

Romans 13:9 and the Fifth Commandment

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The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans 13:9)¹

Introduction

In Romans 13:9 Paul refers to five of the ten commandments.² Notice the order in which they occur: (7) adultery, (6) murder, (8) stealing, (10) coveting. In this list (6) murder and (7) adultery are reversed and (9) lying is omitted. The sequence may or may not be significant, but it is interesting.

When Jesus directly or indirectly cites the same list of commandments in the sermon on the mount He includes (9) lying and gives them in a different order: (6) murder, (7) adultery, (9) lying, (8) stealing, and (10) coveting. In this case (8) stealing and (9) lying are reversed. Notice that both lists omit the fifth commandment.

The Fifth Commandment

The fact that both Jesus in Matthew 5 and Paul in Romans 13 omit the fifth commandment, about honoring one's father and mother, is not proof that they consider it unimportant any more than Paul's failure to mention the ninth commandment, against lying, shows that he felt lying was unimportant. He goes on to say, "and whatever other commandment there may be" (vs. 9, above), so in a sense one could argue that he does include the ninth commandment. But there is another possible explanation.

There are two main groups of commandments in the law, and these rest on two foundational principles – love to God and love to man. We could think of the first principle spatially in terms vertical relationships (God is in heaven, mankind is on earth) and the second in terms of horizontal relationships (we are here, other people are here). What Paul focuses on in Romans 13, and what Jesus focuses on in Matthew 5, is how people should relate with other people. They were dealing with the second table.

And yet how could they justify placing a commandment that shows how to treat our human parents in the first table, which describes our various relationships and responsibilities to God?

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² Exodus 20:13-15,17; Deuteronomy 5:17-19,21.

The changing role of parents

When a child is born into the world it knows nothing of God. It knows only its own needs. And it soon learns that all such needs are supplied through its parents. When a new life begins, father and mother appear to be the source of all strength, all wisdom, all sustenance, comfort, happiness, and whatever else concerns the well being of the child. Another way of saying this is that when a child is first born its parents stand to that child – for a time – in the place of God. As the child grows s/he gradually learns that there is something beyond father and mother – that there is One who is stronger, wiser, more capable, and yes, more loving. But this process takes time. At first the relationship between parent and child is almost entirely vertical.

In adulthood one's father and mother become friends and equals. This is largely – though never exclusively – a horizontal relationship, similar to those described in the second table. However, nothing in later life can change the fact that one's parents are the authors of his or her being, and to the very end this fact demands a special level of respect.

As old age approaches, the relationship becomes reversed, as it were – without taking away any of the respect and friendship that was there before. The relationship is vertical again, but this time with the parent depending on the child for strength, wisdom, sustenance, comfort, happiness, and so on. Being a parent is an involving thing, and this is in God's plan. But my point is that the relationships change over time and that one aspect of them has to do with initially standing in God's place to the child, until the child can be led to know God for him- or herself. So one could perhaps justify including the fifth commandment in the first table on this basis. The fifth commandment is in a sense transitional.

The explanation clauses: 1-5

There is another reason for placing the fifth commandment in the first table, which involves a structural argument. Correctly analyzed, each of the first five commandments includes an explanation clause. We read these without thinking, perhaps, but consider the following clauses now in isolation from the commands that they clarify.

1. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (vs. 2)
2. ". . . for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand *generations* of those who love me and keep my commandments." (vs. 5-6)
3. ". . . for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (vs. 7)
4. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (vs. 11)
5. ". . . so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (vs. 12)

These explanation clauses, drawn from each of the first five commandments in turn, do not tell us what to do. They clarify the command clauses that they accompany. Actually, explanations make up a surprisingly large proportion of the law. If you were to count up the words in all the command clauses, and those in all the explanation clauses, there would be little difference between them. The actual percentages are about 55% command to 45% explanation.

The explanation clauses: 6-10

We can see the distinction between commands that have explanations and commands that don't by studying Matthew 5, mentioned above. Christ does not repeat Himself in the sermon on the mount. The commandments He had already explained on Sinai He does not explain again. There is no need to. Instead He starts where He had left off earlier. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder'" (Matthew 5:21). That's the sixth commandment. The first five had already received comment within the text of the law itself. When we study the two sermons on mountains together (as we must), they complete each other nicely.

These facts show one way a person could justify dividing the commandments as five plus five, instead of four plus six. Each of the first five commandments has an explanation clause; each of the last five commandments does not. So here is one possible reason why would Paul refer to only the last five commandments in Romans 13:9 (not the last six), and why Jesus would do the same in Matthew 5.

Discussion

The fact that so much of the law – almost half – consists of explanations has all kinds of interesting implications, one of which is that God wants to meet our minds. He wants to be obeyed, certainly, and this is entirely fair, since He made us, but He also wants to be understood. He wants intelligent and heart-felt service from His creatures – not the blind compliance of one who is merely forced to submit. He wants us to be, not His slaves, but His friends (see John 15:15). Isn't this the same point Paul is trying to make when he says,

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. ⁵ For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. (Romans 7:4-6)

God does truly want our obedience. He wants us to do exactly and precisely what He says. But He does not want our responses to Him to be cold, mechanical, or unloving. He doesn't want us to act like robots in our relationship with Him. If He did, He would have populated the earth with robots. But He didn't do this. He made bright, intelligent, human beings, capable of choosing what to do and capable of loving from the heart. This is the kind of service He wants from all His creatures.

Conclusion

There are all kinds of interesting things to learn from what Paul says in Romans 13:9, and in the verses on either side (vss. 8-10).

One point we should not try to draw from Paul's discussion, however, is that the fifth commandment is unimportant because He does not mention it. We know this would be the wrong point to draw, because in another passage Paul himself says, "'Honor your father and mother' -- which is the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2).

So his silence about the fifth commandment in Romans does not mean that Paul wants us to dishonor our parents now after the cross, arguing that Christ died to set us free from the law. Nothing Jesus did or said releases us from our obligation to love and honor the parents who gave us life, as God enabled them. The Jews had a way of trying to get out of honoring their parents (see Mark 7:11), by dedicating their money to God and thereby making it unavailable for any help they might otherwise have given to their aging parents. Jesus had nothing good to say about such distortions. Everyone who worships God (and everyone who does not, for that matter) is in every age of history under a solemn obligation to honor his or her parents, just as God commanded.