
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 12: THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

18 LECTURES

REV. A.T. VERGUNST

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Lecture 12

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

God gave us power when He designed the earth to be ruled through His representatives. These authority structures God established are for our good. They are intended to keep our living space orderly and thereby happy. Since our fall power has become dangerous. Possessing it often leads to abusing it. Facing it often tempts us to resist it. Though none likes the abuse of power, we all are tempted to abuse it once we have it. Therefore the 5th commandment to honor those in authority as well as to use authority honorably is the key to prolonging a harmonious and satisfying life.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 12

Hello, friends. Today, we will consider together the fifth commandment. I have called the title of this subject *Honor God's Authority*. The fifth commandment is "Honor thy father and mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20:12), a crucial, important commandment. But, before we look at the fifth, let me share with you a fifth principle relating to the law of God. And, the principle states that we are not only bound to fulfill the law by ourselves, [but] we're also bound by the law of love to help others to obey the law as far as we are able to do so. And, there are various Scriptures that support that.

Let's first look even at the 10 Commandments [themselves]. In the fourth commandment, if I am the head of the home I am responsible that everyone in my home also honors the fourth commandment. Be it visitors, be it family members or workers or animals, they all are to rest. Another example would be Leviticus 19:17. God says, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, nor suffer sin upon him." I need to do everything that he will turn away from the sin he, or she, is doing. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus sets out the duty in a very positive manner. Listen to His summary: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Now, if you are running into a danger zone, and you don't see it, what would you like others to do but to help you to see the danger and stop you and turn you around. See, that's your duty too. That's my duty as I fulfill the law of love. The law of love extends itself beyond my own responsibilities. Whether our efforts will be rewarded or blessed, that's not our responsibility. Ours is the duty to love our neighbor as ourselves in seeking to prevent them from sinning. And again, friends, as we look at the whole of the background of the law of God, we can see the revelation of God's own devotional love to seek to let us live lives conformable to His holy law. And, that makes then perfect sense that we are to reflect that same attitude, effort, [and] intention as He is doing.

So, let's now consider the fifth commandment: Honor thy father and thy mother. This is the first of the second table. So, we ask ourselves, what is the reason that God started the second table with this fifth commandment of honor your father and mother? And second, what is the incentive that the Lord adds to this commandment?

That you may live long. It appears to say that. And thirdly, what are the details of the commandment? How do I honor? What is that?

So first, let's consider, what is the reason that God opens the second table of the law with the fifth commandment? There's the traditional view, at least, and I hold to that view as well that this is the first commandment of the second table, and that explains Ephesians 6 where Paul says that the fifth commandment is the first commandment with a promise. Now, that's only true if Paul is referring to it as the first commandment of the second table because there was a promise in the second commandment already.

However, some of Paul's Jewish colleagues didn't think that the fifth commandment was the first of the second table. They saw it as the fifth, the last one, of the first table. And that's an interesting view, which bears some truth to it because their reasoning was that in honoring all legal authority we honor God Who is delegating His authority to particular persons in authority. That would be fathers and mothers in the domestic realm. That would be rulers and teachers in the church realm. That would be governors and kings and so on in the civil realm. However, I hold to the traditional view that we can consider the fifth commandment as the first of the second table. But then, why did God start the second table with the fifth?

Because, that's the first reason, because God seeks to promote and protect our happiness as we live together as a group of people on His planet Earth. Nothing is more foundational and protective for the joy and happiness of our life here [than] that we abide in the authority structure that governs and is to govern our life here on earth. That's His design. God has designed an authority structure. From the very beginning of creation, He gave Adam dominion over the earth. He made Adam the head of his wife in the marriage. And God knows where, let's take family life [for an example], where the authority structure in family life is established and respected, where love and respect is given in the family authority structure, where clear boundaries of authority are established and maintained, there is the greatest happiness. Family [is] where not only the subjects *honor those in authority*, but [it is] also where those in authority reflect the One Who has delegated them with authority.

So, you see that the fifth commandment is a vital commandment when it comes to the happiness of our life together as human beings in a society. In God's book, the family unit ranks clearly as the highest or the most important of the group settings within our earthly existence. We know that family life is foundational to all other aspects of our social life. Family is the seminary of the church. Family is the training ground for future marriages. Family is the real preparatory place where we are nurtured for our position in society. Now, we've extended the school to that, not to replace the family but to expand the abilities of the family.

God knows that nothing so deeply influences our life as what we receive in our youth. Think of this verse, Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." God knows when children learn, trained in the early stages of life, how to honor authority, they will become honorable leaders themselves once they have grown up into adults. They will become respectable citizens, when they've learned to respect in the early stages of life, when children see the example of honorable leadership in their parents. And as they mature, they will, as it were, turn into arrows to fight the battle of the kingdom in the society in which they live or in their future marriages when they are in turn becoming parents.

So, let me conclude with one obvious statement that is good for us to be repeating in the days in which we live. What God has designed cannot and need not be improved. What do I mean? God defines in the fifth commandment family as a father and a mother and children. But what's obvious today [is that] many cultures face a troubling trend of redefining God's design. Children are to be nourished by a father, a male, and a mother, a female, instead of two of the same-sex parents. The fifth commandment establishes the basic foundation of the family and defines it as a father and a mother. That also means, of course, that children are to be generated within the marriage relationship. Therefore, single parenting is not God's design and ought not to be our choice on purpose, though sadly, that seems to happen a lot also in our days.

Now, let's now together consider what is the incentive that God gives us in the fifth commandment? "Honor thy father and mother: that thy days may be long in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." At first face value, this promise seems to suggest a long life to everyone that honors their parents. I'm sure we can all think of examples where that reality contradicts what we apparently read in the fifth commandment. As a pastor, I have buried very obedient children at a young age, and I see very disobedient children becoming very old. What does that mean?

These facts mean one of three things. One, God fails to fulfill His promise. Well, we can eliminate that. God is truth, and what He has spoken, He fulfills. The second [is] that God speaks in general terms. This is usually what happens, though of course in His sovereignty, there are exceptions. There's truth to that, but thirdly, is that God isn't speaking about individuals in the fifth commandment, but He is speaking about families and churches and societies. They will prosper with long, good existence of living when they honor authority structure as God has given it. And, I believe that is the intent of the incentive in the fifth commandment as you can see when you compare the Scriptures around this commandment in Deuteronomy. God promises that where this commandment is kept, both by those in authority and by those under authority, we will together experience, as families and as the larger society, the best and the longest quality of life together.

Listen to how Moses rewords the fifth commandment in Deuteronomy 5. He says, "that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth [thee]." And, if you look at the word *prolonged* in the Deuteronomy book, you find it is regularly used in reference to all other kinds of commandments. The point is [that] God says obedience will prolong life, will prolong security, unity, stability, harmony. So therefore, God promises when we honor authority structures as He has designed them, we will prolong a good quality of life in family and nation, and that may include also a longer life. Proverbs 14:34 states that "righteousness exalts the nation." And, that is not only true for nations. That is also true for families. That is also true for churches. Children that are taught to honor God by honoring their parents, by loving their siblings, by obeying God's precepts while young, these children grow up by the grace of God as responsible citizens, fighting for the causes of righteousness that exalts and ennobles all those who are in connection with them.

So then, let's look at the details of the fifth. Again, the fifth is much broader than I can cover in this little time period we have. Generally, we focus on the children in the fifth commandment. They are to obey, honor, their parents, but, friends, there are many layers of truth in the fifth commandment that need our attention. I can only highlight them by listing them.

First of all, it contains God's will that all who bear authority, parents, I'll see in a moment others, are doing that in reflection of how God carries out His authority. That's the first layer of the commandment. There is therefore instruction in the fifth commandment for parents, for husbands, who have authority over their spouse, their wife, church leaders, teachers, employers, government leaders, military leaders, political leaders. All of those have instruction in the fifth commandment [on] how to exercise their authority.

On the reverse side, it also contains instruction about how those under authority are to behave towards [those] in authority, and though the fifth commandment mentions children, there [are] many more that are included in the fifth commandment. Yes, it applies to the wife in marriage, to the children to their parents, the church members to their church leaders, children in school settings, citizens to their national leaders, employees or workers to their employers, soldiers to their ranking leaders above them. All of them are also addressed in the fifth commandment. Imagine what society would be like when everyone, both in leadership and under authority, would honor the fifth commandment in a godly manner. What a devotional loving and leading will there be seen by those in authority, and what an obedience and honor and respect will be given by those under authority. Can you see how that would generate a life that's prolonging in beauty and harmony, in health and well-being if that would be honored. Now, that's the intent of the fifth commandment.

So, I'll limit myself only now to two general observations. What is God's will for us toward those who are in authority over us, and what is God's will for us who have been given authority over others? Those are two general observations. So first, what are the three aspects of God's will in honoring those in authority?

First, that I recognize that God is pleased to rule me, or us, by the hand of delegated authority figures. Whether my parents, or whether my husband, or whether my president or my boss, each of these persons who is in an authority position over me [is] God's office-bearer. In my tradition, the word *office-bearers* is only used for elders, deacons, and ministers, but biblically, anyone in authority, no matter what layer, is God's office-bearer. They exercise authority. On whose behalf? On God's behalf. He is the ultimate lawgiver, the ultimate authority, in heaven and earth. And one day, each of these authority figures has to give an account to Him Whom they represent. I'll give you one example. When Paul is writing to the Romans about their governors, and these Romans are experiencing at this moment that there's some anti-Christian pressure placed by the governors upon the

believers, yet he writes, “show them honor, respect” Romans 13. “Honor the king” (I Peter 2:17), Peter wrote, likewise, even though the king was not serving the Lord.

So, that’s the first we need to recognize. God is pleased to rule then, as by their hands, my life. They are His office-bearers. Secondly, we are to honor them, honor God’s representatives or office-bearers in whatever position we meet them. To honor, that means to show respect, recognize the dignity of the office of the person. And notice what I said, “recognize the dignity of the office.” As a parent, as a father or a mother, or as a leader in a church, we are to respect the office because the word *honor* does not reflect to the person. I’m not to honor a person. That’s idolatry. I am to honor the office that a person has been given temporarily by God, as His delegate. Take David, for example. He did not esteem the person Saul when he was trying to kill him, but his heart smote him. His conscience bothered him when he did something dishonorable to Saul. Why? Because, he had touched the Lord’s anointed. He had done dishonorable action towards the Lord’s office-bearer.

So, we honor God’s office-bearers, be that your parents, be that your husband, your nation’s leaders, your church leaders, when we obey their instruction without question, when we accept their leadership without a challenge, when we heed their instruction or their guidance or their wisdom. We honor them when we show faithfulness and love towards them by helping them or encouraging them or comforting them or sharing our appreciation, making their task easier to carry out. All those are ways of honoring them. And, notice the fifth commandment doesn’t use the word *love*. Are we not to love them? Of course we are, but we are to express that love in respect to their office that God gave them.

However, there’s one exception. [In] Acts 5:29 Peter stated, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Never does anyone of us need to obey an authority figure who tells us to do something that is contrary to God’s revealed will. That applies to a child, a wife, a worker, a church member, and so on. And, each parent who is listening ought to think about this as you train your children. We are to teach our children that they are to always obey God rather than man. In my work as pastor, I deal a lot with abuse. And often, abuse happens because we haven’t trained our children to obey God rather than man. When we train our children that authority figures may not abuse their position of power and make children do, or involve children or anyone other under their authority, in sin. So, parents teach your children how to properly and respectfully appeal or disobey if it appears that they’re asked to do something that’s sinful.

Now, the third requirement with respect to those who are to honor them in authority is that we are to remember our office-bearers are human and are sinful. So, let us bear with their limits, weakness, and infirmities. None is perfect, also not those who are called to lead or to carry out God’s task of governing over the earth on His behalf. Sometimes those in authority may lack the correct understanding. They may not have as many abilities as you do. They may have some unpleasant characteristics. They may not be as successful in life as you are. They may not have the wisdom, perhaps that you may feel you have. And since they’re also sinners, from time to time, they fail. They may overestimate your ability in what they require, or there may be unholy anger flaring up in their action, or they may make an incorrect assessment or have an unfair judgment.

We are to honor them. It’s God’s will [that] we honor them in authority over us, and as the catechism again writes so beautifully, the Heidelberg Catechism, that we “patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.” And, friends, what a beautiful example do we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of Joseph and Mary. We read in Luke that He went down with them when He came to Nazareth, and He was subject unto them until he was 30 years old, and always respectfully honored His sinful father and mother, though He Himself was sinless.

Then, lastly, let’s look at what is God’s will for us who have been given authority, the other side of the fifth commandment. Now, God’s will is that in all my actions and all my reactions as an authority figure, I reflect Him in my authority exercised. God is pleased to govern a little portion of life on earth through my hand. It’s His earth. It’s His people. It’s His possessions, and He’s given me the stewardship, in my case as a father, over people; and I am in duty-bound to study what is God’s office bearing like? or what is God’s authority like? and how am I to reflect that?

So, as a husband, we’re duty-bound to study how Jesus is a husband to His spiritual wife, and so are we to reflect His headship in our marriage. As parents, we are to study how God parents mankind in general, and how the father parents his children. As a governor or as a king, we’re duty-bound to study how God is King over all

the nations and reflect His ruling in our ruling. And again, as church leaders, we are duty-bound to feed the flock in the spirit and in the manner of the great Shepherd, Who came not to be served, not for His own status, but He came to serve and to give Himself in the ministry of love. So again, as parents we have much in the fifth commandment, or as any other office-bearer position, to study what am I, how am I to be honorable in my position as leader?

Now, let me conclude, therefore, with pointing that God clearly warns parents, and am I wrong when I extend that to all those who are in authority, in Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3. God pointedly warns fathers not to abuse their positional power. And why? Because we would create rebellion or anger or discouragement within those who we are leading. In the opposite spectrum, Proverbs 29:15 also warns parents, and anyone in authority, not to neglect the use of discipline, and thereby spoil the child. “The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother and his father to shame,” and is that not true on every layer of authority.

So, as I close this lecture, friends, I hope you feel with me that I have barely touched the tip of an iceberg here. It is well said, “The hand that rocks the cradle, rocks the world.” Now, that may be a little overstated, but there’s a lot of truth in that statement. Our task as leaders is crucial for the next generation of leaders. If we fail to teach the present generation respect and honor of authority, and if we fail to be honorable authority, then indeed, we are sowing the seeds of anarchy and tyranny. How beautiful is the opposite when children learn to honor godly parents, when wives learn to respect loving husbands, sacrificial husbands, when citizens honor their serving leaders, when church members esteemed their leaders highly for their work’s sake. Then we will experience the beauty of holiness.

As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate in this beautiful harmony in Their divine existence, so also will we experience this beautiful harmony, unity, and beauty as we live together as humanity on this His earth. You can see again how David comes to say, “O how love I thy law! It is my meditation day and night” (Psalm 119:97). Thank you, and may God bless these instructions.