

**Exodus 20:12**  
**Honour where it's due**

**Consider how to do this even now as grandparents!**

A few years back I went to the funeral of an uncle of mine who had died just a few months short of 100. At the cemetery afterwards, my oldest cousin turned to me and said, *Well, Peter, WE are now the older generation.*

And, without trying to be too rude, just looking around the room here today, I could imagine some of you thinking ... *Just what has this particular commandment got to say to me today?* I mean, when you get around to drawing your Old Age Pension, there's a distinct and growing chance that you won't still have any parents to honour.

So does this 5th of the ten Words, or Commandments, come with a kind of a date-stamp or a **best-before date**? If you don't have any parents still alive, can you safely skip from v11 to v13, and leave *these* words out of consideration?

***“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”***

(Exodus 20:12)

At the very least, do we say that, for better or worse, we have done what we have done, and there's no going back and changing it now? Or is this something that needs to be thought through and lived out until the very day of our own deaths?

I think it's got to be far broader than just literal offspring and literal parents. That's just where you start, when you're young. But if you were to pick up the Westminster Larger Catechism, written in 1647, you'd get a hugely expansive answer to the question:

*By father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.*

And I think I honestly have to say that that over-reaches a bit. Your average five-year-old, on that basis, is supposed to honour about 95% of the world, and that's quite heavy duty stuff when you're still trying to learn the difference between **curly c's, and kicking k's!**

So I'm not wanting to push it that far this morning, but to find something of the middle ground ... which will probably be quite enough for most of us to be getting on with, most of the time. And I'd like us to go through this verse by asking some of those simple W questions.

**What** is actually commanded, and what is actually promised?

**Who** is it speaking to, and who is it speaking about?

**Why** are we to do this?

**How** are we to do this?

I think I might summarise the whole verse as teaching that **parental honour promises societal benefits** - but let's try to unpack this a bit, shall we? And let's start by the most basic question of all, when we pick this up. And keep this question running through your minds, the whole time, because if you don't get this, you're missing much of what's here: **consider how to do this even now as grandparents!**

- **What** is actually commanded, and what is actually promised?

***“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”***

(Exodus 20:12)

Right away we have a deliberately fuzzy word. It really isn't easy to totally nail this down, and I think that's great. Its basic meaning in Hebrew relates to weight, heaviness. It's very closely related to the word we usually translate as “glory”.

We've got something of that meaning in English in the way we might say we give *weight* to what someone might say. Imagine a court of law. In the **dock** is a known scoundrel with a criminal record as long as your arm, and in the witness box is a pillar of the community. Their testimonies contradict each other. Who do you believe? To whose words do you ascribe more *weight*? Whose words, you could almost say, will you honour by believing? Which person will you consider worthy of trust?

Now “honour” will apply in different ways at different stages of life, for example. So in the NT, as we read earlier, it's specified with a different word, like a **snap-shot of live action**, for a specific age-group. Actually it comes up twice, in Ephesians and in Colossians, in those almost parallel sections:

***Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honour your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”***

(Ephesians 6:1-3)

***Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.***

(Colossians 3:20)

That is primarily how children are to “honour” their parents. But it changes over time. That's one of the reasons why teenage can be so tricky. That application to *obey* - just *doing* what is said - slackens over some space of years - but the application to the *heart* deepens. Respect and gratitude come more into play. The relationship is more equal.

And, if both are granted yet more time, it can start to lean the other way. That quip about “treat your children well ... they’ll be choosing your **care home!**” is uncomfortably near the knuckle. But, written before there were care homes, see how the Bible now places a different kind of responsibility upon children in giving honour to their parents:

***But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.***

(1 Timothy 5:4)

***But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.***

(1 Timothy 5:8)

No, I’m not trying to say that adult Christians should always look after their own parents in their own homes. That is not what “provide for” necessarily means - although it might. Its more basic meaning is “to consider in advance”.

***Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.***

(Romans 12:17)

***We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honourable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.***

(2 Corinthians 8:20-21)

So in family life, whereas it used to be that parents set the agenda for their kids, there comes a time when that boot is on the other foot almost entirely. And now it is the *kids* called upon to think through what is best for their *parents*.

And isn’t it interesting that both of these are talking about what is *honourable*? Folks, *honouring* is not just an attitude of heart, but an activity of the mind. And it *has* to be a question of thinking it through, because, as they say, every family is different. How you honour a parent who lives in your own home will be different from how you honour a parent who lives on the other side of the world.

But now, look. The Scriptures give us an incentive here, too. A positive outcome to this kind of thing is promised:

***“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”***

(Exodus 20:12)

Now this is a bit tricky, I have to admit. At first sight - and maybe we think more along these lines because our society is much more individualistic nowadays - it looks like a promise of individual long life. But I guess it won’t take a lot of

reflection to know that that doesn't map out in life as we know it. Even the most godly and honouring of sons and daughters can pre-decease their parents.

So I think we need to get back to Exodus and check out the context of this verse. We can't just think that "in the land the Lord your God is giving you" just means wherever you happen to live in the world nowadays. No, it was originally given in a specific context. There was a specific land. And this was at a specific point in history. Remember how these Ten Words start.

***And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. ..."***

(Exodus 20:1-3)

So this is the time when the *people* of Israel are on the verge of becoming the *nation* of Israel. They have been slaves in the land of Egypt. But their God, the true God, has reached out his mighty hand and liberated them. They have left Egypt. But they have not yet entered into that new land. There is ahead of them a

***"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."***

(Exodus 20:12)

So, rather than saying that individual people who honour their parents, when, eventually - in 40 years time, at the very minimum - they occupy that territory, will be assured of long lives, I think this is much more likely to be speaking about *national* longevity.

And I think that is mightily relevant to our modern societies too. Let me enlarge upon that a bit with our next question.

- **Who** is it speaking to, and who is it speaking about?

In the first place, you've just got to remember that this was being said to people who were largely adults. Read on and you'd have to concede that.

***"You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal."***

(Exodus 20:13-15)

I'm not saying that children can't commit murder - but these are largely adult activities that we're talking about. So if the *you* of verses 13-15 is plural, so is the *you* of verse 12. You *adults*, ...

***"Honour your father and your mother, ... "***

(Exodus 20:12)

Now this might be just a limitation of the Hebrew language, but I checked out on the computer, and the word “parent”, singular, doesn’t appear anywhere in the Bible, in the ESV or the AV. You get parents, *plural*, but only in the NT. If you’re in the OT, it looks as if there is the choice of the word “father” or “mother”, and quite a lot of times you will get *both* referred to, in order to arrive at the idea of parents, plural.

***Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.***

(Proverbs 23:22)

Now why have I started making this point? It’s because in our own modern society, I think we’re moving into something different. Go back a hundred years or so, perhaps, and people generally accepted that a mother and a father were needed in the raising of children. There were plenty of cases where a child might not be so blessed, of course. People died younger, and women died in childbirth or men on the battlefield or down the mines. And there were still unmarried mothers and absent fathers. But society, generally speaking, worked on the basis of children needing a mother and a father.

But there is far less of that nowadays. Things have moved on. People insist on their rights to be themselves, and freed from restrictions. So marriage is diminished, and divorce has grown. I remember when the news went around about a child at my secondary school whose parents had separated, such that they needed to be handled with special consideration. *But what’s so strange about that?* you might ask. And if you ask the question, it proves my answer. Back then it was unusual. Nowadays in schools it’s pretty much a daily occurrence, just one of many that teachers would probably expect to hear of in a term or a year.

Earlier this week, according to the *Christian Institute*, “LGBT campaign group Stonewall has issued yet more controversial advice to employers this week, urging organisations to replace ‘mother’ with the term ‘parent who has given birth’, supposedly to boost an organisation’s equality ranking.”

Folks, do you not think it is the case that we do not simply need to honour our parents, but parenthood itself? Yes, it’s hard work, and, personally, I think it’s harder on the mother than the father. Yes, it ties you down with commitments for years and decades, but isn’t *real* life, *real* self-realisation, or whatever this year’s mumbo-jumbo catchphrase for it might be, not about being as free as a bird but instead involved and interconnected with a network of life?

And just on a practical point, *the world* isn’t going to care for you when you’re old. “The State” is finding it hard enough, even the *Welfare State*. The only place that you’ll *really* get care from is *people*. And if we insist, contrary to God’s general plan for mankind, on living alone, then we must expect to age and die not just alone, but *lonely*.

So I think this Commandment should also stir us up to honour not just *our* parents, but that God-given order of society including families, typically, most desirably, with father and mother, committed exclusively to each other in the lifelong bond of marriage.

If society will not heed its Maker's instructions, then I think the second half of the verse is a chilling warning:

***“... that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”***

(Exodus 20:12)

No, we do not have a promised land in the way that the people of Israel did. But the people of Israel are both a prototype church *and* a prototype nation, for us to learn from. And here I think we see the *nation* of Israel warned: a society that does not honour parents - and, by implication, parenthood - is not likely to endure. If you want to make **Great Britain** great again, I'd say it's far more important to leave the daft modern ideas of how we can define or redefine our own societal and gender roles than it ever was simply to leave the EU. Actually, Brexit *will* be simple in comparison with fixing the modern mess we have made of relationships and lifestyles, things that are going to have effects on the children and grandchildren down through several generations.

One more thing about “who”, though. Jenny and I have several times commented to each other just how simple our lives have been. But even in our quiet family there have been some minor complications that make this Commandment a bit trickier to apply.

***“Honour your father and your mother, ... ”***

(Exodus 20:12)

So my Mum died when Jenny and I had been married just over a year. My Dad remarried before our kids came along. I still find it odd to think that my children never knew my mum. The woman they think of as one of their grandmothers I never knew as my mother.

So, maybe something to think about for this evening ... With the modern complexities of life, and the bizarre family arrangements that so many kids will encounter nowadays, haven't we got some kind of ticking time-bomb in the application of this 5th Commandment?

I had it, to some extent, in puzzling out to what extent a *step*-mother counts, when it comes to applying this command. Am I to honour her as a *new* mother in her own right, or do I honour my *father*, primarily, by the way I now treat the woman he is married to?

But that's really simple stuff compared to the kids of today, with "blended" families, as we are supposed to call them, rather than "broken". And a succession of uncles, most likely, rather than aunties.

What if a child never knows who their father is? How do they honour a mystery?

What if kids are in the middle of a "tug-of-love", and one parent is trying to alienate them from the other? How do they honour what they are told is a monster?

What about kids growing up in homes where there are two of the same, instead of one of each, now that society has claimed the right to redefine marriage?

And I say *kids* ... but what about those kids are adults, and the relationships around them are still as messy? How are they going to model parenthood for their own children? How are they going to continue with respect to ...

***Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.***

(Proverbs 23:22)

And I say *they* ... but what about if those confused kids or confused adults are *us*? We're told to honour *our* parents, *our* father and *our* mother. So what if some of those confusing questions apply to *us* in *our* lives and relationships? Where and how do we even start to *honour*?

So many questions here, that I think we have to leave these to follow up this evening. But before just tossing in a few suggestions as to how, I'd like to give more than just a simplistic answer to the ...

- **Why** are we to do this?

You could just answer it by going back to the first verse of the chapter.

***And God spoke all these words, saying,...***

(Exodus 20:1)

And actually that *is* good enough. I can remember a slightly quirky little (very little!) chorus from way back.

*God said it  
And I believe it  
And that's the way it's gonna be  
(repeat ad infinitum)*

And we don't necessarily have to take it beyond that level. But I think it might be helpful to do so. Why honour not just *someone*, but parents?

And it is true that we're not called *only* to honour parents. The Westminster Larger Catechism was right about that. God has constituted society in such a way that honour properly accords to certain people. The apostle Peter confirms this in a wonderfully subversive verse:

***Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.***  
(1 Peter 2:17)

Yes, honour the emperor. Pray for the G7 summit and the world leaders finally getting some Cornish sun this weekend. But remember that the emperor of this world is just an everyone before God, also to be honoured.

So we live in a world of a network of honours. Some expressed with a medal from the Queen and letters after your name, and some less tangible. We need to learn how to fit into that network graciously.

You will find that network in the church, too.

***Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.***  
(1 Timothy 5:17)

But it's not limited to leaders!

***Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour.***  
(Romans 12:10)

***Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.***  
(Philippians 2:3)

Folks, we need to start by learning to show honour to parents, because our whole lives will be involved in all other sorts of relationships in which honour comes into play. It needs to be learned first at our mother's (and father's) knee. It needs to freshen the air of the home, so that when we go outside people will notice that healthy and life-giving aroma.

In a different and only literal sense, it's the very opposite of the home I grew up in. My mum and dad smoked. I can remember evenings in the living room when I used to sink lower and lower into the settee to try to get down below the smelly fog that used to gradually fill the room, ceiling first and then progressively downwards.

I'm trying to be wary of that Commandment we're looking at today as I tell you this. Because, as I'll mention in a moment, I think that honour includes honouring a parent's *memory*, too. But they simply did not realise just how distasteful I found their habit. And neither they nor I realised just how much the smell of their smoke would have attached to me and my clothes when I was outside the home, either.

Folks, what is the atmosphere like in *your* home? When you're out and about, does the atmosphere that has attached to you as you have lived and breathed there surround you as a breath of fresh air to the people you meet? Are you an *honour* person? Do you speak positively or negatively? Are you compassionate or critical?

And of course, as a hymn puts it

*Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head*

We need to learn our lessons in the school of honour, so that honour may be shown where it is *most of all* due. It is the very language of heaven!

**... "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"**

(Revelation 5:12)

Oh, and of earth too:

**... in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; ...**

(1 Peter 3:15)

And finally for this morning - though I hope you'll all be busting with further questions (and hopefully a few answers) for this evening ...

- **How** are we to do this?

How can we do this? How can we do this at more advanced ages, and in the increasingly bizarre society we live in?

First, let's look at the specifics of literal parents. How can you honour them as you and they age, and when they're gone? In the earlier stages of that, the direction of the initiative slowly reverses. You start to give advice about the world that seems to change every time they blink. You help them to use a mobile phone, and online banking, when their hands are too shaky to sign a cheque. You confront them, if necessary, about their ability to drive safely - if you are willing to risk the biggest argument in your life, *for the sake of* your parent's honour. You take decisions on their behalf, perhaps, because they can no longer do so. But you do it with continuing respect.

**"You shall stand up before the gray head and honour the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD."**

(Leviticus 19:32)

**Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, ...**

(1 Timothy 5:1)

And after they are gone, we can still honour their memory. We can still choose to speak well of them, to not reveal their failings that you may have noticed during their lifetime or discovered when sorting out their home and belongings and financial affairs in the weeks and months after the funeral.

Some people will have horrible memories of parents, though, or the lack of them. Perhaps all we can do at that stage to honour them is to forgive them - though that's part of another whole topic. If you feel there are things that you *can't* forgive, at least ask yourself whether you are willing to be *made* able to forgive.

And if we are *parents*, too, or grandparents or even *great-grandparents*, I think this Commandment is still for us. Remember how Paul teaches us the flip side.

***Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, ...***

(Ephesians 6:4)

***Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.***

(Colossians 3:21)

I wonder if Paul picks on “fathers” there, because this is something that dads are more likely to do. How many of those confrontations in the home are really worth it? Have we picked only the battles that really *need* to be won? Do we really just *taunt* our children when they ask maybe even an *honest* “Why?” with the answer “Because I say so” ... or the super-spiritual resort of the hypocrite, “Because the Bible says so”. Two possible outcomes are flagged up here for us: anger or discouragement.

And don't just think that this applies when your kids are teenage. Think about how this will apply when you are in your seventies or eighties. How are you going to *not* provoke your children to anger then? Or will you continue refusing to wear a hearing aid? Or insisting on undermining their parenting of their own kids?

How can you best help your children to honour you? By being a person of honour yourself.

***I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ...***

(Ephesians 4:1)

Folks, if you wish to be treated with honour, how have you modelled it through your lives? If you want your kids to honour you, how have you behaved honourably in the home life that *they*, more than anyone else, have seen ... or seen through?

***Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, ...***

(Hebrews 13:4)

***... husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, ...***

(1 Peter 3:7)

And folks, finally, for those of us who may not have much in the way of ideal memories here, whose parents may have been far from the people that we needed them to be, and much of what we have been talking about this morning may have been terribly theoretical, or terribly distressing, can I just put two more Scriptures before you by way of final encouragement.

No matter how rubbish your parents may have been to you - or maybe how poor a parent *you* feel you have been - there is still hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

***For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in.***

(Psalms 27:10)

And you can find a home with the people of Jesus Christ.

***And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.***

(Matthew 19:29)

...

***To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.***

(1 Timothy 1:17)

**Consider how to do this even now as grandparents!**