

Exodus 20 v12 Time for Your Parents

Introduction

The rate and extent of family breakdown in Britain has sadly reached record proportions, in excess of forty two billion pounds was spent supporting families that had broken down in 2011, or the equivalent of £1,400 per taxpayer. This is equivalent to one third of the NHS budget, roughly the same as defence spending or interest payments on the national debt [statistics from 'Free sex-who pays?' Cambridge Paper by Guy Brandon, January 2012]. In addition to the financial costs there are the moral and social consequences of these sad statistics. Do our political leaders actually care about the crisis in our midst? On the right wing of politics work is king, family friendly economics apparently undermines the competitiveness of the workplace, so the Thatcher and then Major Governments undermined traditional working patterns that safeguarded Sunday as a day of rest, as outlined in the Social provisions of the Maastricht treaty signed by other European Governments. On the left wing of politics New Labour deliberately shifted the tax burden to penalise married couples to the tune of potentially several thousand pounds a years, favouring families in less formally committed relationships, despite their propensity to break down at least three to four times faster than the traditional family relationships. The current Coalition Government in Westminster (and the politicians in Holyrood are no better than their London counterparts) at the insistence of the Liberal Democrats continues the economic and social attack on Christian marriage and the traditional family unit, seeking to destroy the moral basis of our society. The bitter harvest of such policies is seen in school classrooms every day of the week where children, denied the quality of parental care they deserve, struggle to meet the demands of school life, placing heavy additional pressures on the teachers; how many young people 'in care' have we as a society failed with the politically correct policies today on adoption and fostering and how many young men in prison are there in part because of a lack of an adequate male role model in their lives?

However we cannot turn the clock back to some idyllic era from the past. We need first to recognise the scale of the challenges we face before seeking how as Christians we can attempt to keep this commandment as God intended us to do.

The Work-Parenting Challenge whether one parent or two in the family home financial pressures to make ends meet mean that a record number of people are in the workplace full or part-time. This means less people are available for providing child-care in the wider family circle than would have been the case in the past. This combined with the mobility in the labour market means people are travelling greater distances to work which adds to the pressures on family life.

The Social-Parenting Challenge Families may live under the same roof, but in which home do families all watch the same programmes at the same time in the same room? Factor in the internet and computers and the choices multiply. With different work shifts; different hours at schools, and different holidays across authority boundaries, time together is getting reduced year on year. How many days in the week does the average family eat dinner together? one or two apparently; how can we function and communicate effectively if we have no time together beyond the briefest of greetings or enquiries about the day?

The Cultural-Parenting Challenge the pressures from advertisers and the entertainment industry break society down into ever smaller niche markets; the sexual pressures in our country have never been greater on our young people; and the opportunities for illicit relationships have never been easier through internet websites; how many people consciously mix with others of a wide age range in their free time? Churches are not the only place where a congregation comprised of babies to great-grandparents and all stages between might be

found, but I fear on current trends that places of worship may be the last consciously to resist this cultural trend (and we should resist it with all our might!).

The Family-breakdown-Parenting Challenge statistically speaking individuals brought up in homes that are dysfunctional too often replicate this pattern in their own lives. Children whose parents divorce sadly are more likely to experience the same failure in their own marriages –if they choose to get married. However, there hasn't been an idyllic period of perfect families in the past. When we start to name some of the major Old Testament characters would you have wanted Abraham and Sarah (with or without Hagar) to run the marriage course? Would King David have been a good adviser for a course on parenting skills? Yet out of the messes they made, God brought good; as parents and in our relationships we may be less than perfect, but with His help we can make a success of family life –even if in some cases it is only salvaging the bare minimum of what God intended to be the norm. In addition, before we sink under the pews with the weight of this gloom, we must not forget that more than half of all marriages are successful and the majority of families are successful in the relationships between parents and children. Therefore, there is no excuse for giving up and not believing that we can make our relationships within our family circle work.

1. The Significance of this commandment

Why does God place this commandment at the head of the list of the six directly concerned with our relationships with fellow human beings? There immediately springs to mind a serious problem? How can you honour a parent or parents that have been guilty of physical psychological or sexual abuse? Or one who has deliberately absented themselves from your life? Or relate to parents who have been key people in campaigns of genocide, like the Nazis were engaged in during World War Two? Why should we keep this commandment?

(a) **We are all part of a family** All of us were born to a biological mum and dad. However short a time the family was together or inadequate the relationships, we belong to a family. We can choose our friends but never our biological relatives! A child-parent relationship is the one common human relationship experienced by us all. A marriage can exist and be very happy without children and children in turn can be brought up without ever experiencing a home where their parents or carers are married, even in the age of IVF a biological father and mother must provide the genetic material that is required to generate life. However, 'domestic life and domestic discipline must soon be at an end; society will consist of individuals no longer grouped into families; so early is the separation of husband and wife, of parents and children.' These words were not written in the last decade, though many commentators have produced similar sentiments in recent years, but by Britain's greatest nineteenth century social reformer Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury [Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 160] .

(b) **Obedience to Parents applies to at least three generations at the same time** children, parents and grandparents; *Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you* (Exodus 20:12), is a command that binds the generations together in the wider family network. Children observing their parents relating to and then possibly caring for their elderly parents, is a powerful witness to the next generation of what it means to live this commandment. One of the most moving true stories I learned from my mum's father was on this subject. It concerned a man who was taking his father to deposit him in the workhouse; the appalling dumping ground for unwanted humans in the Victorian era. The old man was being carried on his son's back as he could no longer walk himself. The old man had barely spoken a word after hearing of his son's intentions. On the day not too far away from the workhouse, the son stopped to rest depositing his dad on the milestone nearby. The old man broke out into uncontrollable sobbing. When at last his shocked son could get a

word out of him as to the reason, he admitted that many years earlier he had stopped at the very same spot when taking his own father to abandon him in the workhouse. It was a guilty secret he had hidden from his children until that day. People from other countries are profoundly shocked by how many elderly people have been abandoned in residential institutions by their families, never visited from one year to the next in the worst cases. Old Testament Hebrew apparently has no word for grandchild /grandparent or similar terms –it is always father or mother, even if the relationship is several generations apart. In 2 Chronicles 29:2, for example, it reads: *He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done.* These words refer to King Hezekiah, the fourteenth ruler of the nation after David. Therefore, when an Old Testament Israelite heard or read *Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you* the assumption would be made that these words applied equally to grandparents or great-grandparents as well –should they still be alive. A high premium is placed on the extended family together learning what it means in practice to live the way God wants us to (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

(c) **Because the home is where the child first learns how to behave appropriately** in the summer of 1996 a group of young elephants were taken from the Kruger National park in South Africa to the reserve at Pilanesburg, approximately twenty kilometres from Sun City. However, something went wrong; instead of behaving like ‘normal’ elephants these youngsters acted like delinquents ripping up trees, attacking tourists’ cars and even threatening their rangers. Why did they behave in this way? They had been taken from their parents too young and had never learned appropriate social skills [B. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p.162]. Older animals teach their siblings discipline and explain the place of authority in the family in the same way younger children learn from older ones and they in turn see how their parents model behaviour for them. Paul in Ephesians (5:22-33 and 6:1-4) pointed out clearly the responsibilities of husbands and wives in marriage, and they jointly in responsibilities for their children. *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.* ² *Honour your father and mother— which is the first commandment with a promise—* ³ *that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.* ⁴ *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord* (Ephesians 6:1-4). The absence of proper parental supervision in the home environment results in increasing disruption in school classrooms and dysfunctional behaviour too often in adult life.

(d) **Because behavioural patterns learned in childhood are often repeated later in life** A girl as a teenager might want to assert the differences between her behavioural choices and those of her mother, but as the years pass by the similarities will increase –not just copying recipes for cakes or meals, but habits and mannerisms and turns of phrase; similarly a boy with his father. These patterns may be quite unintentional, but are learned forms of behaviour deep in our psyche. Proverbs 22:6 declares: *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.* Sadly this is not an absolute rule that is followed in every case, but there is a high incidence of a children brought up in good Christian homes who after going away from the Lord in early adulthood come back to faith when they realise the wisdom of their parent’s encouragement to join them in following the Lord. Never underestimate the significance of the times spent reading God’s Word and praying with your children each day. The investment we make in our children is a long term one and parenting like running the marathon is an endurance race not a quick sprint. _

2. **What are we required to do?**

(a) **The importance of respect** Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12). This command was repeated along with the others at regular intervals in Moses' lifetime. Leviticus 19:1-3, for example, declares: *The Lord said to Moses, ² Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. ³ Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God.* Here is a strong assertion to the nation that acknowledging the Lord as God would be characterised by honouring God's day and honouring our parents. Likewise nations that dishonour the Lord as our country has done by legislating away a day of rest and passing laws that time and again undermine parental authority, for example, the law that allows nurses in High Schools to distribute the pill or other forms of contraceptives to girls without the knowledge or consent of their parents, is outrageous. This command is counter-cultural today as respect for anyone in authority is in rapid decline. However, if in our homes there is appropriate respect for older people, then this will be transferred to relationships with older people outside the family circle. If in the home this principle of respect is taught as a pattern for our lives then it should naturally follow that we treat people of different colour, race, religion or social status with equal respect as persons. It should also, for example, influence us to be sympathetic to people with mental or physical disabilities. Good citizens often learn that particular skill within their immediate family and then translate it into other social contexts.

(b) **The importance of obedience** Jewish rabbis stressed the duty to observe this command regardless of the age of the parents. Malachi, around four hundred years before the time of Jesus, places this charge from God against his nation, and especially against the religious leaders of the day in Malachi 1:6: *A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to Me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to Me? says the Lord Almighty. It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.* Proverbs 1:8-9 states: *Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. ⁹ They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.* Listening is a skill, it is a deeper form of attention than hearing someone speak; all of us as adults, let alone parents, make mistakes or come to wrong conclusions. Sometimes our children can have a clearer insight into a situation than their parents. However, whether as a child (young or adult) or as a parent we must always be careful how we respond when others make what we believe are mistakes as none of us are infallible. Proverbs 15:20 teaches us that: *A wise son (or daughter) brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother.* In the latter days, Paul told Timothy, that one of the characteristics of such an age relates to this commandment: *People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, **disobedient to their parents**, ungrateful, unholy,³ without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴ treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (II Timothy 3:2-4).* What a contrast with the example of Jesus. Luke records a summary of Jesus' life from the age of twelve to nearly thirty: *Then he went down to Nazareth with them [Mary and Joseph] and was obedient to them. But His mother treasured all these things in her heart (Luke 2:51).* This behavioural model was reinforced elsewhere in the New Testament. Colossians 3:20 states: *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* Although there are no qualifications to this statement by the apostle Paul, I have no doubt that he was not giving parents the right to make unlawful or unreasonable demands upon their children as elsewhere he urges fathers, as the head of the family unit not to provoke your children to anger by unreasonable actions (Ephesians 6:4). However, the general principle of respect towards people in authority over us due to their position (and their appropriate treatment of those under their authority or care) is consistently stated in the Bible.

(c) **The importance of discipline** it goes without saying that good behaviour is modelled and taught. Parents have a particular responsibility to train their children when they are young.

Proverbs 22:6 declares: *Train a child in the way he should go...* A number of other passages in Proverbs make similar points. Proverbs 19:19a: *Discipline your son, for in that there is hope...*; Proverbs 22:15 states: *Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.* And Proverbs 23:13-14 says: *Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.¹⁴ Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.* Moderate physical chastisement will be a last resort, but an undisciplined child is an unloved child. More than twenty years ago at a Christian camp I was responsible for a group of boys for a week. Most of them were well behaved and co-operative, but one child whose appearance was a cause for concern, despite having the best quality clothes and possessions in the cabin. His entire vocabulary was confrontational and right up to the day I took the children and their bags to wait for the coach to take them home he objected to every instruction I gave to him. One day was particularly difficult and I'm not sure I handled it as well as I might have done. Yet my dogged persistence and the patience of the other children that day touched his heart. On the day he left his final words shocked me to the core. With tears streaming down his checks he said: 'I never knew anyone loved me that much' with reference to the time I spent with him. Unlike the majority of the children that week he had his parents at home who both had good jobs with high incomes. Whatever material possession he wanted he had, except the one thing he really needed, that was their time, their love and discipline. It appeared that he had responsibility for making his own boundaries, despite being under High School age. Until that final conversation I had felt that I had failed him and was pretty down about my contribution that week. Children need clear boundaries within which they can grow; secure well-disciplined children will have a good foundation on which to train their own offspring in due course. Paul urged Christian parents in Thessalonica to relate to their offspring in a similar manner to the way he, Silas and Timothy had cared for the spiritually young congregation. *You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.* ¹¹ *For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,* ¹² *encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory* (I Thessalonians 2:10-12). These are strong words which we would only dare write to people we knew and who knew that the information was a correct summary of our conduct. So we can make the same assumption of these early Christian leaders. What a great summary of parenting skills is given here!

(d) **The importance of caring** In II Corinthians 12:14-16a, Paul uses this family imagery to describe the care of Christians for one another in a local congregation, and by implication further afield as well. *Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.*¹⁵ ***So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?*** ¹⁶ *Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you.* In his first letter to Timothy, albeit in a context where he was speaking about the ministries of older widowed ladies, but in words applicable to us all, Paul wrote: *if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God* (I Timothy 5:4). We are right in our culture to be concerned about the neglect of some children; however, we ought equally to be concerned about the neglect of the elderly and people with additional needs in our families and our country. Now in some particular cases the best form of care for someone in the family may be in a residential home; a loving adult child or spouse in some contexts may choose that option as the best available provision. All of us are well aware of distressing situations where specialist care is needed. Let us encourage and support one another in caring both within our family circle together with our church family.

3. **The Promise linked to keeping this commandment**

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12). Paul repeats this commandment and its associated promise in Ephesians 6:1-3). Proverbs 4:1-5 is a fuller exhortation on this theme. *Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.* ² *I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching.* ³ *When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother,* ⁴ *he taught me and said, Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.* ⁵ *Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them.* As is Proverbs 6:20-22: *My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching.* ²¹ *Bind them upon your heart for ever; fasten them around your neck.* ²² *When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you.* How will our lives be extended? Warnings about personal safety will reduce the risk of physical harm; guidance on moral issues might preserve us from other forms of ruin; wise words about the use of finances and budgeting can help prepare a child or young adult for the challenges of paying their way in adult life. In our country the suicide rate, especially of young men is profoundly sad. We cannot shield our children or older parents from the heartaches and difficulties of life, but together we can plan and prepare and with God's help make the best of what can at times be very difficult circumstances.

In our family circles whether as the parent or the child we have to work with each other through the range of experiences life throws at us, good and bad; enjoyable or distressing. All of these situations are contexts in which we can learn something about ourselves, each other and life in general. We must strive to be fair and even-handed as parents with our children, or with the two sets of grandparents or other people in our family circle. We must always seek to communicate effectively with one another; when time is so pressured –how easily we can misjudge the words or actions of another and this can lead to something small growing out of all proportion to its place. We must also be willing to forgive and be forgiven –this is so fundamental in relationships, being open with issues, dealing with them and closing the case. Lastly appreciating and encouraging each other to be the best we can be for God and for each other; always remembering that there are no perfect parents or perfect children; it is a steep learning curve sometimes and there are days when we want to quit and ‘throw in the towel’. Please don't because God will give us the strength and grace to be the best we can be day by day as we seek His help; let's encourage one another, not least on the days when we feel like a complete failure, but let's also have a heart of praise for the privilege of having parents and for some of us of being parents and thank Him for specific named blessings they have brought to us, Amen.