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Appreciating our Indebtedness

Exodus 20:12

There is a story told about a decrepit old man, little better than an infant, whose son and daughter-in-law took him into their home because they could not afford to do anything else with him. Yet they considered the old man a great imposition and took every opportunity to humiliate him. The man was a messy eater, so during meals his son placed him in the kitchen, at his own little table, while the rest of the family ate in the dining room.

The old man had lost his powers of speech, but the wistful way he looked in at the family during meals let them know that he wished he could be included.

Then, one morning, the old man turned over his table and made a huge mess, enraging his son.

His son said to him, "You are a pig and I am going to treat you like a pig!"

Then the son went into his shop and made a trough into which he dumped his father's food, taking away his plate.

This son and his daughter also had a six-year-old boy whom they adored, and one day the father saw the little boy playing intently with blocks of wood, carefully arranging them.

"What are you doing, son?" the father asked.

"I'm building a trough so that I can feed you and mommy when I get big."

That night, at dinner, the old man was sitting at the table with the rest of the family.

The trough had been thrown away,

and if he made any messes from that time on, nobody ever mentioned them

The Fifth Commandment weds biology and theology.

The more complex the creature, the longer the period of maturation, the longer the period of dependence upon others for nurture and nourishment. That's biology. Theologically, the Fifth Commandment makes the point that the more complex the creature, the greater should be our appreciation for that indebtedness.

Yet the fact that God gives us an overt reminder to honor our indebtedness to our forebears suggests that the more complex the creature, not only the more complex its awareness of its heritage of indebtedness but the more complex its process of trying to express that appreciation.

The African beetle has no awareness of its indebtedness to forebears.

The African elephant does: it is a social creature somewhat aware that it has been nurtured by others.

Yet, for humanity, that most complex of creatures, our recognition and appreciation of our indebtedness to those who raised us is variable, multi-layered, often difficult to assess and express.

For the hard truth is, we possess the power to reject and rebel against our indebtedness.

If you want to know anything about any college in America, you need only to ask my wife Melissa.

She has been researching sundry universities since our boys reached about the seventh grade, and she turned up a most interesting fact about the University of Alabama:

it really believes in the power of groups. They expect their students to join some group!

Their extensive research has shown that students who join some kind of group, any kind of group, significantly academically out-perform their peers who do not. The school has even started

to track freshmen who have not joined a group, and after a few months it actually says to them,

"Join the kayak club or the chess club or the Baptist Student Union or the Tri-Delts – but join a group."

Why? Because the school realized that a group elicits from the student a higher level of performance than the student would accomplish without being subject to communal pressure.

In a sense the school is simply noting that we are creatures shaped by the influences of our indebtedness.

As a minister, I've spoken on morality and the building of ethical character all of my career, but I must concede that one's ethical character is not formed primarily by overt moral teaching.

Ethical character is primarily formed by community, by cultivating a sense of belonging.

The Fifth Commandment tacitly acknowledges that the most powerful and positive stimulus in shaping human behavior can be the impact and incentive provided by the family and by the clan, for the family and clan can surround a young life with a high standard of expectation that calls an individual to aspire achievement.

I look out at Dr. Jonnie McLeod of our congregation who has long had these words on her license plate: "Hold Fast." Where do those words come from? They come from a time-honored McLeod family motto: a McLeod holds fast. A McLeod is expected to hold fast to cherished principles even in the face of adversity. A McLeod holds fast! In times of difficulty the family expectation is for everyone to draw upon resources of faith and fortitude and perseverance.

A family elicits from the individual a greater yearning for achievement than could ever be possible alone.

"Honor your father and mother," intones the Fifth Commandment.

When I was a kid, I figured this advice was offered for the benefit of the parents. Now I know better.

The Fifth Commandment is not designed for the benefit of the honored; it is advice offered by our God for the benefit of those doing the honoring.

Lest we miss this point, the Commandment says,

"Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land."

One's longevity, one's aptitude for survival, is tied to one's capacity for honor.

I have been coaching and teaching young people for most of my life, and I can tell you from experience that no matter what a child's social or economic background might be, one distinguishing factor matters: *a child who has learned to respect his or her parents has a capacity for learning that others do not.*

The child that honors his or her parents has developed an ability to listen.

The child that honors his or her parents has developed the ability to follow instructions.

The child that honors his or her parents has developed the ability to interact with authority figures.

They know how to trust! In learning how to honor others, they learn how to learn.

Paradoxically, the beginning of creativity is developing the capacity for obedience.

I think of the writer George Eliot's brilliant observation: "Genius is mostly the ability to be taught. Genius is mostly the capacity to learn."

Every teacher here knows the truth of what I am trying to say.

The child who respects his/her parents develops a capacity for learning that other children do not possess.

Remember, the Fifth Commandment, like all the Commandments, is meant as a building block for creating a successful life.

One who develops the capacity to honor one's indebtedness has the ability to root his or her life in the depth of meaning in one's heritage.

Tolstoi once made this observation: "All happy families are alike."

He was making the shrewd statement that successful families pass down from one generation to the next a matrix of survival skills that allows young lives to embrace eternal virtues and avoid perennial vices.

However, it is also true that the nature of the family has changed over the course of the past fifty years.

Many of you in the older generation were raised on family farms where you served the purpose of an unpaid employee whose work was essential to bringing in the cash crop.

Everyone knew that cooperative participation was vital for the family's financial success.

That is generally not the case now.

However, in our complex world the family has become even more important.

We live in a modern world with its teeming masses that make people feel less significant, less meaningful, less human with each passing day.

The trend in our society is toward depersonalization.

Our society tries to strip us of our individuality; we become mere numbers.

Family fulfills the essential function of refuting our anonymity.
Family serves to help us regain our individuality and sense of purpose.
As Robert Frost put it – “home is where they have to take you in.”

“Honor your father and mother so that your days may be long in the land the Lord gives you.”
The principle of honoring one’s parents instills in us a respect for authority.
I know, of course, that respect for authority is a skill reviled in our culture. It is considered “uncool.”
Ours is a society that glorifies those who reject authority. Bumper stickers urge us to question authority.
But the truth is, we cannot improve any authority until we first respect it.
We cannot replace authority until we first grasp how authority seeks to function.
Our glorification of rebellion apart from respect for authority produces only rebellion for the sake of rebellion, resulting in not a better authority, nor an improved society, but chaos.
Only the child who learns to respect authority can change it.
Certainly, authority often abuses its privilege, and protests against authority have their place, but only someone who can respect authority has the capacity to challenge and transform it.
I admit, I speak as a parent as a preacher, an “authority figure,”
so perhaps my comments seem self-serving, yet I admit to you that authority figures, regardless of their communication skills, must admit that to some degree they are *inarticulate*.
What do I mean by this? I mean that authority figures try to communicate a great wealth of wisdom that is so true the authority figure cannot express it. The truth is so true as to be largely inexpressible.
Let me offer an example: I tell a seventeen-year-old driver that he needs to be home by eleven.
I know that I am going to hear a one-word response: Why?
Well, there are so many reasons why I want that child home by eleven.
There are so many things that could go wrong, so many wrong places that he could wander into by mistake, so many bad things that could happen, that I cannot say them all.
The truth I seek to impart is so self-evident to me that I cannot express it.
The wisdom that authority generally tries to express is so deep and true that we cannot fully communicate it.
So I fall back upon the time-honored maxim that parents have been using since Moses:
“Because I said so.”
The beginning of maturity is sensing to trust the wealth of inexpressible wisdom that inarticulate authority is trying to express.

When I think of the Fifth Commandment what comes to mind is a friend who enjoyed one of the best relationships with a father of anyone I’ve ever known.
He taught me a key parenting principle through what I’ve come to call “The Parable of the Rope.”
My friend was a somewhat wild rebel as a young adolescent, so his father came into his room one day carrying a rope. He handed his son a piece of the rope, while he held the bulk of it.
The father said, “Son, I am giving you a piece of this rope, but I am going to hold most of the rope myself. As you prove yourself more responsible and trustworthy, I will give you a little more rope of freedom.”
As my friend matured through middle and high school, the father would come in from time to time and symbolically give him more freedom and responsibility by handing over to him more and more rope.
This process continued into the son’s young adulthood until finally, on my friend’s wedding day, the father came into his room and said, “Son, today I give you all the rope.”
My friend thought for a moment and replied,
“Daddy, why don’t you hang on to just a little piece of that rope?”
My friend’s father has now passed from the earth,
but his son still “feels the rope” within him every day.

As the parents of college students, for one entire week now, I must say that I am wondering what will prove more expensive: our tuition costs or our cell phone bill.
The truth of the matter is, the phone bills are worth every cent.

It is interesting now to hear my children say back to us some of the things that we have been saying to them for the last few months, truths that never seemed to sink into their consciousness. All of sudden, now we are not there to say these truths, now they seem to be hearing them! Now that they are out of our household, it is nice to see my children beginning to honor their indebtedness. Perhaps Melissa and I don't seem quite so stupid to them as we did a few months ago. One of the reasons our Lord instructs us to honor our indebtedness is because when we trace our indebtedness back to its ultimate source, we find that it roots in God. Thus, the honoring of our indebtedness to our parents becomes a paradigm for our honoring of our indebtedness to God. To paraphrase John, we cannot honor the Parent we cannot see, without first learning to honor the parents we can see. We go through stages in life where we think of God and our parents as mere rule-givers, dictators who are always saying, "Thou shalt not! Do this! Do not do this! Do that! Do not do that!" But we eventually emerge from that stage of understanding. The more we come to honor our parents, both our heavenly Parent and our earthly ones, the more we come to realize that what they say to us they say in love. And their words come to abide in us as the counsel of a friend. That is how it should be. "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land the Lord gives you."

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Sixth in a Series