The Second Table: Honor Your Father and Your Mother

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 20:1-17

Let's start off with a question. "Is it OK for parents to indoctrinate their children?" Is it OK to tell your children what to believe? I don't know what answer your thinking right now, but in my experience, most modern parents want to say "no" to that question. They instinctively feel that somehow it's wrong to indoctrinate kids.

They have support for their view. Just two years ago *Psychology Today* published an article "*Beware the Temptation to Indoctrinate Your Children*." The article said that a good parent raises their child to be an independent thinker. Children have to learn to choose for themselves, so in politics or religion or anything else what you ought to do is present all the options to children, present them fairly, and let the children choose. Here's a quote:

"*Make the best-case, not straw-man case, for opposing views. Ask your child which case is most persuasive and why. When they disagree with your position, it's tempting to jump in and defend it."*

But maybe it is better *"to remain silent" and "acknowledge the legitimacy of their perspective, or ask a question that might lead to more nuanced thinking."*

Does that sound familiar? Is that an approach that you've heard? I hear it a lot, and here's what I want us to see: contained in that kind of advice is a view of authority. There's a view of where authority comes from and who has ultimate authority over your life. Implicit in that advice is an idea of who gets to decide what's true and what's right. In that advice who has ultimate authority in deciding what's true and what's not and what a good life looks like? It's the individual. It's me. It's you. It's wrong to tell another person what to think. Every individual should be allowed to choose for themselves. The center of authority is the individual conscience, the individual person. You get to choose your life. You get to choose what you want to do and who you want to be! No one has the right to dictate your life!

That view is, I would argue, the <u>dominant cultural view</u> and it is communicated in both the progressive and conservative forms. Question Authority – something progressives say. "Don't tread on me!" Something you are more like to hear from conservatives. Both center authority on the self.

You hear it from leading cultural figures at commencement speeches. In 2005 Steve Jobs addressed the graduates at Stanford and said this:

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.

Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking.

Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice.

And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition."

Who's the authority in that paragraph? It's the individual. Steve Jobs is giving a little sermon against indoctrination. Steve Jobs is saying, "*Don't let anyone tell you what to do. Listen to your own inner voice, because that's where authority comes from."*

If that's the default view in our society, how does that fit with the fifth commandment? Not well. *"Honor your Father and your Mother that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."* In the Bible, authority isn't something that comes from listening to your heart or deciding for yourself. In the Bible, authority comes from God. It doesn't come from inside us; it comes from outside. In the Bible, authority comes from the God who made us. He's the one to whom we belong, and a life of flourishing comes from submitting to his ways.

God delegates his authority to people – to people and institutions. God appoints imperfect people and imperfect institutions as his agents. And the very first agents of God's will and authority in our lives are our Mother and Father, our parents.

Of course, the Bible also values our individual independence. Every human being is made in the image of God. Every human being has worth and dignity. In the Bible the small and the weak are beloved. God hears their cry. But while the individual is valuable, the individual is not their own boss. You do not belong to yourself; you belong body and soul, in life and in death to your faithful savior Jesus Christ. You don't find your way in the world by looking inside yourself and into your heart; you find your way by living in a community of fellow believers who look to the Lord.

So you have these two different ways of looking at authority. We are presented with two different versions of how to navigate life, two different ways of finding human flourishing. One says follow your heart and it will go well for you; the other says honor the teaching and authority that God gives to your Mother and Father, and it will go well for you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Depending on which path you choose, you will parent differently. If you see the child as a sovereign individual who finds her way by following her heart and looking inside herself, what kind of parenting will that produce? You will give love and support and encouragement. You will expose your child to lots of experiences and opportunities, but you won't give them much direction. And if someone else tries to give your child instruction that upsets your child, you will be inclined to take your child's side, because your child's heart must be guarded. You end up with parenting that is high in love and support, but low in authority and discipline.

But if you see the child as a valuable and beautiful individual who flourish when they are part of community and when they learn to submit themselves to God's way and God's will, when you understand that it's your job to teach them God's way and God's will, you will be loving and supportive and encouraging, but you will also direct your child. You will steer their life. You will, in many cases, compel them to do things. *'You are coming to church, whether you like it or not, young lady!'* Is that indoctrination? It's definitely values transmission. It's Proverbs 22:6 – "teach a child the way they should go." It's Deuteronomy 6, "These commandments I give to you today, teach them to your children." When you take the Biblical perspective on authority and human flourishing, you will parent with lots of support and encouragement, but also with lots of direction and discipleship and expectations.

'*Honor your Father and your Mother that it may go well for you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*." It's saying so much more than, "be nice to your Mom and Dad"; it's teaching us the shape of authority and offering us a path to human flourishing. As we think about this commandment, as we think about parents teaching their children God's ways, and as we think about what it means for children to honor their parents, let me say a few Biblical things.

We should expect the work to be messy. The parenting will be messy and the honoring will be messy. One of my favorite Sietze Buning poems is called '*Obedience*'. Sietze Buning was, of course, the alter-ego of former Calvin professor Stanley Wiersma. Dr. Wiersma wrote these poems that all come out of the experience of growing up Christian Reformed in Iowa in the 50's. Obedience is built around a story from Sietze's youth.

It's a Sunday morning in the harvest season. Father's oat crop was ready to be brought in, but not today, because today was Sunday – the Sabbath. A day of worship. It so happened that the weatherman had predicted a terrible storm for that Sunday morning. A severe thunderstorm, the kind that could flatten a crop. Sietze thinks that his dad should harvest the crops – after all didn't Jesus say that if your ox fell in a ditch it was OK to pull him out on the Sabbath?

His parents will have none of it. They go to church and so do the rest of the farmers. During the service, while they are singing the hymns they hear the storm start to rage outside. They sing the hymns extra loudly to be heard over the storm. "God be merciful to me, on your grace I rest my plea." The minister preaches a sermon "Five good reasons for Infant baptism." He makes no effort to keep it short. At the end of the service the power goes out and they sing the last hymn in the dark. On the way home they drive past his Father's flattened oat field, but Dad says, "I'm glad we went." And Mom says "Those Psalms never gave me such a lift as this morning." Sietze keeps quiet, but privately, he thinks they are crazy.

Years later, Sietze is now a middle-aged Father. He and his wife decide to move into a troubled neighborhood in the city. He and his wife want to make a difference in a difficult urban environment rather

than fleeing to the suburbs. His Father shakes his head at this. When he comes to Grand Rapids to visit, he asks Sietze why he lives in the inner city. Sietze reminds him of that morning of the storm. "Immediately he understood."

Later, as he reflects on that encounter with his Dad, he imagines his own children coming to him someday with an article from a sociologist who argues '*The Integrated Neighborhoods of 30 years ago, in spite of good intentions, impaired black self-image and delayed black independence*." Then I shall tell my sons about my Father and that Sunday morning, he says. Let me close with the end of the poem.

"*Fathers often fail to pass on to their sons their harvest customs*
for harvesting grain or real estate or anything.
No matter, so long as Fathers pass on to sons another more important pattern
defined as absolutely as muddlers like us can manage: Obedience."

Sietze's Mom and Dad may have got their Sabbath theology wrong, but they got something more important right: obedience.

I love that phrase: "muddlers like us." When we teach our children and when we honor our parents, we muddle. When you teach your children you do not do it with papal infallibility. You do it with love, you do it with your face turned towards God and you do it the best you can. When you honor your parents, you do it with love, you do it with your face turned toward God, and you do it the best you can. We muddle.

Calling us muddlers is as Biblical as can be. It's biblical both because the Bible teaches that we are imperfect creatures who see through a glass darkly. It's also Biblical because every family in the Bible muddles. Think about it. Can you name one family where the parents get this commandment right? Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel? How was that family? Messy. They were muddlers. Abraham's family? Definitely muddlers. Think about the whole Ishmael episode. Jacob's family? Extreme muddlers! They sold one of their brothers into slavery. David's family…we just had a sermon series on him. And we saw there how David was a model dad and his family was a picture of happiness. Nope. They were muddlers too. Even Mary and Joseph had their moments with Jesus, right?

So the Bible does this startling thing: It makes the family the first line of teaching, the first institution charged with passing God's truth from generation to generation, it gives the family an exalted role, and then it shows us this succession of messed up families. We see parents who don't do a great job of modelling and teaching God's ways. We see children who don't do a great job of honoring. And yet somehow God's kingdom moves forward, his salvation comes, his covenant remains intact.

Why do you think that is? Because God is in the midst of your muddling. Because God is in the midst of the muddle of your parenting and the muddle of your honoring and he's working all things for good. So long as there have been Christian parents, we have tried to love our kids and set boundaries for them, and God has taken our muddling and worked it by his grace. So long as there have been Christian children who honestly tried to honor their parents, God has taken our best attempts and worked them by his grace. He's doing it with you too.

Let me say a couple of things about the muddling. Sometimes parents will do such a poor job working out their responsibilities that children need to build distance into the relationship. When the relationship is relentlessly abusive and toxic, sometimes the child needs to build a safe distance. These cases are rare, but they are also real. I can't give you a set of rules for when that's the right call - these things need to be worked out in the messiness of individual cases, with much prayer. Even in those cases, even when a child cannot possibly honor the Father who abused her, she can still honor the institution of parenthood as God created it.

Second, let us all admit that we are muddlers. In our family relationships, both as parents and as children, let us be willing to admit when we are wrong and let us be quick to ask for forgiveness when we mess up. This is especially important for parents. One of the best things a parent can do for a child is to model admitting when you are wrong and asking for forgiveness when you mess up. If parents approach their parenting with an attitude of anxious perfectionism (or worse, stubborn perfectionism), they will raise anxious

perfectionists. It's so important that we teach our children how to muddle, and that God is working in the midst of our muddling.

I said that every family in the Bible was messy and muddled through. Actually that's not quite true. There is one family that gets it right. There is one parent who perfectly instructs and guides their child. There is one child who perfectly honors their parent. This Father loves his son with everything he has. He is proud of his son and tells him so – 'with you I am well pleased.' The Father also gives his son an incredibly difficult work to do, he has high standards for his boy. For his part, the Son loves the Father and trusts him completely. He does his Father's work and his obedience goes all the way to the end, when he lets himself be crucified for the sins of the world.

We belong to this Father. We belong to this Son. We belong to this family. Their perfect parenting fills up our weakness. We muddle, but the perfect work of the Father and the Son, pulls us muddlers along and give us the assurance that we will find our way home. ©Rev. Peter Jonker