

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 13, 2012
Mother's Day**

A COMMANDMENT FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 15:1-9

If moms were paid for everything they do, do you have any idea how much money they would earn? True, you can't put a price tag on everything moms do and all the sacrifices mothers make for the sake of their children and family, but if you did, Salary.com says they would earn about \$112,962 a year – about the same as an advertising executive, marketing director, or a judge. (Source: Family Research Council Action Update, May 11, 2012)

Your actual income may not reflect it, but we want all of you moms to know you are valued and appreciated beyond our ability to express it in dollars or words.

Though today is Mother's Day, this message is not just for or about mothers. It has more to do with parents – both mothers and fathers – than just mothers alone. And it is more about children than it is about parents or parenthood. It is more about how children are to keep and fulfill the commandment (number five in God's original "top ten," and the first, as Paul points out in Ephesians 6:2, to come with a promise) to honor our fathers and our mothers, not just when we are young, not just when we are under their authority and dependent on their care, protection, provision, guidance, and instruction, but at every point in every season throughout the whole course of our lives. The commandment to honor our parents really is for children of all ages. You don't graduate from the duty to honor your parents when you reach adulthood. It is a commandment for children of all ages.

Before talking about this "children's commandment" at more length, though, I want to offer a few preliminary principles for parents and children, a few basic truths established beyond a shadow of a doubt by both experience and observation. You may think these are intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. Maybe they are. But it is amazing how easily we can forget or lose sight of things that are intuitively obvious. So, here goes:

1. Not every parent is a good parent. (OK, this *is* pretty obvious, isn't it?) Not every mother is a good mother. Not every father is a good father. Some of you may have had parents who let you down, who left a lot to be desired. You may have scars left over from wounds to your spirit or emotions inflicted intentionally or unintentionally by one or both of your parents. I understand. More important, God understands. On the other hand, if you're a young person and you live under your parents' roof and you have good parents, if God has blessed you with the advantages of living in a stable, loving, grace-filled home where Jesus is honored and exalted as Lord, don't take it for granted. Praise God for it. It is a precious gift. Lots of people, probably including some of your friends, would love to have what you have. To those of you who are grown and gone from the family home, whether your parents are still living or not, if you were blessed with good parents when you were growing up, give thanks to God with a grateful heart for it. You know that not everyone is so blessed.

2. There is no such thing as a perfect mother or father (except for God our Heavenly Father), and no such thing as a perfect home. If you're a parent, strive with the help of the Holy Spirit to be the best Mom or Dad you can be. But face the fact that perfection as a parent is beyond your reach. You're going to make mistakes. You're going to mess up. You're going to blow it. Every parent does. Every parent has weaknesses. Blind spots. Inconsistencies. So what do you do? You pray a lot. You seek the wisdom, counsel, instruction, and encouragement of God's Word. You learn from the experience, insight and wisdom of other parents who are traveling the same road with you, or who have been down the road before you. But don't demand perfection of yourself as a parent. Don't demand perfection from your parents either. And don't expect your kids to be perfect. It is not going to happen. Try a little grace – for your kids, for your parents, for yourself. God's grace really does cover a multitude of shortcomings and sins.
3. At times, even the most dedicated, loving, and conscientious parents feel like failures. There is no guaranteed formula for success in parenting. Kids don't always do what you want them to do. They don't always act the way you have taught them to act. They don't always make the choices you want them to make. It doesn't mean you have failed as a parent. At a certain point in time, our kids have to take responsibility for their attitudes, decisions, and actions.
4. Some kids raised in Christian homes by loving, godly parents reject the faith and values of their parents – sometimes, for a season; sometimes, for a lifetime. They choose to turn away and go their own way instead of God's way. When it happens, as heart-breaking as it is for Christian parents whose kids say no to Jesus, it does not mean the parents have failed. Without question there is a greater probability that children raised in homes where Jesus Christ is loved and honored and exalted as Lord *will* embrace him as their Savior and Lord, and live as followers of Christ. But there is no guarantee. Some who are raised in Christian homes reject the Lord Jesus. And some raised in homes where faith in Christ is either absent or not important become deeply committed followers of Christ. It is all by grace. And only by grace.

Now then, what about this commandment for children of all ages? What does it mean to “honor your father and your mother”? What does it mean, first of all, for children who have not yet reached adulthood?

Part of the answer is found in Ephesians 6:1, where the apostle Paul says: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Teenagers, this is for you: One way to honor your parents is to obey them. One way to honor your father and your mother is to do what they ask or tell you to do. Without grumbling or complaining or whining. Remember what Paul says in Philippians 2:14: “Do everything without complaining or arguing.” Everything. That is not just for teenagers or younger kids. It is for all of us.

One way to honor your parents is to obey them. But there is more to it. To obey is to do as you are told. To honor means to treat with respect and love. You honor your parents when you treat them with the respect and honor they deserve, not because they are perfect, not because they never make mistakes, but simply because they are your parents and have been given an awesome responsibility. You honor your parents when you recognize their God-

given authority and responsibility, and give them not only your obedience but your love and respect as well.

Two boys were walking to school one day, and somehow they got on the subject of their families. One of them said he had figured out a system for getting along with his mom. “It’s really simple,” he said. “She tells me what to do, and I do it.”

Teenagers, how is that for a plan? Do you want to get along with your parents? Do what they tell you – as long as it isn’t illegal, unethical, or against what God tells us in the Bible. Do it with a willing and cheerful heart, not with grumbling or complaining or arguing.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right (Ephesians 6:1), and, as Paul says in Colossians 3:20, it “pleases the Lord.” *The Message* says it this way: “Children, do what your parents tell you. This delights the Master no end.” I like the sound of that, don’t you? Kids, if you want to bring a smile to God’s face, if you want to bring joy to God’s heart, honor your parents with your obedience, respect, and love.

But what about when you’re no longer a kid? What about when you’re an adult? How does this commandment apply to us as our parents grow older and enter the twilight years of life? How does it apply if our parents reach the stage in life where they can no longer make their own decisions or care for themselves? How does it apply when our parents become dependent, like children, on their own children? Some of you have been there. Some of you find yourselves dealing with this right now. How does the commandment apply when the relationship between parent(s) and child(ren) is reversed?

One thing is for sure: We are not to neglect our parents in their later years. We are not to make fun of them or take advantage of them. One way to honor our parents is to care for them in practical ways, to help them when they are in need.

The apostle Paul writes about his concern for widows in 1 Timothy 5. But I think what he says about caring for widows applies to the responsibility of adult children to care for their aging parents, whether the parents are widowed or not. Listen to what he says in 1 Timothy 5:4, 8:

“If a widow has children or grandchildren, their first responsibility is to show godliness at home and repay their parents by taking care of them... But those who won’t care for their own relatives, especially those in their immediate family,” including their parents, if they are in need, “have denied the faith. They are worse than unbelievers.”

Strong words, aren’t they? *The Message* expresses it this way: “If a widow has family members to take care of her, let them learn that religion begins at their own doorstep, and that they should pay back, with gratitude, some of what they have received. This pleases God immensely. Anyone who neglects to care for family members in need, repudiates the faith. This is worse than refusing to believe, in the first place.”

In other words, if your faith in Christ is real, if the commitment of your life to God is genuine, your love for Him cannot be divorced from loving and caring for your parents. For any of us to neglect the needs of our parents, or to withhold practical love and assistance from them, when it is in our power to give it, is a sign that our faith is worth zero. We can talk all we want about loving God, but if our love for God is not translated into love for people, our talk is just hot air.

Think about the exchange in Matthew 15 between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers who were upset that the disciples of Jesus weren't following their rules and regulations about the right way to wash one's hands before a meal. You have to understand that their complaint was not about the hygiene of Jesus' disciples. It was not that the disciples didn't wash their hands. They just didn't do it the right way – according to “the tradition of the elders” (15:2). They didn't follow the ceremonial practices or rituals prescribed by the Pharisees and teachers of the law for people who were really religious and wanted everybody to know it.

What did Jesus do? He turned their criticism around and accused the Pharisees and teachers of nullifying God's commands by elevating their own ideas and traditions (15:3, 6). It is not hard to see the contrast here between what the Pharisees were concerned about and what really mattered – matters, present tense – to Jesus. The religionists (the Pharisees and teachers) were all about external things, such as clean hands and doing things in a prescribed way. Jesus was – and is – far more interested in what is on the inside. In a person's heart. Jesus was – and is – far more interested in relationships than rituals.

The religionists had mastered the letter of the law, but they had massacred its spirit in the process. They were obsessed with the traditions and all the rules and regulations they had added to God's revealed Word, and they had lost sight of the meaning and pre-eminence of God's commands. It still happens today, whenever we try to make our personal preferences or traditions more important than what God has revealed to us in His Word.

On this occasion, in Matthew 15, Jesus was particularly bothered by something called *corban*. The word *corban* simply means a gift or an offering dedicated to God. Several times in the Old Testament it is used to refer to an offering a person might make to God. By the time of Jesus, though, *corban* had taken on a different meaning. It still referred to something dedicated to God, but it was held in trust by the person dedicating it, as long as he or she lived. In practice, it meant that a person could declare his property or possessions *corban* – dedicated to God – and still use it for himself. And he could use his pledge, his declaration of *corban*, as an excuse to withhold assistance from his aging parents, if they were in need. It had become a legal loophole that enabled or even encouraged a son to avoid his responsibility to his parents.

You see, back in Jesus' day, they didn't have Social Security or Medicare. There was no such thing as an IRA or a 401(k). The only kind of Social Security program they had was the family. And, later on, the church. *Corban* had become a religiously-acceptable way to get around one's God-ordained responsibility to honor and care for one's parents. Jesus saw it for what it was, and called the religionists “hypocrites” (NIV) and “frauds” (MSG) (15:7).

An offering, no matter how sincerely offered, is no substitute for obedience. As Samuel said to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22, to obey God is always better than sacrifice. When you start looking for loopholes in God's Word, you only get into trouble. And you end up dishonoring God. When you dishonor your parents, you dishonor God.

Someone has said it is not a sin to grow old, but it is no joke either. Some of our senior members and aging parents lead active, interesting, robust lives. But for some, the "golden years" are anything but golden. For some, the later years are the most difficult of all.

For someone whose mother has suffered a debilitating stroke, what does it mean to honor your parents? What does it mean for the one whose father has Alzheimer's? What does it mean for those whose parents live on a fixed and extremely limited income? What does it mean for the one whose widowed mom or dad struggles daily with loneliness? Or those whose parents can no longer manage their own households or take care of themselves?

What does it mean, in circumstances like these, to honor your parents? It may mean something different in every situation. In some cases, it may involve taking one or both of your parents into your home in order to care for them. But there is no "one size fits all" answer. Taking your parents into your home may not be the right or best answer for them or for you. If it is not the right answer in your situation, do not allow yourself to be plagued with feelings of guilt, or feeling that you have failed your parents.

In calling you to honor your parents in all the seasons of life, God is not asking you to be Superman or Superwoman (or some other "superhero"). God does not ask you to do what is impossible in your circumstances. What He does ask of us is to do what we can, and all that we can, to be there for our parents and to care for them in the strength He gives. With the resources – material, emotional, physical, and spiritual – that He provides.

When you show your parents that you care about them, when you take time to be with them (if it is possible), when you take time to listen and to help with their household needs, when you take time to visit or call (if distance separates you), when you do what you can, and you do it out of love, you honor your parents. And when you honor your parents, you honor God.

"Honor your father and your mother." No excuses. No religious loopholes. It is a commandment for children of all ages. And, O yes, there is a promise attached to it: "That it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:2-3). If you want it to "go well with you," if you want the blessing of God in your life, "Honor your father and your mother" in all the changing seasons and circumstances of life. Beginning, if necessary, right now.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.