The Fifth Commandment: Honor your father and mother

Q. 123. WHICH IS THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT? (WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM)

A. The fifth commandment is, Honor thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God gives thee.

Q. 124. WHO ARE MEANT BY FATHER AND MOTHER IN THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT?

A. By father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.

Q. 125. WHY ARE SUPERIORS STYLED FATHER AND MOTHER?

A. Superiors are styled father and mother, both to teach them in all duties toward their inferiors, like natural parents, to express love and tenderness to them, according to their several relations; and to work inferiors to a greater willingness and cheerfulness in performing their duties to their superiors, as to their parents.

Q. 126. WHAT IS THE GENERAL SCOPE OF THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT?

A. The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals.

Q. 127. WHAT IS THE HONOR THAT INFERIORS OWE TO THEIR SUPERIORS?
A. The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honor to them and to their government.

Q. 128. **WHAT ARE THE SINS OF INFERIORS AGAINST THEIR SUPERIORS?**

A. The sins of inferiors against their superiors are, all neglect of the duties required toward them; envying at, contempt of, and rebellion against, their persons and places, in their lawful counsels, commands, and corrections; cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage, as proves a shame and dishonor to them and their government.

Q. 129. **WHAT IS REQUIRED OF SUPERIORS TOWARDS THEIR INFERIORS?**

A. It is required of superiors, according to that power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors; to instruct, counsel, and admonish them; countenancing, commending, and rewarding such as do well; and discountenancing, reproving, and chastising such as do ill; protecting, and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body: and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God, honor to themselves, and so to preserve that authority which God has put upon them.

Q. 130. **WHAT ARE THE SINS OF SUPERIORS?**

A. The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them, an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure; commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them unduly; careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger; provoking them to wrath; or any way dishonoring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behavior.

Q. 131. **WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF EQUALS?**

A. The duties of equals are, to regard the dignity and worth of each other, in giving honor to go one before another; and to rejoice in each other's gifts and advancement, as their own.

Q. 132. **WHAT ARE THE SINS OF EQUALS?**

A. The sins of equals are, besides the neglect of the duties required, the undervaluing of the worth, envying the gifts, grieving at the advancement of prosperity one of another; and usurping preeminence one over another.

Q. 133. **WHAT IS THE REASON ANNEXED TO THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT, THE MORE TO ENFORCE IT?**
A. The reason annexed to the fifth commandment, in these words, That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God gives thee, is an express promise of long life and prosperity, as far as it shall serve for God's glory and their own good, to all such as keep this commandment.

**General Principles**

**BOTH FATHER AND MOTHER**

Although husband must lead the wife, children must show *equal* honor to both mother and father.

**THE ROLE OF PARENTS**

Deut. 6:6-7—

Proverbs (cf. Paul and Timothy; Jesus and disciples)

**PARENTHOOD AND FREEDOM**

First freedom, then commands...

**THE COMMAND WITH A PROMISE**

Not absolutized (Psalm 90:10)—

Not downplayed (Ephesians 6:1-3)—

**Specific Applications**

Parenthood and discipline

Discipline is thus important, not to let off steam, but applied in wisdom as effective medicine. Proverbs indicates that discipline is life-saving! Commands that aren't supported by discipline become empty and ineffective (eg Eli!). Punishment is painful, but brings fruits later.

It is naive to allow children to make important life choices on their own. During childhood years, very significant decisions with lifelong consequences are being made *for* the children and not *by* the children (eg by taking the family to church, reading the Bible). We should thus not give plenty of freedom, for one is truly free only when he loves God and keeps His commandments. Parents commit themselves to this kind of child-rearing at baptism.

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Even so, things can go differently, that children follow evil in spite of their good upbringing. Faith is a gift of grace, and children must believe for themselves. Further, in our modern world there are limits: a rebellious son can't be stoned as he would be in Israel. Yet the underlying principle remains: He who despises the freedom God gives by disobeying parents is foolish, committing a serious sin, and is playing with his life.

**Honoring parents**

Someone who must be honored is someone of weight ("honor" = "heavy"). God places parents above children, and so they share some of the glory/honor belonging to God. The opposite of respect is disrespect, where something weighty is treated as if it were light. This is a serious wickedness, since we must always continue to honor our parents, even if they become old and useless.

Honoring parents involves several things:

1. Taking to heart their instruction.
2. Show deference toward them, by language and forms of address.
3. Loving them.
4. Being faithful, also providing for them (financially, spiritually) in their old age.

**Honoring parents and choosing a spouse**

Older commentaries speak about the parents' task with respect to their children's courtship and choice of marriage partner. Often there is conflict between parents and children regarding dating and marriage. In the past, the influence of parents in this choice was far greater. Although we don't have arranged marriages today, parents do have a say about such a serious decision in their child's life. Children must not see it as strictly private matters beyond parental control. Parents do have a right to be involved in the choice, especially when they see their child take a wrong spiritual turn in dating. Children honor their parents by accepting correction when their parents warn against making wrong choices (eg mixed courtships). Even if the parents are wrong by not accepting a proper partner, one must respect them by discussing openly and honestly with them, and by being as patient as possible.

**The limits and style of obedience**

There are limits to the obedience that children must give. God stands over the parents, and sometimes children must choose for Him and against their parents. For example, when parents don't teach their children about God and His service, children are not obligated to follow the instruction of their parents. We must love Jesus more than father and mother, says Christ. Obviously one should not too quickly deny obedience to one's parents.

This can happen when someone from a secular home comes to faith in Christ as an adult. Paul said it was possible for an unbeliever and believer to stay in a marriage (1Cor 7:12-16), and so also a spiritual rift need not entail cutting all natural ties. Wisdom is needed in honestly expressing one's faith convictions while seeking at the same time to maintain family relationships.

Sometimes children are abused. Generally speaking, however, problems between parents and children are rarely of the kind where a choice "for or against Christ" is required. Parents have weaknesses and inadequacies,
with which children must be patient. When they get older, children must realize that all parents are sinners, and so within the families children must learn patience and accept the fact that also parents have faults.

The limit of obedience thus is that children must obey their parents "in the Lord", ie as long as it is not against the Lord. The style of obedience is also "in the Lord", accepting parents with their weaknesses, just as Christ did. Honoring our parents means we must thus be willing to endure a lot.

Other forms of authority

Can we exegetically defend including "all in authority over me" (eg government, elder, teacher)? The Biblical concept of "father" allows this, for the term "father" could apply also to elders, the king, etc. In these relationships of authority, the concept of fatherhood indicates the possession of wisdom and insight. The honor due to father and mother must therefore be given to all those other "fathers" and "mothers". The elderly, the king, etc are all to be shown deference and honour.

The honor due to parents, the elderly, judges, princes, and teachers includes the duty to obey. For example, after mentioning this commandment, Paul speaks about the obedience that slaves must give to their masters, wives to husbands, children to parents, etc. Although authority today is less patriarchal, honor and obedience must still be given to those who exercise authority.

Different forms, different words

The husband wife relation has now changed, and wives no longer call their husbands "lord" as Sarah did. Although "obey" is no longer in the Dutch form for marriage, the term "follow" contains the notion of a certain rank and authority relationship. Although the fundamental structure remains, cultural changes can necessitate choosing other words.

We see similar changes in the master-servant relationship, and although the texture of the relationship has changed, the concept of authority in the employer-employee relationship remains.

Although authority relationships in the political sphere have changed with democracy, yet a government still rules the people, and an authority relationship remains.

We must take the changes that have taken place into account in our usage. Although we can use terms like "subjection" in the context of parent-child relations, we don't use it anymore in the context of husband-wife relations. Similar remarks can be made about the employer-employee relationship.

Authority and power

The concepts of authority and power aren't identical: one can possess authority without having the power needed for carrying out his authority (Dutch queen during war). The reverse is also possible.

Power is in itself not bad, but good and necessary. Although it can be abused, in itself it is not brutal or demonic, eg we speak about the power of the word, of love, of numbers. Power is necessary and wholesome for the proper development of society. Defined, it is "the ability to do something."
Authority, defined, is "the authorization for the (appropriate) use of power."

1. It must be "appropriate", ie have a serving character. Those in authority must use their authority appropriately, that is, it must be functional. Is it still authority if it is not used appropriately? Yes. Authority is thus misused, but the authorization for using power is still there. Parents don't become ex-parents by raising their children inappropriately. Of course, no earthly power is absolute, and can be stripped. There are means in which the authority of parents, office-bearers and governments can have their power taken away.

2. Authority must also be limited by its purpose. eg an employee is only under the authority of his employer during working hours. In this sense, authority is always a limited authority. Even though all authority comes from God, it is not thus untouchable - it has either a wide and narrow scope, of long or short duration.

As such, those who possess authority should be respected, even if they are unable to use their power appropriately.

Max Weber (1864-1920) distinguished between authority:

   a. Charismatic authority characterizes the prophet, hero or leader who speaks to the heart of the people. This authority is easy.
   b. Traditional authority rests upon "sacred" traditions, such as caste or office. Often this authority is untouchable, though it can also be oppressive.
   c. Legal authority has no face, and is characterized by laws and bureaucratic institutions.

Although Weber is helpful, he does not take a normative approach. The real basis for respecting authority flows neither from emotions, traditions, or rationality, but from God. People are clothed with authority by God. Although the forms of authority have changed, we are under other people, and this means they have been appointed by God to be over us, and so we must respect them. Regardless of the form of authority, or whether it functions well or badly, one must submit to legitimate authority.

Crisis of authority and handling suffering

The influence of and respect for authority has declined in recent times. There is a cry for change, and for greater freedom. The contemporary emphasis describes authority as functional, to the extent that where the appropriate use of power is absent, the authority is also rejected. The result of this view is that authority depends on the person who exercises power, and the God-given origin is forgotten. Consequently, those under authority are the people who determine whether authority functions, and thus whether it can be legitimated. In the case of a negative judgment, then authority no longer exists. Consistently applied, this would mean that children could dismiss their parents, pupils their teachers, etc.

The error here is that one can't conclude from a misuse of authority that the right to exercise authority no longer exists. There may be legitimate means to terminate badly functioning authority. But while in authority, they must be respected, no matter how difficult that might become for us.

How can we explain the drastic lowering of respect for authority?
1. The matter of respect for authority has always been a problem.
2. People often fail to see why defective authority is always better for society than unbridled freedom. In the climate of secularism with its distaste for authority, the entire "capitalist" system with its authority structures is endangered.
3. People are preoccupied with their own individual rights, but forget about their responsibilities. Authority is seen to restrict a person, and hinder individualism.
4. There is less willingness to endure pain. Pain used to be seen as coming from God's hand, but today even smaller amounts of pain and suffering are endured with much protest.

**The authority of the state**

Scripture clearly teaches that there must be civil government, contra Anabaptists. Yet the government itself doesn't have absolute power, but is subject to divine justice and to the laws of the land. The state also has the power to bear the sword. Although ministers and church members can't defend Christian teaching with physical force, the government may employ force in defending or restoring public order.

This understanding accords with Scripture in Romans 13. Christians in the past have generally operated with a favorable view of government. Politics need not be dirty and ugly, and political power is not a suspicious matter in itself. Although there can be abuses of power, we should not see politics as so thoroughly stained that one can't avoid getting his hands dirty.

**Must we read Romans 13 differently?**

Some say that the church has misunderstood Rom 13, and that a submissive attitude towards the state can't be deduced from this chapter as is traditionally done.

One evangelical writer says that a person must submit (hupotasso, Rom 13:1) to the powers above him, which is different from obeying (hupakouo). Powers that exist have been ordained "under" (not "by") God. The government is thus a human ordinance, which God did not create, install, or appoint, but ordered and put under Himself. Although the state bears the sword, Romans does not say that this is good - Paul is merely observing a fact. This is part of an order that is passing away. The "good" that Christians must do relates not to obedience to the law, but to the "good" actions of Romans 12.

With this contemporary interpretation, one wonders how much loyalty toward the state was actually left. In fact, this view is incorrect. The word "submit" presupposes an attitude of obedience, as is clear from the use of the word elsewhere in the NT. "Submitting" thus includes "being obedient to".

This obedience must be rendered because governments are ordained by God. This is clear from the fact that the government exists in the service of God (v4). The theme of Romans 13:1-7 is that since governments are ordained by God, we must live under them. Resisting the government is thus resisting the ordinance of God. Consequently, we can simply continue to say that the government has been instituted by God. Although the state bears characteristics of the provisional and the passing (eg the sword), it is a present characteristic instituted by God, and so the use of the sword and the use of force is legitimate. Moreover, the context makes clear that the "good" refers to showing loyalty towards the state, such as by honoring its tax laws.
So where does this new interpretation come from? It has its origin in Anabaptism, in which Christ is excluded from worldly politics. They have a theology of a suffering God, whose power consists in a capacity to tolerate everything. This ends up with a theology of revolution, for although they swear off using the sword, they need it to usher in the new and more just order!

In contrast, we maintain Romans 13, which sees the state as instituted by God in order to reward good and punish evil. Although governments do abuse their power (eg Paul imprisoned), the state must be honored.

**The right of revolution**

Although the 5th commandment requires us to respect political authority, resistance is permissible in emergency situations. Sometimes we must obey God rather than man (eg Egyptian midwives), although such actions don’t represent revolution against the government. Religious persecution can be the basis for justifying revolution, but even then freedom of religion is just one of the rights being defended and sought. Other instances can be if a government continually and brutally violates the elementary rights of citizens.

It is necessary that a revolution against the state be conducted by people with political authority. Lesser governments, or leaders recognized by the people, should lead it. In summary, there are three conditions that must be met in order for the right of revolution to exist:

1. Elementary rights belonging to citizens are brutally and continually violated by the government.
2. Persons who may be considered to represent the people are the ones leading the revolution.
3. The probability of success for such a revolution must be high, so that possible bloodshed remains limited.

**Civil disobedience**

*Civil disobedience* refers to “publicly visible conduct that consciously violates the law in order to change a law or government regulation by means of what is intended to be nonviolent compulsion.” It bears a public character, in the form of sit-ins, blockades, etc.

Objections against civil disobedience:

- In practice, it rarely succeeds in remaining nonviolent.
- It undermines parliamentary democracy.

Christians should avoid civil disobedience. We should use every legal means at our disposal, but not take the law into our own hands by walking outside the fence of the law and try to force our will upon others.

Disobedience to the government can be necessary; but civil disobedience, in terms of both its definition and its well-known practice, looks entirely different from the disobedience commanded for Christians in extreme situations.