke it. His son and daughter-in-law said, "If you eat like a pig then we will serve you like a pig, and they made a wooden trough for the old man to eat out of.

Not long after that, they came upon their son playing with some pieces of wood. The dad asked what he was doing. The boy looked up, smiled and said, "I'm making a trough to feed you and mama when I get big." The next day the old man was back at the table eating with the family again and no one ever scolded or mistreated him again. We model now how we want to be treated later.

Lastly, let us not give up in praying for our broken parents. Jesus said to pray for those who mistreat you, so we need to make it a priority to pray that God would change their hearts, pray they would be healed, pray for restoration in their relationships, and pray for their salvation. And don't be surprised if God uses you in some way to be an answer to your prayers for them.

For some, this fifth Commandment may be the most difficult of all the commandments to follow, and God knows this. He understands. I have told you on a few occasions that sometimes the hardest thing is also the right thing. God tells us to honor our father and mother, broken or not, because in the long run, it is right and it's for our own good.

Source Material:

Holman Old Testament Commentary, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers – Glen S. Martin
The Bible Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament – Walvoord & Zuck
Forever Children – Ray Stedman
How Can You Honor Bad Parents – Mark Driscoll