

Honor your parents. Do not kill.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

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Exodus 20:12-13 (CEB)

¹²Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³Do not kill.

Ruth 1:1-5 (CEB)

During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab. ²The name of that man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and settled there.

³But Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. Then only she was left, along with her two sons. ⁴They took wives for themselves, Moabite women; the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth. And they lived there for about ten years.

⁵But both of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband.

[After the deaths of her husband and both sons, Naomi decided to return to Israel, her home. Her daughters-in-law accompanied her for awhile. But Naomi told the two young women to stay in Moab, so Orpah turned around and headed home.]

¹⁴Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. ¹⁵Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."

¹⁸When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

Matthew 5:21-26 (CEB)

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell. ²³Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. ²⁵Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

God's commandments move from loving God to loving others.

As we've seen in this series, the Ten Commandments can best be understood by seeing that they begin to set forth what it means to love God (the first tablet) and to love our neighbor (the second tablet). This week, we turn to the second tablet in the fifth and sixth commandments. (Remember, we looked at the seventh and eighth last week.)

Honor your mother and your father

In a way, the fifth commandment bridges the two tablets, for honoring our parents is derived from our honoring of God. We are children of God and of our parents – we are

given life by both. We are nurtured and cared for by both. We will always be God's and we will always be our parent's children. Martin Luther wrote:

If we had no father and mother, we should wish, on account of the commandments, that God would set up a block or a stone which we might call father and mother. How much more, when he has given us living parents, should we be happy to show them honor and obedience. For we know that it is highly pleasing to divine Majesty and all the angels, that it vexes all the devils, and, besides, that it is the greatest work that we can do, next to the sublime worship of God described in the previous commandments. . . . For God has exalted this estate of parents above all others; indeed, he has appointed it to be his representative on earth. (*The Large Catechism*, 26)¹

We could talk along time about what it means to honor you parents, but I know no better way than to consider the story of Naomi and Ruth. Honoring our parents is not limited to our birth parents, includes those deep and abiding relations that come to be truly familial – parent and child.

Naomi and Ruth

The story of Naomi (and it is Naomi's story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth's faithful devotion, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah² and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Now, Naomi's sons were dead and the three widows were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.³ Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own – it is a pledge from daughter to mother. "Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." Thus, Ruth binds herself to Naomi and will honor Naomi. Ruth will be brought into Naomi's family and worship Naomi's god.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, this newly-created mother and daughter set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant "sweetness," even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for "bitter." Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their

¹ Quoted in Hauerwas, Stanley; Willimon, William H. (2010-08-01). *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (p. 68). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

² Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn't it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

³In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman's social standing was derived entirely from her husband's. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God's insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus' day, widows didn't have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43).

union comes about is a touching, and somewhat complicated, story that consumes much of the book.

After the marriage, we are told that “when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth’s son, would be Naomi’s redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.” This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole. Naomi is now a grandmother – she is in a place she never imagined possible after the deaths of her sons.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by grandma Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God’s people, making them (us!) whole.

This story should help us to understand two points when it comes to honoring our parents. First, this commandment, like the others, is given to God’s family and is meant to shape our lives within that family. With respect to this commandment, the Apostle Paul writes, “As for children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it is right. The commandment ‘Honor your father and mother’ is the first one with a promise attached: ‘so that things will go well for you, and you will live for a long time in the land.’ As for parents, don’t provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4). Thus, Paul reminds the Christians that the commandments are given to those who are “in the Lord” and need to be lived out in the light of Christ.

Second, God does not command blind submissiveness to one’s parents. For many Christians who desire to honor their parents, it is very hard to know what that really entails. Do we just do what they want us to do? What about when our parents grow less able to care for themselves? The well-known Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, helps us in this:

The fifth commandment concerns the struggle between the generations, a struggle that is inherently filled with tension (v. 12). On the one hand, there can be a kind of traditionalism that submits excessively to “the way we were.” On the other hand, there can be a one-generation narcissism that imagines nothing important happened until “us.” That intergenerational tension requires a seriousness that does not simply capitulate but that honors in freedom and response. In the angel’s announcement to Zechariah, a remarkable transposition of the relation of the generations is anticipated: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17 NRSV).

Here it is not the children who submit to the parents, but the parents who are “turned” to the children. This assertion of the angel does not override Moses’ command. Rather, the two statements are in tension, and adjudication requires that both parties, parents and children, must be engaged in the process. The commandment precludes a new generation that disregards the parents and does not give them due weight. The angel’s poem precludes a blind, mechanical submissiveness of children to parents. “Honor” is a more delicate, transactive maneuver, whereby both parties grow in dignity through the process.⁴

Do Not Kill

I often get the question, is it “kill” or “murder”? The answer is that the Hebrew verb here can mean either. Ok, you say – then what is the point of the commandment? The

⁴ Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 849–850). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

key here is to remember that these commandments are given to the community of God's people, not to individuals. Among the Israelites, there can be no killing that is not approved by the community – in other words, no murder, as we usually use the word. Importantly, in the community of the Israelites, there is to be no personal vengeance. All life is given by God and needs to be cherished as such. All life is to be protected. Any life taken is to be taken with the sanction of the community, which must strive to always love God and love neighbor even as the people make their way through a fallen, broken, and violent world. Brueggemann again:

The prohibition on killing asserts that human life is valuable to God, and under God's protective custody (v. 13). No doubt distinctions and differentiations are to be made in enacting this command. The most obvious of these now before us concern capital punishment, war, euthanasia, and abortion. The interpretive community is of no single mind on these great questions, and no consensus is in prospect. The commandment itself states a non-negotiable principle and nothing more. That, however, is a great deal in a society where life is cheap, where technology is impersonal, where economic greed is unbridled, where bombs are "smart," and where ideology is powerful. The murder that makes the newspapers signifies a breakdown of the human infrastructure, which legitimates brutality. The murder behind the headlines—i.e., the killing that happens a little at a time, mostly unnoticed and unacknowledged—is kept ideologically obscure. Such slow, unnoticed destruction diminishes human life among those not powerful enough to defend themselves. The interpretive issue may be this: If human life is precious, what public policies are required in order to enhance and protect it? The old-fashioned responses of employment, housing, and health care are not remote from this command. Calvin counts on the positive application of this command, "that we should not only live at peace with men ... but also should aid, as far as we can, the miserable who are unjustly oppressed, and should endeavor to resist the wicked, lest they should injure men."

Jesus intensified the command to include anger (Matt 5:21–26; cf. 1 John 3:15). One wonders whether in our society Jesus might have focused not on anger but on cynical indifference that is sanctified by a greedy, uncaring individualism that is in its own way killing.⁵

May we hear Jesus well on this. All the commandments really speak to the state of our hearts. Granted there is a difference between murdering my neighbor and merely wanting to. Nonetheless, the desire to harm is like a poison that can ruin us and wreck our lives.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. My generation is learning the challenges that come with honoring and caring for aging parents. You might share a few personal stories that speak to these challenges. So often, we think we know what God wants from us, but we're not really sure what it means in the day-to-day realities of life. What do you think it means to honor your parents throughout your life . . . and theirs?
2. Sadly, some people experience angry, abusive parents. What might it mean to honor your mother or father in such a case? What might be the path of forgiveness and reconciliation? What do you think Paul means when he places the fifth commandment in the context of being "in the Lord?"
3. What are some ways that we can all protect and cherish life? How might we be complicit in the cheapening, degradation, and even destruction of life? How does this commandment figure into our making of war and ensuring of peace? What might it mean that this commandment is given to the community of God's people and not to the world at large? How might that shape our understanding of the sixth commandment?

⁵ Ibid.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Ruth 1-2 Naomi heads to Moab and makes a new life, the return, and the struggle to survive.</p>	<p>Tuesday Ruth 3-4 Survival, redemption, and renewal are the future.</p>
<p>Wednesday Matthew 5 Jesus brings the Law to the people in this Sermon on the Mount.</p>	<p>Thursday Matthew 6 Jesus' teachings on prayer, fasting, and earthly treasures</p>
<p>Friday Matthew 7 More of Jesus' instruction on the importance of choosing God and God's way.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

