

“The Fifth Commandment: Honor your father and mother.”

Sermon for 24 July 2016

Texts: Isaiah 33:5-6; Exodus 20:12

The first task of getting at the text of Exodus 20:12 is that of escaping the gravitational pull of 21st century, cultural Christianity—of the Western/American version. This is, certainly, a regular challenge. We have to clear the smog of these cultural assumptions. I can not be exhaustive in this regard but here are four cultural emphases that we find ourselves imbedded in: 1. extreme individualism whereas the text has a more communal setting; 2. consumerism whereas in the day of Moses the people saw themselves as workers (even as slaves!) and as producers and not as primarily shoppers and economic ciphers (to be allured and targeted as “markets”); 3. persons as the needy psychological entities (as givers rather than takers, active as opposed to passive); and 4. the therapeutic model of coping with these presuppositions (the religious model of serving, worshipping and obeying God was in force). The therapeutic model assumes that people need affirmation, praise and constant maintenance to support their self-understanding in this world (the kind of support one can hire an empathetic counselor to supply—for a fee). I would be guilty of understatement if I suggested that this gravitational field is difficult to escape.

So, the first stage of our rocket ship must be something like getting our focus off ourselves. For instance in the Lord’s prayer, Jesus makes the first petition: **Hallowed be Thy name.** This is a superb treatment for the selfism in which we find ourselves enmeshed. We are rather like spider’s prey, wound in and immobilized by our cultural assumptions about me and my neediness. No, the first need that we have as the people of God—note, not as individuals—is to honor God. *We will make progress in honoring our father and mother is we start here!* We are created to be other-centered beings and being self-centered is stunningly perverse. We honor God by glorifying, exalting and praising His name—and not our own! We are not the center, God is. If we get our focus, all the follows makes better sense. As an illustration of this, we should consider Isaiah 33:

**The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness. Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, And the strength of salvation; The fear of the Lord is His treasure.**

Isaiah 33:5-6

Isaiah, speaking here as a public theologian (or as a prophet, if you will) directs this Word of the Lord to King Hezekiah. This Word comes as it were on the heels of an astonishing military deliverance. Jerusalem, surrounded by a vast, potent and proud army of Assyrian invaders, has been spared destruction. Sennachareb had taken the king’s tribute (which emptied the coffers and stripped the temple of its gold splendor) and gone back on his word! The emissaries of peace had been thwarted and the king betrayed—Hezekiah had come to the end of his resources, humanly speaking. *So he prayed.* (Not the noblest, or most astute leader apparently until then.) **The Lord heard and answered.** Consequently, the angel of the Lord struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand fierce warriors and reversed the tide of war marvelously—indeed

this signal defeat sent shock waves through the known world and pulled down the entire Assyrian Empire.

Sennachareb flees home, without his army, and, in addition to being humiliated on the battlefield, ends up being assassinated by his sons while worshipping in the temple of Nisrock his god. God is exalted when man is humiliated. Instead of death and destruction, Jerusalem, spared, is **filled with justice and righteousness**. This might well be the kind of encouragement we need in our country and world today. Conscientious parents wonder aloud about the wisdom of bringing their children into this world. (I know because some of them share their anxiety with me.) *But God reigns*. Despite the boasting of the Assyrians, despite their mockery of Israel's God and our God, Hezekiah, upon the heels of the wicked King Ahaz, returns the people to God, relies on God, finds his best defense in the worship of God—**The Lord is exalted**.

In the wake of such a revival, in the wake of such a turning to God, Isaiah declares deliverance: in this opening, in this moment of our time justice and righteousness, says Isaiah, **wisdom and knowledge will be the stability**, the foundation of social order and peace, if they are established now in the hour of this great salvation, **the strength of salvation!** So, build on this deliverance, build on it now and build on it well. However, or, yet still **the fear of the Lord is His treasure**. Isaiah is pressing upon the king the urgency of promoting the fear and worship of the Lord—because the Lord is our **great honor**, our safeguard for both kings and the people. The value of thinking about this moment in history is plain: there is more to life than our own little bubble!

Now the fifth commandment comes to us (with a promise): **Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you**. Another historical window, long before the age of the kings, Moses is declaring this to the nation Israel. It is before the land is occupied—and, as we know, that land is no longer occupied by Israelites—the monarchy, the temple and the priesthood are all obsolete, at least in the formal institutional shape they took for centuries. So, the question might arise, is there any purpose to this commandment? Why should we bother? It seems too parochial, too nationalistic. And I reply, the major point of this commandment is this: we exalt the Lord our God when we keep His commandments—that is still in force! It is rather neat that the promise of prosperity, and/or longevity is defunct. That means that *reverent submission can lead us to obedience*—without, as it were, any carrot! Our needs do not define us, or our times. God's purpose to magnify His Name, to be exalted in all the earth does.

I should be remiss if I passed this point without mentioning that in the a neighboring section, dealing with violence (Exodus 21:12-15), the issue of how we treat our parents is raised: first, **he who strikes his father or mother shall surely be put to death**. (v.15) and **he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death** (v.17). It certainly would appear that God was concerned to constrain elder abuse in the Law! These are things we ought not to do; they do not honor God, or our parents.

Our example in what to do is found in Jesus. He ascribed glory, honor, radiance, beauty, splendor and majesty to God and the apostles followed Him in this. The ultimate image of God's glory is found in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14). If we fix our eyes upon Jesus, we shall be transformed into the image bearer that we are created to be. We must not miss the transcultural truth here that God has always wanted His glorious holiness to fill the earth. From **be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth** (with godly offspring) **and subdue it to Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey, observe all the things that I have commanded you** form one seamless mission, or purpose.

We note that Jesus always honored our Father God. We must do that as well. However, beyond that we have the challenge of also honoring our earthly fathers and mothers—in a God-fearing and appropriate way. It is commanded so it cannot be evaded. There's the whole family piece involved. Our human family is a echo of the divine family we belong to as Christians. (We also have "fathers" and "mothers" in the church setting to honor. Our spiritual parents are deserving of honor, of reverent respect and, frankly, submission. We should do as directed by them to do.) Our efforts to honor our father and mother can be complicated by their enmeshment in the cultural assumptions that form the smog we breathe. Perhaps their childrearing was not as thoughtful, or biblically based as it could have been—perhaps, if we are parents, we have having difficulty with the same chores! But if we are going to do as the bible says, I am convinced we must do it with a biblical understanding—we must step past (or repudiate individualism, consumerism, and the needy cup syndrome which the psychological world imposes on our self-understanding.

So, in closing, I want to refer us back to John 4 where we were recently. This is the woman at the well incident. It illustrates for us, albeit in first century terms, or setting, the leaky love cup metaphor currently in use. She has come to draw water, probably with a leaky bucket, and Jesus has nothing, not even a cup to draw water with. This fact is something she notes. If we were to picture this woman in our town, we might say she is a classic example of someone looking for love in all the wrong places. She has had five husbands and the **one whom you now have is not your husband**. (John 4:18). We should leave it at the level of this being a reflection of her neediness—she went to men as she went to the well . . . to refresh and to replenish herself. She is probably selfish and probably driven by the fear of man. After all she has come out at noon to avoid detection, to be invisible. That would be safer for a woman of her experience. The imputation of adultery is not far off. The price for that would be death by stoning. What she does not realize is that she is presently being loved, with an abundant and everlasting love—a real love, a love that does not dishonor, or degrade or use her. It is probably a first for her. You see, the breakthrough comes for us when we realize that we do not need love as much as we need to love. **We need to love others** and we can only do that if **God first loves us**. When that occurs, as it does during this noon day exchange, we are changed utterly from a leaky love cup to **a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life**. She is transformed into a source of love, by the Lord of love and all she wants for that moment on is for everyone to meet this Jesus, the Messiah. She has become a fountain! Christians are fountains, not needy persons desperate for therapeutic assistance. And, of course, if honoring one's parents is

challenging through their sin, failure or Scriptural ignorance. we are not stymied! We can love our parents with the love which Christ has showered upon us. **Amen.**