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“Parents Who are a Test of Faith”

Exodus 20:12

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Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Exodus 20:12

An 83-year-old tells this story: “I know I shouldn’t have done this, but I was in the McDonald’s drive-through this morning, and the young lady behind me leaned on her horn and started mouthing something because I was taking too long to place my order. So when I got to the first window, I paid for her order along with my own. The cashier must have told her what I’d done, because as we moved up, she leaned out her window and waved to me and mouthed “Thank you,” obviously embarrassed that I had repaid her rudeness with kindness. When I got to the second window, I showed them both receipts and took her food, too. Now she has to go back to the end of the line and start all over again. Don’t blow your horn at old people, we’ve been around a long time.”

Getting along with people who have been around a long time is hard. There are more old people in our country than ever before. They are our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and in-laws.

They are living longer in a culture that worships youth—a culture in which Kylie Jenner, 26, has ten times as much money as Meryl Streep, 74—a culture in which families do not live together and older people are segregated. Parents in two-career families are stressed trying to divide their time among their children, jobs, and aging parents—searching for the right words to talk about loneliness, forgetfulness, selling the house.

My 91-year-old mother is living with dementia. When I tell people that, they often ask, “Does she know who you are? Does she recognize you?”

For a while, when we visited her in Colorado—where my brother and sister-in-law care for her—I would take photographs and talk to mom about who the people were. Sometimes on Zoom calls, I would hold up a picture of our children and ask, “Do you know who these people are?”

She doesn't. This line of questioning accomplished two things. I made myself sad, and my mother irritable. Why did I ask questions she can't answer? Why did we ever feel the need to correct her when she called us by the wrong names?

It's just mean. My mother raised me better than that, so I have stopped asking, “What's my name? How do we know each other?” I do not need my mother to tell me my name or how I'm related to her. I know how we're related, and I know she has dementia. (Janelle Taylor)

The inability to remember names may not mean that a person with dementia cannot recognize or care about others. My mom still knows that people care for her, and that they are somehow familiar. My mother cares for lots of people. Some have stopped making contact. Some stay connected as best they can. The question has shifted from “Do you know who we are?” to “Do we recognize her as a person who's still here?”

Talking to my mother is not hard. We don't ask questions. There is a lot of, “That's a pretty dress, mama. It's cold in New York, but not as cold as Colorado. I saw a house that reminded me of our house when I was in junior high. They even had a basketball hoop out front. Carol and

I had pancakes this morning and I remembered how you used to make a face with bacon and strawberries.”

If mom smiles, it is a gift.

Our ageist society works with the mistaken impression that people have less value when they no longer work. It is considered natural to dislike your in-laws, immature to ask your parents for advice, and abnormal to value their company. A century ago, American houses were twelve room affairs, designed to hold grandparents as well as parents and children—the Waltons. Now it is unusual for a grown child and a grown parent to live in the same city. When we are dealing with broken hips, dementia, and Alzheimer’s, the problems seem insurmountable. We know more about assisted living communities than we used to, but we still feel unprepared to care for those who cared for us. No one can write hard and fast rules on how grown children should care for their parents. Each situation is unique and most are difficult.

We find some comfort in realizing that it has always been hard. In ancient Israel, several generations shared a home. Grown sons grew frustrated waiting for years to be in charge. They were expected to follow their father’s wishes, even when those wishes made no sense. It is easy to understand why older parents who were finally no longer in charge could be neglected. But the Hebrew people came to believe that God cares about how we treat our elderly parents. They thought they heard God say, “Honor your father and mother.”

The Hebrew word for “honor” is kavod (John Holbert, *The Ten Commandments*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, 64-65). The root word means “heavy” or “weighty.” The fifth commandment could be translated “Recognize your parents’

significance.” While the Bible legislates love of neighbors and strangers, for one’s parents it specifies honor— “Give weight to the importance of your parents.”

Jesus refers to this commandment twice. In the Gospel of Mark, he condemns those who try to ignore it by saying, “This command isn’t about me and my parents.” Jesus quotes this commandment to the rich young ruler when he asks, “What do I do to be saved?”

At first glance this is one of the most dubious of the Ten Commandments. Shouldn’t this be in the twenties, mid-teens maybe, but not number five? But, like it or not, there is a mysterious, crucial tie between us and our parents. Since Sigmund Freud, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, anthropologists, and sociologists have produced a vast literature exploring the importance of parents. The ambivalent feelings of grown children are enormously complicated.

Our parents are never done with us. Some of us whose parents died years ago know that they are still part of our lives. Long after our parents are gone, we are still working with what they gave us—good and bad. The connections between child and parent are so deep that our parents’ influence can hardly be overestimated.

The first way for us to honor, to take seriously their influence, is with gratitude. This commandment is easier for some, because our parents were basically good. They were not perfect, but we are grateful for most of our memories and honoring our parents is reasonable. So those who still have their good parents try to be kind. We call. We visit. We do not bring up the subject they don’t want to talk about. We bring up the stories they never tire of telling.

For many, as parents age, a role reversal takes place.

Adult children are given the opportunity to order their lives and resources on behalf of their aging parents. We who received care from parents now get to care for them.

We show our gratitude in a variety of ways. A woman flies to California on a business trip. On the way home she goes out of her way to make a stop in Minneapolis. She rents a car and drives a hundred miles to visit her father.

A man is baking a cake, using his mother's recipe. He pauses to look at the familiar handwriting on the three-by-five card, and smiles at the memory of his gray-haired mother.

A surgeon completes a difficult operation and looks at the time. She knows her father's having a hard day on the anniversary of her mother's death. She slips around the corner to a quiet spot and leaves a message, "I'm thinking of you."

No matter what kind of parents we have, we can be grateful to the woman who endured intense pain to bring us into the world, no matter what else happened before or after our birth. That might have been the first and last good gift we got from either parent, but that much we received. We recognize their significance with gratitude.

And with forgiveness for the scars they left. The command to honor parents is not fair, because there is no escape clause for the children of undeserving parents. Some suffered at the hands of abusive parents—physically, sexually, emotionally. Some parents tyrannize their children, crush their spirits, and do damage that continues to the end of their children's lives. We are tempted to decide that we don't need to ever think of our parents again, but "I couldn't care less" is never the right response.

To curse our parents is to curse our own beginning.

This commandment doesn't say, "Honor your parents to the degree that they merit honor." The abusive parent may not deserve forgiveness, but the abused child deserves to get to forgive.

Even the best parents had moments when they talked when they should have listened, got angry when they should have been patient, criticized when they should have encouraged, said "no" when they should have said "yes" and "yes" when they should have said "no."

Do you remember *On Golden Pond*? Chelsea holds on to her resentment against the father she could never satisfy and the mother who never came to her defense. In a scene with her mother, she starts a well-rehearsed and much-used litany of complaints.

Some of you remember Katherine Hepburn reprimanding Jane Fonda: "Here we go again. You had a miserable childhood. Your father was overbearing. Your mother ignored you. What else is new? Don't you think everyone looks back on their childhood with some bitterness or regret about something? You're a big girl now, aren't you tired of it all? You have this unpleasant chip on your shoulder which is very unattractive. You only come home when I beg you to, and when you get home all you can do is be disagreeable about the past. Life marches by. I suggest you get on with it."

Chelsea finally sees that she does not have to drag this burden around forever. Maybe it is time to write a letter in which you lay out your resentment. Be honest and direct. Read it over. Make it more pointed. Revise it. Say it straight. Maybe share your letter with a trusted confidant. And then, about 99% of the time, the next thing to do is throw it away, and ask God to help you let go of the bitterness.

We know it is hard to forget a difficult past or a difficult present, but we need to move beyond resentment. The fifth command is realistic. It does not demand that children love their parents or even obey their parents. We recognize our parents' importance, because it is a measure of our understanding of grace.

The fifth commandment has an interesting place among the ten. The ancient rabbis taught that the commandments were divided on two tablets so that one contained those laws concerning our duty to God, and the other the laws concerning humanity.

The first five commandments include “worship no other gods,” “make no graven images,” “don’t take God’s name in vain.” The second five include “don’t murder,” “don’t commit adultery,” “don’t steal.” This commandment, “Honor your parents” is on the first tablet—the commandments about worshipping God.

The way we honor our parents is a test of our commitment to God. The way we respond to the people who brought us into the world is a measure of who we are. Our future is dependent on our acceptance of the past.

Do we live in gratitude for good parents or do we take the gifts we have been given for granted? If our parents have done more harm than help, do we live in bitterness for the hand we have been dealt or do we play our cards as best we can? Recognizing the importance of those who gave us our beginning is crucial. We are better off if we give our parents more gratitude than most would feel, more forgiveness than they deserve, and more acceptance than they could expect, because then there will be more grace for all of us.