

The Ten Commandments

The fifth article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



5th Commandment:

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

The fifth commandment is the first to have a promise attached to it, providing a “cause and effect” in our human actions. “Length of days” is a result of honouring your father and mother. The commandment has origins in the area of social control and the good ordering of society as is evidenced by the punishment which failure to honour attracts, for example:

"If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you" Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (KJV)

"And he that smiteth his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death ... And he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death." Exodus 21:15,17 (KJV)

We may be chary here about the impact of this punitive background, aware that violence towards children is endemic in our Christian history and clearly sanctioned by Holy Scripture. This is a reminder that reading the Bible has to be undertaken with resort to other resources such as common sense, the body of professional opinion about human behaviour and compassion for our fellow human beings, especially the smaller ones!

It is a matter of some shame that people have in the past justified the infliction of physical pain on children by references to the Bible, and a matter of urgent concern

that this is still the case in parts of the world including our own country. It is a shocking fact that in our country we still need the NSPCC and there is a need for a Child Line telephone service to combat child abuse. It is a matter of regret that some people have read the Bible and hurt children as a result.

We may move swiftly on from this punitive background, remembering that we are now being deliberately and consciously selective in how we read Scriptures, selective for very good and theologically sound reasons. A reading of the Bible in which all texts are regarded as equally inspired leads only to mayhem and chaos, theologically and often in real life too.

This commandment may be interpreted today as part of the general provision of a healthy and caring society which pays proper attention to the needs of every aspect of human life including the



older generation. The commandment is predicated from the belief that those who have brought new life to birth and nurtured the young into successful adult life should be treated with honour and respect by the recipients of their parenting work, and by implication, they should also be cared for in old age by the provision of decent pensions, housing and health care.



This commandment is linked with the gift of God of a place, a land, for the people of Israel to live in and reflects the care which God gives to his people, a care which the people are duty bound to pass on to others. It starts with the family in which young and old alike are cared for appropriately. In times and conditions where there is no pension provision, the family became its own “welfare state” and so having a large number of children was a priority to keep the extended family afloat.

It all sounds obvious, especially to those who are already well advanced in years. So why did such an issue find itself a place in the Ten Commandments? Because older people are not

always cared for by the younger generation and are often among the poorest people in society, living with loss of dignity and under financial pressures which are difficult to deal with, having lost the power to dig for their own food or in modern terms, earn money in work. In the modern world, the old are often seen as pointless, having done their work and now of no further value. The fact this issue appears as one of the ten commandments would indicate that this pushing aside of the elderly is not just a modern phenomenon! It is a harsh view of old age, but it is frequently encountered.

Those who are still young will find it difficult to appreciate just how vulnerable old people can become and feel. The ageing process is inexorable and it can be seriously disabling. For example, and on a very simple matter, without spectacles, many older people would find reading and seeing some things impossible. In the past this would have made aspects of life very worrying for the elderly. The problems associated with old age such as arthritis make physical movement painful. Losing mobility makes life a constant battle. By no means all, but many older people become vulnerable to the activities of the unscrupulous and may be targeted for financial or physical abuse. This can be through sharp sales practices or simply through attacks and robbery on the streets or in the home. They suffer the indignity of needing attack alarms and door chains. The loss of faculties is difficult to cope with and can lead to many problems.



Who cares?

The commandment requires the children to care. It is quite a difficult requirement to meet. Younger generations frequently encounter differences with their parents which make close relationships difficult to maintain. Some fall out permanently and live as though they had no relatives. Others find their children die before them and can be left isolated with nobody to care for them.

But there are problems for those who try to care for their parents on their own or in their own homes. Modern housing doesn't help because smaller rooms and houses lead to less privacy and more stress. For many older people, care becomes a significant issue and to respond, their children would need to give up their paid employment which may be impossible to do without severe hardship. The provision of a "granny flat" can be very beneficial, but even this can become impossible to maintain because of the on-set of dementia.



"Dementia"

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Yes, there is dementia, one of the cruellest tricks played on the human race by our failing brains. An old person living in the throes of dementia is almost impossible to live with, especially if there are small children involved in the same house as well. For such people and for those requiring professional 24 hour care, many feel that it is appropriate honouring for their needs to be met in a care home, despite the feeling that they might have of being abandoned. There are a few brave souls who see it through to the bitter end, but that end is often very bitter and the cost to the individual involved can be very great indeed.

Our society has tried to fulfil the obligation to honour our collective mothers and fathers by a care system funded through taxation, and although it may be less than adequate in places, it does offer some kind of communal response to the 5th commandment.

But what about those unfortunate people whose parents have wronged them, neglected them, disowned them or proved themselves unfit and unacceptable parents? How can this commandment be fulfilled for such difficult cases? In the end, we know that we are all part of something bigger than our own immediate family. We are truly of the same family, that "family of man" celebrated in the famous song. Our common humanity, transcending race and religion, creates a common care and so a common purse will need to provide for the more difficult cases.

Honouring one's mother and father should always be held in balance with honouring their need to live their own lives to the full. The implication of "honouring" should not be that their life is seen now as more-or-less over!

To the younger generation, the older generation would like to say, "Thanks for the honouring, but we also have a lot of life to lead and make the most of, now that you are independent!"

