

The Fifth Commandment

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Introduction

The first table of the law deals with vertical relationships, between mankind and God. The second table deals with horizontal relationships, between people. Ironically, there is a question both as to where the first table begins and where it ends.

As with all the other commandments, there is also a question what it means to keep this one. Not only is the fifth commandment transitional between the two tables, but there is a sense in which is unique among the ten.

The First Table of the Law

We begin with a question about the structure of the first table before taking up the theological and practical significance of the fifth commandment. As suggested above, there is a question which table this commandment belongs to.

Where does the first table begin?

In many Bibles there is a paragraph break at vs. 3, but not at vs. 2. Thus, vs. 2 is part of the introduction and vs. 3 is where the first commandment begins.

Introduction: "And God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

First commandment: ³ "You shall have no other gods before me."

In my view, this arrangement creates an unnecessary problem and misses an important insight. Breaking at vs. 3 gives the law two introductions: ([a] "And God spoke all these words"; [b] "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery") and deprives the first commandment of its explanation clause. All that remains is the command clause ("You shall have no other gods before me").

Elsewhere I have argued that the paragraph break should come at vs. 2,¹ not at vs. 3. In this case the introduction to the law is everything before the colon (in English translation), "And God spoke all these words:" What words did He then speak? Everything that follows.

Introduction: "And God spoke all these words:"

First commandment: ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me."

¹ Hardy, "The Ten Commandments, Part 1: Non-Imperative Clauses," *Historicism* No. 6/Apr 86, pp. 59-70.

In this case the law has one introduction ("And God spoke all these words") and the first commandment has both an explanation clause ("I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery") and a command clause ("You shall have no other gods before me").

The reason why it is important not to lose sight of the explanation is that then we can capture the important insight that each of the first five commandments has an explanation clause. The sequence is reversed in the case of the first commandment (explanation, then command) for rhetorical reasons. God tells us who He is before commanding us to obey Him. In commandments 2-5 the sequence is command, then explanation.

Where does the first table end?

We have talked about the fifth commandment having an explanation clause like the four that precede it. What does this imply? Does the law divide after the fourth commandment, or after the fifth? We often say that the first table deals with love to God (1-4) and the second deals with love to man (5-10). But structurally the matter of the explanation clauses could be used to argue for including the fifth commandment in the first table (1-5, 6-10). All of the first five commandments have explanation clauses. The last five do not.

The lack of comment and explanation for the last five commandments is supplied, not in Exodus, but in Matthew. In the sermon on the mount Christ begins His discourse on the law by beginning where He had left on in His other sermon on another mountain (Sinai) so long before.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. . . ." (Matt 5:21-22)

He discusses the last five commandments in the sequence: 6 (vss. 21-26), 7 (vss. 27-32), 9 (vss. 33-37), 8 (vss. 38-42), and 10 (vss. 43-48).² The connection is pretty easy to pick out in the case of commandments 6 ("You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder,' . . .") and 7 ("You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery'").

Christ's explanation of the ninth commandment – the one having to do with our use of words – is, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (vs. 36). His explanation of the eighth commandment, not to steal is, "Give . . ." (vs. 42). The tenth commandment has to be looked for, but it is there. It has to do with our thoughts alone. Here the explanation is, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (vs. 44, 48). We might think that this last clause needs its own explanation, but my point is that it comes in a section which comments on the tenth commandment.

² In Matt 19:18-19 the sequence of commandments, as Jesus refers to them, is 6, 7, 8, 9, 5, and then Lev 19:18 ("love your neighbor"). In Mark 10:19 the sequence is 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (but with a form of *apostrephō* rather than *epithumeō* [Exod 20:17 LXX]), and then 5. In Luke it is 7, 6, 8, 9, 5.

So where does the first table end? With the fourth commandment, or with the fifth? One could make the case either way. The fifth commandment is transitional between the first table (with its vertical relationships) and the second (with horizontal relationships). And therein lies part of the paradox of how to keep it, but not the whole paradox.

How Does One Keep the Fifth Commandment?

I once heard a mother say that her child was keeping the fifth commandment because of some praise she had received as a result of the child's good behavior. I thought then, and think now, that her remark was extraordinarily thought provoking and insightful.

What does it mean to keep the fifth commandment? What does it mean to keep any of the commandments? Is not breaking them the same as keeping them? Perhaps on one level it is, even though more is involved. To avoid breaking a negative commandment such as, "You shall not murder," at a minimum one must avoid doing what the commandment says not to do. This might not be all of what is involved in obedience, but at least it's an understandable place to start.

Here we are not talking about a negative commandment. The only way to avoid breaking a positive commandment is to do what it says – which brings us back to our starting point. How can we do what this commandment says? Passages such as Prov 23:22 (below) offer some help, because at least some of what it says is stated negatively. We can honor our mothers by not despising them when they are old. The first part of the verse, however, is again stated positively.

Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.
(Prov 23:22)

The fact is there are some things we cannot do by simply doing them. Let me illustrate. When church is dismissed we go home, to some afternoon activity, or wherever. For ease of exposition let us focus on the act of going home.

If the pastor were to ask everyone in the congregation to point toward home, people would point in a variety of directions. And yet everyone starts by walking to the door. Actually, they don't start by walking to the door. They start by moving to the end of the pew. The first task is to get to an aisle. The next task is to get to a door, then to the parking lot. Even at this point people don't go directly home, whether they go anywhere else along the way or not. Instead they go to a street corner and get on a main road, which along the way almost certainly goes many directions other than straight toward home. Let this suffice. Getting home from church, or from anywhere else, is rarely a direct process. It is a goal oriented process, but not a direct one. There are intermediate steps.

In the same way, there are intermediate steps involved in honoring one's father and mother. Speaking respectfully to them is a good start, but little more. In the parable

a son is asked to go and work in his father's vineyard, and Jesus says his response is, "I will, sir" (Matt 21:30), but he doesn't. The other son says, "I will not" (vs. 29), but later one he changes his mind and does what his father asked. Which of the two did the will of, and therefore honored, his father? Not the one who spoke respectfully. This does not mean we should speak disrespectfully. It means that showing respect involves more than the way we use words. It involves our actions as well.

Could showing respect to our father and mother involve more than our actions? Could it involve other people's actions, or other people's words? The illustration we discussed earlier in this section about a mother and her child would argue that it does. When our actions cause others to praise our parents, they are not keeping the fifth commandment for us. We are keeping it, but through their words rather than our own. How can one person's words constitute obedience for another? Admittedly this is a remarkable concept of obedience. Although reminiscent of grace, this is not grace. The other person's words are not being imputed to us in some way. And yet when they speak, praising us to our parents, it is we who are obeying the commandment.

Other "Live Long" Clauses

The fifth commandment, along with the others, is repeated in Deut 5. There the wording is, "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you (vs. 16). Notice in passing that the words, "as the LORD your God has commanded you," take us back to Exod 20. If there is a question which giving of the law takes precedence, Deut 5:16 should help answer the question. See also vss. 12 ("as the LORD your God has commanded you") and 15 ("Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you . . ."). These three clauses look back to an earlier giving of the law, and more specifically to the one recorded in Exod 20.

The words, "so that you may live long," are a prominent and interesting part of the commandment. Notice that some form of this expression occurs in five other passages. All are associated in one way or another with a prior condition, stated variously as, "Keep his decrees and commands" (Deut 4:40), "Observe therefore all the commands I am giving you today" (Deut 11:8), "You must have accurate and honest weights and measures" (Deut 25:15), and, in regard to all the words Moses has conveyed to the people from the Lord, "They are not just idle words for you – they are your life" (Deut 32:47). So far we have quoted four of the passages. Each of these holds out a prospect of blessing.

Offsetting this, a curse is found in the remaining passage. "But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess" (Deuteronomy 30:17-18).

The idea in each of the five passages is one of following instruction – first the instruction we receive from our human parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16), as in the commandment, and then what we receive from the Lord in other ways (Deut 4:40; 11:8; 25:15; 32:47). If Israel does not pay attention to what God commands, the opposite

result will accrue. Instead of a blessing, "You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess" (Deut 30:18).

Discussion

Let me point out a number of miscellaneous points before closing. These have to do with the commandment's structure, its content, and some other lessons we can learn from it.

Structure

The fifth commandment is the only one of the ten which has no negative component in its command clause. One part of the command clause in the fourth commandment is stated positively ("Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God"), while another part is stated negatively ("On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates"). But the command portion of the fifth commandment is stated only positively ("Honor your father and your mother").

Content

In terms of content, the fifth commandment references both the beginning and the end of our lives. Our lives begin when our parents, through an act of love which drew them together, give us life by the miracle of procreation. And they end a longer or shorter time after that depending on how closely we follow their instruction – assuming it is wise instruction. We honor our fathers and mothers because, on a human level, we owe our existence to them. Ultimately, of course, God brings about our existence. But He does this through human instruments, not by an independent act of creation repeated each time another child is born into the world. Perhaps the most godlike capacity we have received from the Lord is the ability to procreate – to beget life.

This fact has a number of implications. When an infant is first born into the world s/he has no concept of God. That comes with time. So at first his or her parents are the source of all sustenance and the source of all authority. They have all power. This is from the child's point of view. It takes time for us to realize that our parents are not infinite, and more time than that to realize that God *is* infinite. As our concept of father and mother show them to be more and more human, our concept of God shows Him to be more and more divine. But for a certain period during infancy and beyond, father and mother stand in the place of God to the child. Ideally, when our parents are in extreme old age the roles become reversed and the child becomes a source of sustenance and support, completing the cycle.

I realize in saying this that not everyone has been blessed in the same way I was with godly parents who provided a loving home and Christian guidance. In some cases our relationship with our parents leaves us deeply scarred. And yet we are not told to honor our parents only if they are perfect. The commandment remains, whatever the quality of care might be that we receive while growing up. The honor we are

commanded to give is not a response to early care. Some parents don't care for their children. Some parents are positively abusive, but the fact remains that each child receives life through his or her father and mother. This is cause enough for respect, even if it is the only reason one can think of.

Other

One other point that could be mentioned has to do with parenting. The commandment is stated from the perspective of a child, looking back. But as we have children of our own it can shape our thinking in other ways. Is the object of our discipline to cause them to honor us? This is widely different from disciplining for the purpose of venting frustration. If we stand in the place of God to our children at one stage in their development, what concept of God will our actions implant in their minds? If we human children because we ourselves are human, that should remind us that parent and child both have the same heavenly Father. Both are equally responsible to Him for their actions. And ultimately it is this Father, and not just human parents, that we must lead our children to honor.

Conclusion

Honoring our fathers and mothers is a complex and profound undertaking. It illustrates both a vertical relationship (between us and those who gave us life) and a horizontal relationship (between us and other people like ourselves). The fact that we are like our parents is the only reason why we in turn are able to give life to children of our own. But my point is that our relationship with our parents is not on one level, but two. It is both vertical and horizontal.

Keeping the commandment to honor our parents is also on two levels. There is what we ourselves say and do and there is also what we, by our lives, cause others to say and do. And there are other factors. By honoring our human parents we honor not only them, but God – our divine Father. And all of this reflects on us as well. There is a lot of depth in this commandment.