

PARENTS AND THE NEW EARTH

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Many think that it's difficult to obey the fifth of God's wonderful Ten Commandments. To them it seems as impossible as if God asked them to jump over the moon. It says: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12).

Cindy's parents always preferred her older sister Lisa. Lisa was a straight "A" student, a class leader to whom everything came easily. She was the apple of her daddy's eye and her mother's pride and joy.

As the middle child, Cindy always felt she got lost in the shuffle. She was never as brilliant as Lisa and never as cute as Baby Faith. She grew up hearing—sometimes in actions, other times in actual words—that she was "dumb and ugly."

Of course, her parents don't remember or acknowledge ever making such comments. They were good, Christian people who loved all their children equally. But Cindy remembers. She will never forget.

It wasn't that Cindy's parents wanted to be cruel. It was just that they allowed their personal preferences, which they didn't even consciously realize they had, to influence what they said and how they treated the children. And that was cruel, regardless of intent.

Even when the girls were grown and had children of their own, Lisa's two daughters were "special" grandchildren, while Cindy's son was just an "extra" grandchild. The cycle of insensitive preferential treatment continued as it always had.

However, when Cindy's parents became old and frail, it seemed natural to everyone concerned (except Cindy) that caring for them would fall to her. After all, Lisa was an important lawyer now; she couldn't be expected to give up her career to care for elderly parents. Faith was a free spirit, totally undependable. Who else was left but plodding Cindy? Besides, she was good at this sort of thing—being in the background and taking care of the drudgery. It wouldn't bother her. And there was nothing in her life to prevent her from being the primary care-giver.

It seemed so logical. But Cindy was angry. Her parents had never been there for her in the way she needed them. Why should she be expected to be there for them now? It just wasn't fair!

Still, as a Christian, Cindy worried that she ought to feel differently about all this. After all, didn't the fifth commandment read, "Honor your father and your mother?" (Exodus 20:12.) How could she be faithful to God, feeling the way she did about her parents? Her dilemma was a very real one. How does a good person get over having bad parents?

Many of us have very good parents. They've provided us with all the loving and nurture we could ever have asked for. They've provided sage counsel and caring understanding as we've struggled into adulthood. And we owe them tremendously for it.

But not all of us.

Some of us—far too many of us—have had parents like Cindy's. Or worse. What about the children whose parents have molested and abused them? What about the children whose parents have abandoned them? What about the children whose parents have ignored or belittled them—year after year? How are these children supposed to relate to a requirement that they "honor" their parents?

Does it sound easy? It doesn't to these people. If your mom and dad are kind, faithful, loving parents, you may find it easy to "honor" them. In that case, just be very thankful! But for others, this commandment is a stone wall. Mom was mean, an alcoholic perhaps, a drug addict, someone lazy, selfish, uncaring, or cruel, just the kind of person it seems impossible to "honor." Or, it could be dad is the problem: he was an alcoholic, harsh, cruel, selfish, absorbed in his own pleasure, he showed you no love, and he may have even abandoned you to take off with another woman. How can you "honor" or respect him? When it comes to praying the Lord's prayer, you find it hard to say, "Our Father which art in heaven"

This problem is important. If you believe that God is telling you to do something you can't do, that upsets your whole attitude toward Him. You can't help it; it's not your fault if your parents deprived you of the atmosphere of loving nurture that every child born into this world deserves. What happens for multitudes is a sour alienation from God Himself. Why serve Him if He demands what you can't do?

But at the same time, your heart of hearts deep inside longs for peace with God and healing of soul. You can't expel your parents from your mind, even if they are thousands of miles away. As long as you live, there they are casting a shadow over your inmost emotional being. You are never truly free; you have a ball and chain around your ankles. If some miracle enabled you to keep that troublesome

fifth commandment, you would see hope that you could keep all of the ten and be happy.

God has assured you in the fifth commandment that He will enable you to “honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long” and happy. Therefore this commandment contains the secret of joyous living.

But how can He accomplish this miracle?

God sees people differently than we do, and He enables us to see them as He sees them. In other words, when God sees someone who is mean, selfish, irritable, unloving—just “bad,” He sees that person as he/she could become, or would have become, by His grace. This is how God looks at the sinful human race, “not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Yes, God loves people, but He does not love their badness. So, because Christ gave Himself for everyone’s salvation, He sees in every person what that person will become when God’s grace has time to work on his/her heart. He sees the potential; He sees what that person would choose to be if circumstances had permitted. Many a person who is irritable, unpleasant, or cantankerous has a hidden problem that makes him/her that way.

For example, there was an irritable elephant that got onto the main road and harassed motorists passing by. Finally, the game warden had to shoot the beast. Then they found the problem: it had a painfully abscessed tooth. Yet the elephant was probably normally docile.

You learn from the Bible to think of your parents as they would have been were it not for the troublesome pain that distressed them. Yes, this requires faith on your part, but you learn that faith from Jesus for He has faith in you. As Jesus forgives us when we are unlovable, so you learn to forgive your parents.

It’s very true that you don’t have the resources within yourself to do this. No psychology textbook can give you that ability. But this is precisely what the grace of Christ does for us. It’s God’s assurance in the fifth commandment. He says, You will learn to honor your father and your mother, and then you will be happy for now and forever.

The love of parents for their children can be reversed; even if a child is bad, the parent still loves him. Now by the grace of the Savior, it is possible also for a child (perhaps grown by now!) to love the parent in spite of his/her badness.

What is back of this miracle is the realization that all of us are like that irritable elephant. Something gives us pain and irritates us, but we learn from the Bible that Jesus had things that gave Him pain also. He was “despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:3), abused, insulted, yes, crucified. He had enemies and tormentors, but He prayed for those who crucified Him, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). As we want God to be generous with us, to overlook our faults and to love us in spite of them, so now we are given love and grace toward other people who wrong us. This is the miracle of the assurance in the fifth commandment.

That assurance embedded therein rests on the firm foundation of a truth more solid than the everlasting hills: the love of God for His lost world. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Can you imagine a more wonderful “Father” to have than God Himself, the Father to Jesus? But wait, here’s a problem: there was a time when the Father was so distant from Jesus, so unresponsive to His pleas for help, that it seemed to Jesus that He did not love Him. When Jesus was on His cross, the Father seemed so far away (maybe your father or mother has seemed far away emotionally from you!) that Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Then, according to the record in Psalm 22:1 and following, Jesus kept on praying to Him, but the Father did not answer: “You do not hear” (verse 2). During those awful hours, Jesus had no visible evidence that His Father cared anything for Him! Don’t discount the reality of the temptation Jesus felt. If He had opened His heart to welcome the temptations of Satan, Jesus could have become resentful and bitter. But He resisted that temptation, and chose instead to create something out of nothing, to believe that His Father loved Him and heard Him even though there was not a shred of visible evidence to support His faith. Here He was despised and rejected of men, forsaken by His own disciples, the heavens black above His soul, and yet He chose to trust in His Father.

So we read that before He died on the cross, Jesus gained the victory. It seemed He was in the last throes of agony, being tossed on the horns of wild buffalo, “Save me . . . from the horns of the wild oxen!” (vs. 21). I cannot see your loving face, Jesus says; but I

believe you are there, and even though it seems you don't love me, I believe in the darkness you do love me!

It's like a child who cannot see the loving face of his parent in the dark, but trusts that his/her love is real. On His cross Jesus cries out for us all to hear, "He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard" (verse 24).

Jesus built a bridge over a vast chasm of darkness and sin (our sin, our guilt), and made a way for us to believe in Him when things are dark for us. We call that bridge "the atonement," or "the reconciliation." Now, can you build a bridge of reconciliation between you and your parents, even when it seems they don't care? Even if they are long gone to their rest, you can recreate the matter and receive the "reconciliation" Christ gives.

Yes, by the grace of Christ your Savior! Your faith based on Him and His faith is powerful. It also builds something out of what appears to be nothing. Love that is more than our normal human love takes over (it is called *agape* in the New Testament), and it begins to work miracles. Such love, which has its origin in Christ, works miracles here on earth. Many are the alienated families who are healed by this grace of Christ!

But suppose your parents resist and reject this grace of Christ manifested in you? In some cases, that may happen, and we need to be prepared, for God cannot force people to respond properly. But be very slow about blaming others; but if it is indeed their fault, then God's backup plan kicks in.

Jesus explains that if we love people in a "household" and the "household . . . is not worthy, let your peace return to you" (Matthew 10:13). The meaning is that even if your efforts at reconciliation and "honor" meet with apparent failure, the Holy Spirit will give you peace within your own heart. You have chosen to "honor your father and your mother," to "honor" the institution of parenthood and the establishment of families, to honor the wise and loving parent he/she could have been by the grace of Christ—the original plan of God for the human race. Now "your days" will be "long" and happy, just as the assurance in the fifth commandment says!

There is a precious lesson we learn in our relation to our parents: "We have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. . . . No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of

righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 9:9-11). We learn to thank God for His “chastening” us! “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?” (verses 6, 7). Great good news! All that you thought was “against you” turns out to be “for you,” a million times over! The painful “chastening” turns out to be proof that you are treated as a child of God!

Will we learn to honor grandparents also? God could have chosen to multiply people on earth through some other way than through families, like putting coins in machines. But no, He chose to bring every child into the world through the loving warmth of a family. When we begin to understand His plan of salvation, we “honor” His wisdom. In this way, we are given the gift of a respect for all our forebears. They may have been far less educated than we are, but they did the best with what they had. God says of them as Jesus said of Mary Magdalene, “[She] has done what she could” (Mark 14:8). Your grandparents “did what they could,” and you will honor them for their love and faithfulness.

In the same way, your heart wants to honor others who have been used by God to be a blessing to you. It’s the same principle at work in the fifth commandment. Your teachers, your pastors, even your government leaders who have worked for you, are deserving of respect and honor. “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:29).

It is the story of an older man who lived with his young son and his son’s wife. They also had a four-year-old boy. The old man’s eyes blinked, his hands shook. When he ate food the silverware would rattle against the plate. He often missed his mouth. Food would be spilled on the tablecloth. This upset the young wife. She appealed to her husband to do something. They decided to move their dad to a corner at meal time away from the family. He would set alone in the corner eating out of a bowl, sitting on a stool. The old man would look sadly at the others and desired to be with them. One day the man dropped his bowl and broke it. His son and daughter-in-law said, If you eat like a pig then we will serve you like a pig. They made a wooden trough for the old man to eat out of. Not long after, they came upon their son playing with some pieces of wood. The dad asked what he was doing. The boy looked up, smiled and said, “I’m making

a trough to feed you and mama when I get big.” The next day the old man was back at the table eating with the family again and no one ever scolded or mistreated him again.

Do you remember the classic song, “The Cat’s in the Cradle” by Harry Chapin? It’s about a dad who refused to share his attention with his son while he was growing up. The song says, “There were planes to catch and bills to pay.” But by the end of the song the father finds the table has turned on him. “I’ve long since retired and my son moved away. I called him up the other day. I said, ‘I’d like to see you if you don’t mind.’ He said, ‘I’d love to dad, if I could find the time. You see, my new job’s a hassle, and the kid’s got the flu, but it’s sure been nice talking to you.’ And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me, he’d grown up just like me. My boy was just like me.

Again, that’s an assurance of what the Lord will enable you to do if you believe He has brought you “out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” “The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness” (Proverbs 16:31). “The glory of young men is their strength, and the splendor of old men is their gray head” (20:29). The “young men” will someday be “old men,” and if they have shown respect and “honor” to their elders, they will reap the same blessing when they become old! By obedience to the principle embedded in the fifth commandment, you will create a little heaven all around you.

You are going to go to heaven, but now you have a little heaven all around you while you are on the way!

“Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” Whoever obeys this commandment is sure of everlasting life. The sure promise is that whoever honors his father and mother will be satisfied with length of days in the new earth. “That thy days may be long.” How long?—For ever; for the land which the Lord God gives us is to be ours for an everlasting possession. We are to be planted in the land, and pulled up no more. God says to the one whom He delivers, “With length of days will I satisfy him.” “He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest it him; even length of days for ever and ever.” Ps. 21:4. How long would it take to satisfy one with a life of fullness of joy? How long before one would say that he had had enough? In that perfect life which nothing can disturb, in that full day where “we shall ever feel the freshness of the morning, and ever be far from its close,” rich in love and happiness, one can never be tired. Nobody ever gets tired of life who

lives with the Lord. Every day will be so full of satisfaction that nothing less than eternity of such blessedness can fully satisfy. The true land of Canaan, the land where God will plant His people so that their days may be long in it, for they will have it for an everlasting possession, is the whole earth, where righteousness will dwell, and the children of wickedness will not afflict them. Canaan means submission, bowing the knee, and in that new earth all flesh will come before the God who hears prayer, and will worship Him in Spirit and in truth; for then “The Lord shall be King over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord, and His name one.” Ps. 65:2.

God has warned us that in the last days many will lack the faith that, if they had it, would enable them to obey the fifth commandment: “Know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good” (2 Timothy 3:1-3). This sad condition is the direct result of a failure on the part of many pastors to proclaim the pure, true gospel of Jesus Christ. The second angel of Revelation 14 warns us, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen,” (verse 8). Transgression of the first four of God’s holy commandments has resulted in a widespread transgression of the last six!

In fact, God has written His Ten Commandments in a divinely arranged order. James says that if we break one, we break them all (James 2:10). But it is also true that breaking one leads directly to breaking the next one.

In fact, it is impossible to break the fifth commandment unless first of all there has been transgression of the fourth commandment. God has placed His commandments in a meaningful order. If we would keep holy the Lord’s Sabbath day, “the seventh day” which He has sanctified for us, He would be able to seal us with the Holy Spirit so that broken families would be healed as they gather to worship the Lord together Sabbath after Sabbath.

There is good news in the fact that all around the world there are many dear people who are coming out of “Babylon,” taking their place among God’s “saints” who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (verse 12).

You want to be among them! Jesus invites you. He is gathering a host of people who come from all kinds of sad, unhappy places; now they are coming into the bright sunshine of His love. They rejoice

in the fellowship of others who share this “faith of Jesus.” Your place is there, waiting for you.

A man took his wife and son to a lake area outside the city for a vacation. While the mother was fixing a meal in the house, the father and son went out on the lake in a boat for awhile. A sudden storm came up. Clouds covered the sun. There was darkness all over the lake as the waves were billowing. Then the son and the father saw that the mother had put a light in the window, and the father said, “Son I’m going to row. You keep your eyes on the light. Help me go in the direction of the light.” They did and made it to the house safely. When they arrived home, the mother was there to greet them. The son said, “Mom, we came home safely because we steered by your light.”

I wonder, when our children reach heaven, if they will come up to us and say, “Oh, dad, mom, I made it home safe because I steered by your light.”