

## **The Ten Commandments - 4**

Few of the Commandments are more direct and to the point than the fourth, which reads, "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you". It occurs again in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 3, slightly differently worded, "Each of you must respect his mother and father"

In dealing with the Commandment concerning the Sabbath Day, I spoke of the Lord's constant conflict with the leaders of the Jews over their narrow and totally legalistic approach to proper observance of that day. I spoke of the multitude of rules which had been drawn up and how it was that everything was defined, down to the actual distance one could travel, the meals which must not be prepared, and the burdens which were not to be carried. They were horrified that the Lord healed on the Sabbath (for that, too, was forbidden) and that His disciples walked through a corn field on the Sabbath and picked and ate the grain as they went. (Luke 6). Inevitably, the Lord found it necessary to challenge this rigid adherence of man-made rules and regulations and to point out that this kind of approach was neither wanted nor involved.

So too did the Lord take issue with some of the leaders of the Jews in regard to their attitude to this Commandment. Sanctioned by the Scribes and Pharisees (for they stood to profit by it) a person could avoid their obligation to their parents by declaring their goods and property formally dedicated to God. This didn't mean they couldn't go on enjoying them or that they had to surrender ownership of them. It was nothing more than a subtle way of escaping expenses that might otherwise be incurred on behalf of aged parents. "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men". (Matthew 15, 7-9)

In one other place in the New Testament, this Commandment concerning parents is spoken of and it deserves special mention. In Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians, chapter 6, he wrote, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother — which is the first commandment with a promise — that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Both sides of the parent child relationship are touched upon here. As well as the duty of children to parents, Paul also speaks of the duty of parents to children. Both aspects are brought forward. And since we are concerned with such a sensitive area of human relationships I suggest we do well to look at each in turn.

As parents nothing is more important for us than to remember that our children are not our own. They are the Lord's. Through conception and birth they are placed in our care and entrusted to us. But they do not ever become exclusively "ours". And once in our care heavy responsibilities rest upon us, not only that they be fed and clothed to the best of our ability, that their health be safe guarded, and that they be properly educated, but also, they be led to know and love the Lord and to see the need for living their lives according to the teaching He has given us. There is both the material and spiritual welfare of our children to be borne in mind. Both are to be safeguarded and we do not properly discharge our parental responsibilities unless they are.

Many argue that so far as religion and spiritual things are concerned they will leave this to the decision of the child when he or she grows up. They make the astonishing statement that they would not want to impose their beliefs and religious outlook (if they have any) on their children, despite the fact that they are constantly impressing their children with their own cultural, moral and political values and cannot help doing so. So far as religion is concerned they forget that the child is going to make up his or her mind anyway. No one can impose religion on a person, not even in the parent child relationship. In time the child will demand to make up its own mind about the matter. It is inborn in them that they must think these things out for themselves.

But how do they get on if they know no religious values? How can they make a decision about something they know nothing of? Parents talk of them deciding things for themselves later when they are grown up. But on what basis could a decision be made? In any case the attitude totally ignores the fact that the directions of adult life are largely formulated in the earlier years of infancy and childhood. As parents, we exercise extremely far reaching influences over our children, and if that influence has been non-committal insofar as religion is concerned, or even anti-religious, can we really expect our children to readily shake that influence off and make a balanced judgement about the matter? I am impressed by a statement Swedenborg made, one which any of us who are in contact with children does well to remember: "Whatever a person from their first infancy thinks, wills, speaks, and does, adds itself to their life. While these things can be removed (though sometimes only with difficulty) they

cannot be exterminated." (Arcana Celestia 9333)

That parent who worthily fulfils their responsibilities will have these things in mind. Material welfare is one thing. Much more important, however, is their child's spiritual welfare. Worldly success is one thing. But much more important is that our children come to know and love the Lord and that their highest aspirations be in terms of service to their fellow man.

In view of what is done for them, in view of the role they must play and the authority they must exercise, it is right that children should honour their parents. They must be brought up to obey them and to accept the fact that parental experience and understanding must prevail over their own impulses and often insufficiently thought out wants and desires. Necessarily, they have got to accept the limitations of their youthful state, their inexperience of life and lack of understanding of people in general.

Nevertheless, such courtesy and respect cannot by itself be arbitrarily insisted upon. Most definitely as children grow older. A parent must earn the right to be obeyed by the obvious example of his or her own life. They cannot expect respect when they have done nothing to win it. If there would be consultation there must be sympathy and understanding. It's no use a parent loftily dictating to their children and expecting them in turn, to want to consult about matters. And in too many homes parents and children are almost strangers to one another. They have never developed the art of communicating. Too many parents fail to look upon their children as developing and independent personalities in their own right. And in the eyes of many young people parents are somewhat remote and busy figures who never try to look at life from their point of view.

Not surprisingly many look upon this Commandment as having special application for us only in our earlier years, especially while we are children and as adults, so long as our parents are alive. But this is far from so. Because of the deeper levels of meaning within it this Commandment is of universal application and it is binding not only on people in this world, of all ages, but on the angels of heaven as well who know no earthly parents and cannot be required, to honour their father and mother according to the flesh.

In the light of its deeper, spiritual meaning, this most familiar of all Commandment

takes us beyond earthly parents and family ties and speaks of adoration and love of God and devotion to the Church (Ohdner). For these are our spiritual parents. God is our heavenly Father. "Do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven" Matthew 23:9. And what words are more familiar to us than these? "Our Father, who art in the heavens." And the Church is our spiritual mother, for it feeds our spirits and clothes our minds. As our earthly mothers nourish our bodies and care for our welfare, so the Church, our spiritual mother, nourishes us spiritually and is constantly caring for our eternal well being.

The Commandment is of universal application. It has relevance for us all, old or young, whether we are in this world or have become angels of heaven. All of us need to be reminded to love and honour the Lord God, our heavenly Father, and the Church, our spiritual mother, which so cares for us in the way it does.

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