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Sermon Brief
Text: Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16
Title: Honoring Mothers
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

In many countries around the world, especially in Europe and North America, today is Mother's Day. The second Sunday of May has been set aside each year in order to pay tribute to mothers and to the ideals of motherhood. Such actions go back to the earliest times in western culture, and have been a part of western societies for several thousand years. The official holiday celebration of Mother's Day has its beginnings in the United States in 1914 with an official proclamation of a national holiday by President Woodrow Wilson. The work of Anna Jarvis in pushing politicians both in Virginia, her home state, and in the federal government was the moving force behind the creation of this celebration. From that beginning Mother's Day has become in the US today one of the major holiday celebrations. In Europe each country has its own distinctive history and pattern of celebration of Mother's Day.

The celebration of Mother's Day in Germany has a very distinctive history that reaches back to the middle 1920s.¹ This 'checkered' history of Mother's Day with the political use of it by the Nazis in the 1930s

¹"In the 1930s Germany had the lowest birthrate in Europe, and it was still declining. It was attributed to women's participation in the labor market. At the same time, all influential groups in society (politicians in both Left and Right, churchwomen and feminists) thought that mothers should be honored, but they couldn't agree on how to do it. All those groups agreed strongly in the promotion of the values of motherhood. This resulted in the unanimous adoption in 1923 of the Muttertag, the Mother's Day holiday as imported from America and Norway. The head of the Association of German Florists cited "the inner conflict of our Volk and the loosening of the family" as his reason for introducing the holiday, and he expected that it would unite the divided country. In 1925 the Mother's Day Committee joined the Task Force for the recovery of the Volk, and the holiday stopped depending on commercial interests and it started being about the level of population Germany.

"The holiday was now seen as a means to get the women to bear more children, and nationalists saw it as a way of rejuvenating the nation. The holiday didn't celebrate the individual women, but an idealized standard of motherhood. The progressive forces resisted the implementation of the holiday because it was backed by so many conservatives, and because they saw it as a way to cut the rights of the worker women. The Die Frau, the newspaper of the Federation of German Women's Associations, refused to even recognize the holiday. Many local authorities made their own interpretation of the holiday: it would be a day to support economically larger families or single-mother families. The guidelines for the subsidies had eugenics criteria, but there is no indication that social workers ever implemented them in practice, and subsidies were given preferentially to families in economic needs rather than families with more children or with "healthier" children.

"With the Nazi party in power during 1938-1945, this all changed radically. The propaganda for Mother's Day had increased in many European countries, including England and France, and Nazis increased it from the moment they entered into power. The role of mothers was unambiguously promoted as that of giving healthy sons to the German Nation. The Nazi party's intention was creating a pure "Aryan race" according to the Nazi eugenics. Among other Mother's Day ideas, the government promoted the death of your sons in battle as the highest embodiment of patriotic motherhood

"The Nazis quickly declared Mother's Day an official holiday and put it under the control of the NSV (National Socialist People's Welfare Association) and the NSF (National Socialist Women Organization). This brought conflicts with other organizations that resented Nazi control of the holiday, like the Catholic and the Protestant churches and local women organizations. Local authorities continuously resisted the guidelines from the Nazi government and kept assigning resources to families that were in economical need, much to the dismay of the Nazi officials .

"The government started issuing in 1938, an award called Mother's Cross (Mutterkreuz), with different categories depending on the number of children. The cross intended to encourage having more children, and recipients had to have at least 4 children. For example, a gold cross recipient (a level one) had to have eight children or more. Since having fewer children was a recent development, the gold cross was awarded mostly to elderly mothers with grown children. It promoted loyalty among German women and it was a popular award even if it had little material awards and it was mostly empty praise. The recipients of honors had to be examined by doctors and social workers according to genetic and racial values that were considered beneficial to the Volk. The friends and family were also examined for possible flaws that could disqualify them, and they had to be racially and morally fit. They had to be "German-blooded", "genetically healthy", "worthy", "politically reliable", and they couldn't have vices like drinking. Criteria against honors were, for example, "family history contains inferior blood", "unfeminine" behaviour like smoking or doing poor

and 1940s has perhaps played a role in the more limited celebration of Mother's Day in Germany than in many of parts of the world today. Additionally to Roman Catholic tradition of *Laetare Sunday* celebration during Lent in honor of the Virgin Mary has had an impact as well. But the celebration seems to be growing in importance here in Germany today.

Against this interesting history we come to the issue of the importance of mothers and the ideals of motherhood in our society. Are mothers important in our world? I can't think of a single reason why anyone would answer no to this question. Without doubt mothers are critically important in society. Without them society wouldn't exist! What about motherhood? What is motherhood (in German, *Mutterschaft*)? The term in English and in German emphasizes the giving birth to and the raising of children by the mother. The importance of this to society should be clear, although in modern times in western society the importance of motherhood has not always been valued and cherished, especially in some of the strands of feminism in the western world. And at times promoting motherhood has been more a political agenda for increasing the slumping birth rates in a country, than a genuine valuing of the role of the mother in the home. In most Christian traditions, when one thinks of motherhood attention usually turns to Mary the mother of Jesus as the idealized expression of Christian motherhood. In ancient Judaism, no single woman ever came to fully embody the ideals of motherhood. Instead a number of ancient Israelite women, especially in the patriarchal and early Israelite history, came to exemplify important ideals of motherhood among the Jewish people. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was one of them. Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel is another.

But the teachings of the Old Testament make it clear that motherhood was revered and that Israelite mothers were given great respect and reverence. Perhaps the most famous text at this point is that of the idealized wife and mother in Proverbs 31:10-31. But the focus there is more on being a wife than on being a mother. The beginnings of Old Testament focus on motherhood are found in the Ten Commandments with the fifth commandment requiring the honoring of both father and mother.

It is this text that I want to give attention to today in our time together. Turn with me in your Bibles first to Exodus 20, and then to Deuteronomy 5, as we read these two versions of the Decalogue in the Old Testament.

Exodus 20:12

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deut. 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

These two versions of the Ten Commandments come chronologically at the beginning of the Exodus (Exodus 20) and at the end of the Exodus just prior to entering the land of Promise (Deuteronomy). The Exodus narrative reflects the giving of the Law of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai during the early stages of the Exodus by the Israelite people. The Deuteronomy narrative comes as a part of Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites at the end of the forty years of wilderness wanderings just prior to Moses' death and the assumption of leadership by Joshua of the people of Israel. Thus it has a backward look, often alluding to God's commands originally given on Mt. Sinai many years before.

The structure of the Ten Commandments provides important background understanding. The first four commands (Exod. 20:1-11; Deut. 5:6-15) stress Israel's relationship to God, the so-called vertical commands. The fifth commandment, which we are examining today, signals a shift so that the fifth through the tenth commandments focus on relationships with other people in Israelite society, the so-called horizontal commandments. The larger significance of this was to say that proper relationship with God also included proper relationship with other people. One could not be in covenant relationship with God without also being in proper relationship with other Israelites. This was a huge distinctive of ancient Israelite religion in that world. And when Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament adopted the same viewpoint, Christianity also took on that very different perspective to other religious traditions of the first century world.

housekeeping, not being "politically reliable", or having family members that had been "indicted and imprisoned". There were instances where a family was disqualified because a doctor saw signs of "feeble-mindedness." Even contact with a Jew could disqualify a potential recipient. Social workers had become disillusioned from the Weimar Republic and supported Nazi ideas personally as a means to "cure" the problems of the country. Application of policies was uneven, as doctors promoted medical criteria over racial criteria, and local authorities promoted economical need over any other criteria.

"The holiday is now celebrated in the second Sunday of May, in a manner similar to other nearby European countries."

["Mother's Day: Germany," Wikipedia online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother's_Day]

The other important implication of this organizing structure of the Ten Commandments is that when the emphasis shifts from the vertical to the horizontal, the first set of relationships to be emphasized are those within the family. And the stress falls upon the children in their relationship with their parents. The implications of this will come to the surface repeatedly in the detailed expression of the Law of Moses that is built off the foundation of the Decalogue. The requirement of God upon children to honor their parents will form the basis for many of the laws in the legal codes of the Torah.

For ancient Israel, the family was the starting point of human relationships. Proper relationships within the family were critical to relationships in other social contexts. And at the heart of proper family relationships was the honoring of parents by their children.

Out of this setting I want to say two basic things about honoring mothers from the fifth commandment of the Decalogue.

BODY

I. The Command: honor your mother

Exodus 20:12

Honor your father and your mother,

Deut. 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you,

This command is presented the same way in the two accounts, but with Deuteronomy alluding back to Exodus as expressing a command of God to the Israelite people. The importance here is the recognition that we are under divine mandate to show respect and honor to our parents. This is not optional; it's not something to be done only if convenient or easy to do. There is no condition attached to the command like this. As with the other commands the requirement is absolute. This to disregard this responsibility is to disobey God and to commit a grievous sin against God, not just against one's parents. With the teaching of both Jesus and the apostles on this same topic, no change or diminishing of this command takes place with Christian teaching. If anything, as we will see below, Christian teaching extends this responsibility.

Honor: its meaning

The command is not limited to young children; rather it is focused on adults. One should realize that the nature of the biblical text is to issue the command to adults. This is true of all of these ten commandments. The young children were not singled out here for special focus. To be clear, they are included in the scope of the command. But the command is primarily targeting adults who are to give honor to their parents throughout the life time of their parents. The ancient Hebrew respect and valuing of age, particularly older age, lies in the background of this command.

Hebrew verb, כבד, (kabad),

Meaning:² "To give honor, weight to, glory, esteem"

The literal meaning of the Hebrew word kabad is heavy or weighty. Thus the word כבד is used in a wide range of settings in the Hebrew Old Testament. In this figurative application of the word, the idea is that children are to 'give weight' to their parents. That is, they are to consider them as 'weighty' people, people of highest importance and value. The ancient Jewish translators of the Hebrew text into Greek used the Greek verb τίμα to express this, which stresses the esteeming and attaching of value to parents. Quite interestingly, when this command is repeated in summary form in Lev. 19:3, the verb ירא (yare) is used with the meaning of revere.³ And mother comes before father: "You shall each revere your mother and father." John Durham (WBC) defines this as "give a place of preference to, take seriously."

At the heart of our responsibility to parents is both our attitude and our actions toward them. How we view them becomes the basis for how we treat them.

Honor as attitude.

²"The piel imperative singular כבד means "honor, give weight to, glorify, esteem," in the sense of giving a place of precedence, of taking someone seriously. This verb is so used both of human beings, as here, and of Yahweh, as in 1 Sam 2:30, Isa 24:15, Ps 22:24 [23], or Prov 3:9 (cf. also Gamberoni, ^z 8 [1964] 169–72). To "give honor" to father and mother means more than to be subject to them, or respectful of their wishes: they are to be given precedence by the recognition of the importance which is theirs by right, esteemed for their priority, and loved for it as well. As Yahweh is honored for his priority to all life, so father and mother must be honored for their priority, as Yahweh's instruments, to the lives of their children. Lev 19:3, in the chapter of the Holiness Code that gives special application of the Decalogue, even uses ירא "have reverence for, stand in awe of," instead of כבד in the repetition of the fifth commandment. [John I. Durham, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary : Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 290]

³Note the repetition of the fifth commandment in Lev. 19:3, "3 You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God."

Children must have the right attitude toward their parents. And this attitude is expressed in terms of respect, esteem, reverence, valuing etc. Without the proper attitude, the right actions toward them will not take place.

This does not mean that we naively accept everything they say and do. Parents can be bad people, and they can be dumb people. But when they are godly individuals, it becomes much easier for children to hold them in high esteem and do so in ways that are healthy. Parents are to set the right example, and should treat their children in ways that are God honoring. And God will hold each parent accountable on the Day of Judgment for how they have carried out their parenting responsibilities.

But a fundamental attitude of respect and an honoring of them as parents is what God requires of all of us, all of our lives. Sometimes it takes us some time to come to the full level of respect and appreciation that we need. Childhood is always a mixture between passionate love of parents and frequent disobedience to them. The teen years are perhaps the most challenging years for us as children in our relationship to parents. In the process of moving from children to adults teens explore the boundaries of their own individuality and freedom. Western culture has developed these teen years largely as rebellious years where teenagers push the envelope constantly against parental control. Wise, however, is the teenager who learns the lesson of honoring parents, along with learning how to function independent of them as adulthood arrives.

Honor as action.

For ancient Israel, the two central actions toward parents was to obey them, and then in their old age to take care of them. They were to treat their parents with the same respect as to be given to all elderly people in their midst as Lev. 19:32 makes clear: “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.” This was important, and the treatment of elderly people with respect was require of God and was to grow out of their fear of God.

The Christian extension of this command:

Eph. 6:1-4

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise: 3 “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” 4 And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Col. 3:20-21

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

The New Testament in reflecting Christian values comes to see this Old Testament commandment as important and as a basis for Christian values. But the apostle Paul, who addresses this issue more than anyone else in the New Testament, sees additional aspects. And thus, in his emphasis, not only is there obligation of children to parents, but parents have clear obligation to children as well. Against the social background of the first century Greco-Roman world, this obligation of parents to children was astounding. Cruelty to children, often by parents, was widespread in that world.⁴ Extreme disciplinary patterns that often injured the children, sometimes permanently, were rampant. The apostle imposes strict limits and mandates upon parents, in particular upon the fathers who held ultimate authority.

All of this from both the Old and New Testaments underscore the critical role of the family. God created us to be family focused people.

II. The Promise: God’s blessings

Exodus 20:12

so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deut. 5:16

so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Distinctiveness of the Fifth Commandment.

The fifth commandment is the only one of the ten to contain ‘a promise.’ Paul noted this in his quoting of the fifth commandment in Eph. 6:2, “this is the first commandment with a promise.” The nature of the ‘promise’ is that it is both God’s promise of blessing and His warning against disobedience. Much of the legal code will play off this text as warning with stern declarations of what will happen to Israel if it ignores this commandment of God.

The Nature of the Promise

⁴Two common forms of ancient abuse are particularly reprehensible: Pederasty, sexual abuse of children, was especially prevalent in ancient Greek culture; Infanticide, the killing of unwanted infants, especially females, at birth was widely practiced by the Romans.

The positive aspect of the promise segment is God's promise of a long life in a stable society in the Land of Promise for the Israelites. The clear recognition is that when the family functions with stability the society will function with much greater stability and longevity. Interestingly, Paul's interpretive twist to this in Eph. 6:3, "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth," shifts the thrust of the promise to the individual obedient child by the use of the second person singular verb form. Appropriate to a non-Jewish application, the focus is not on the Land of Promise, but upon the life of the individual and the community he belongs to. But the recognition of the nature of the promise remains the same as in the original code expression itself: obedient children promote stable families. Stable families in the community of faith promise stable, long existing communities of faith.

The Warning Aspect in the Promise

It is especially applied to the disobedience of children to their parents. Disrespect for parents was a serious offense in Israel. Note the following legal codes built off the fifth commandment.

Exodus 21:15, 17

15 Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death.

17 Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.

Lev. 20:9

9 All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them.

Deut. 21:18-21

18 If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. 20 They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." 21 Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.

Deut. 27:16

16 "Cursed be anyone who dishonors father or mother." All the people shall say, "Amen!"

When one examines these applications of the fifth commandment to various legal codes, and also against the social backdrop of a communal culture rather than an individualism culture, the picture becomes clear. Israel say in a troublesome child a serious danger not just to a particular Israelite family, but to the entire Israelite society itself. And it demanded that such potential dangers to society be permanently removed as the best remedy to protect itself.

To be certain one must ask the question regarding implementation of these legal codes. As the later Israelite history clearly indicates, not all of the legal codes contained in the Mosaic Code were ever implemented, especially on a widespread basis. The answer to this question is difficult to determine with precise details from the later Jewish writings in the ancient world. We do understand that the Jewish Sanhedrin during the beginning Christian century severely limited the imposition of the death penalty prescribed by the various codes in the Mosaic Law.

To modern ears such measures requiring the execution of disobedient children seem extremely severe. And in the context of modern western individualism they would find little acceptance by governmental authorities on either side of the Atlantic. Most Jewish and Christian groups would also view these codes as excessive and extreme.

But a foundational presupposition behind these laws remains valid and important for our day. Undisciplined children pose a real danger to the stability of a family, and ultimate to the stability of a society. Both ancient Judaism and beginning Christianity recognized this and demanded that discipline of such children be carried out. This was the first responsibility of parents, but if they failed to take appropriate action, then society would intervene and impose discipline on such children. Ephesians 6:4 and Col. 3:21 make this very clear. Disciplining of children by their fathers is demanded, but it is to be discipline imposed under strict guidelines, rather than the open-end patterns of discipline common in the surrounding cultures of early Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Today is Mother's Day. To you mothers present today we want to say a huge thank you. You have birthed us; you have nourished us; you have guided us by your wisdom through the challenges and hardships of growing up; your godly example has inspired and instructed us in how to live. We love you and in our experience of parenthood we have come to possess enormous gratitude for you.

May God help us to truly 'honor' you not just today, but tomorrow and the day after and the day after -- all the days of both your life and ours.