

Human Authority

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:12;
Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Proverbs 23:22-25
Mark 7:9-13; Ephesians 6:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:5*

Whereas the first Commandment enjoins submission to divine authority, the fifth Commandment requires submission to authority. It establishes the principle of obedience in human relationships.

What is authority? Basically it is the power or right (1) to declare to others what shall be considered right and wrong, (2) to demand of others that they do what is right, and (3) to enforce right conduct by punishing evildoers. (See H. Hoeksema, *Love Thy Neighbor for God's Sake; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955, p. 16.*)

Obviously the only one who has such authority in an absolute sense is God. But God has chosen to set up certain spheres of authority within the human race. Within each of these He has appointed certain ones who exercise authority as His representatives.

There are at least three such spheres of authority. One is the state; another is the church. The third sphere is the family, with which the fifth Commandment specifically deals. Though the family is the smallest unit of authority, it is nevertheless the most important. Thus it is singled out for special attention.

I. The Family in God's Plan

The family is especially important because it plays the crucial role in establishing and maintaining proper authority in all spheres. It is primary and basic to all others, because it is in the home that one begins to learn obedience and submission.

To the growing child parental authority is representative or symbolic of all authority. The attitudes and patterns learned in the home determine how he will respond to authority in other spheres. When young people fail to learn how to honor father and mother, they will have little respect for teachers, policemen, and lawmakers. Rebellion in the home is a prelude to general lawlessness and social anarchy.

The Family Under Attack

The breakdown of the family is the result if not the explicit purpose of many trends and movements in our time. In light of its extreme importance in God's plan, it is no wonder that Satan is working so hard to destroy it. In doing so he uses many weapons, some old and some new.

Divorce continues to be one of Satan's major instruments of destruction. The "no-fault" divorce laws being enacted in some states make the dissolution of marriage a simple matter. Also, divorce is becoming more socially acceptable. Thus marriage and family solidarity are being taken less seriously.

Another factor working against the family is the covetousness of many parents. Sometimes a father will work long hours or hold two jobs just to provide unnecessary luxuries for his family. Often both mother and father work, making the children daytime orphans. True

family life is sacrificed to mammon.

The current social revolution threatens the family from several directions. The "gay liberation" campaign is a movement away from the family as designed by God, and so are some elements of the "women's liberation" movement. The "new left" revolutionary movement seeks to turn youth against parents.

The Crisis in Authority

The result of these satanic assaults on the family is an increasing contempt for authority. Divine authority is mocked and scorned. There is open rebellion against the authority of the civil government; the law is defied and policemen derided as "pigs." In many public-school classrooms teachers are openly insulted and ignored. Parents are regarded as squares, and their values are considered to be outdated.

The erosion of the family unit is certainly a principal cause of this crisis. Youth not disciplined to submit to parental authority are presently asserting their freedom from all authority.

Honor for parents is thus not just tradition or sentiment or kindness. It is absolutely necessary for an orderly world. The family unit is the building block of society, the very foundation of the social order; and the fifth Commandment is the guardian of the family.

II. Respect for Parents

The fifth Commandment specifically requires children to honor their parents. This refers basically to an attitude of respect and reverence. Leviticus 19:3 even says, "Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father." Here "fear" means godly reverence.

Submission in Youth

In childhood, honor for parents involves obedience or submission to parental authority. Colossians 3:20 exhorts, "Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord." Ephesians 6:1, 2 puts it thus: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother. . . ."

The crucial necessity for respect and obedience to parents cannot be overemphasized. In the Old Testament law God prescribed the severest penalties for dishonoring parents. Striking or even cursing a parent was punished by death (Exodus 21:15, 17). An incorrigibly rebellious son was likewise to be surrendered to the authorities and stoned to death by all the men of the city (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

This severe procedure shows that disrespect for parents is not just a family matter; it is the concern of society as a whole. "All the men of his city" were to participate in the execution because the whole city was threatened by such a youth. If left unchecked, the attitude of rebellion grows and spreads to others; thus this evil must be removed from the community. The execution itself was to have a deterrent effect: "All Israel shall hear, and fear."

Care in Later Life

The command to honor father and mother applies to adults also. Though no longer required to obey parents, adults must show them honor in other ways.

Perhaps the best word to describe the attitude an adult should have toward his parents is *care*. We should care about our parents, and we should care for them if necessary.

Care means remembering: remembering via letters, calls, visits, and gifts. An elderly

parent dreads few things more than being forgotten.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees who tried to escape their responsibility of providing for their parents by "donating" their possessions to the Lord (Mark 7:10-13). It was a "donation" only on paper; they continued to use everything as if it were their own.

III. Responsibilities of Parents

The fifth Commandment involves obligations for parents as well as for children. Respect for and submission to authority must be learned. It is not enough for a parent simply to give orders; a child must be taught how and why to obey.

Thus it is the parents' responsibility to nurture an obedient and respectful spirit in their children. If a child fails to learn respect for authority his parents must share a large part of the blame.

Instruction in Righteousness

A parent's first and basic obligation to his children is to instruct them concerning God's works and God's law. Psalm 145:4 says, "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts." Thus every parent must be a teacher.

In Old Testament times Hebrew parents were strictly commanded to teach their children the law of God, as Deuteronomy 6:6-9 emphasizes. Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois were faithful to this command (2 Timothy 1:5), and Timothy knew the Hebrew Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15).

If this was required of Hebrew parents, do not Christian parents have an even greater duty to instruct their children in righteousness? Indeed, Paul commands fathers to rear their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Sunday school, church, and youth activities in the church should not be considered optional and left to the choice of the child. The same is true of Christian camps, retreats, and youth conferences, which are among the most effective teaching instruments today. Christian parents must see such programs as means of instructing their children in righteousness. Of course, they should use discretion in order to avoid provoking rebellion, and also take account of the special needs of shy or sensitive children.

Church programs, however, can never take the place of instruction in the home itself. Christian parents must constantly be teaching their children about Christ and Christian living. Every Christian home should have regular family devotions.

Occasionally a parent will say, "I'm not going to try to influence my children regarding religion. I want them to make up their own minds." Such an idea is irresponsible and un-Christian. If a parent loves his children, he will do everything in his power to influence them in the way of salvation.

Correction

The second basic responsibility of parents is correction. Instruction alone will not build respect for authority in the heart of a child; the teaching must be enforced with corrective discipline. (See Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13.)

Two extremes must be avoided. If a parent is too slack and inconsistent in discipline, this may lead to a contempt for authority. On the other hand, if the correction is too harsh and unjust, it may create anger and lead to rebellion. Thus Ephesians 6:4 warns, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath."

In summary, the main point of the fifth Commandment is to establish the principle of authority and obedience in human relationships. Parental authority properly administered and duly respected is the chief means to the realization of this principle in all human relationships.