

“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”
Part Six: The Fifth Spiritual Principle ~ *“Honor your father and mother”*

Honoring the Aging in our Families and Societies

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Exodus 20:12 ~ *“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”* (NRSV)



Four Generations of Honoring

“Honor your Father and your Mother.” So begins the fifth spiritual principal, given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai to be communicated to God’s people so that they might create families and societies based on principles of compassion and justice. We might imagine Jesus sitting with the other young Jewish boys in the town of Nazareth, perhaps reciting what today we call the Ten Commandments using the fingers of his hands:

- (1) “You shall have no other Gods before me.”
- (2) “You shall not make for yourself an idol”
- (3) “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”
- (4) “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”
- (5) “Honor your father and your mother, that you days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

The Bible and writings from the early church record a number of times when he was challenged to honor his earthly father Joseph and his mother Mary. While the four Gospels make little mention of Jesus’ childhood, leading us to fill that void by believing that Jesus was a sweet and obedient child who honored his parents, stories that circulated in the early centuries of the church contradict this view. In these, Jesus is portrayed as the kind of dangerous bully that parents warn their children against associating with. We hear about the naughty bully Jesus between the ages of perhaps 5 and 12 in a manuscript known as the *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (not to be confused with the popular *Gospel of Thomas*). (Note: you can easily find both manuscripts through the internet and I encourage you to read them. I cite Ehrman’s translation throughout.) While I’m glad that this manuscript was not included in the official canon of the New Testament since its stories are disturbing, I thought you might be interested in hearing some of the incidents that were shared in the early church about the child Jesus.

In *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus as a child demonstrates his divine powers by performing miracles like fashioning sparrows out of clay and bringing them to life, healing people including his brother James after he was bitten by a poisonous snake, and even raising people from the dead. Yet he is seen as the village bully. He is opinionated, arrogant, out of control, belligerent, and mean to his peers. He disrespects his parents and insults his elders. He gets irritated by another child, whom he calls an “unrighteous, irreverent idiot!,” and punishes him by causing his arm to be withered. The parents of this child go to Joseph and Mary and say: “***What kind of child do you have who does such things?***” (Ehrman, p. 58) Another child accidentally runs into Jesus, bangs his shoulder, and Jesus kills him. These parents go to Joseph and Mary and say: “***Since you have such***

a child you cannot live with us in the village.” (Ehrman, p. 58) Joseph, alarmed, tells Mary that she may not allow Jesus to leave the house.

A kindly teacher named Zachaeus, who has been impressed with Jesus’ spiritual knowledge, hopes that he might help redirect and tame Jesus. Zachaeus goes to Joseph and says: *“You have a bright child with a good mind. Come, let me have him that he may learn to read, and through reading I will teach him everything, including how to greet all the elders and to honor them as his ancestors and fathers, and to love children his own age.”* (Ehrman, p. 59) This is kind of a version of “honoring one’s father and mother.” Yet this backfired. Jesus’ intellect far surpassed that of his teacher. The teacher became so exasperated with Jesus that Jesus cursed him, causing him to become comatose. As the story continues with his alarmed parents trying to discipline him and others trying to help, over time everyone begins to be positively astonished both by Jesus’ mature understanding of scripture and his divine ability to heal. It seems that Jesus eventually grows out of his defiant behavior, learns to be patient and control himself, and engages in constructive activities. The divine side of Jesus is able to temper his human side. This should serve as a comfort to all of those parents who have struggled to raise a difficult and defiant child. Parents, there is light at the end of the tunnel!

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* concludes with the story told in Luke’s Gospel when the twelve-year-old Jesus was taken by his parents to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, ending up with an obedient child who honors his parents. Let’s pick up here with this story in Luke’s Gospel account, which provides the only story we have about Jesus between the ages of about 2 and 30 in the New Testament. Do you remember the story? When Jesus was twelve he went with his parents to Jerusalem. After celebrating the Passover festival there they began their journey home. They had already been traveling for a day when they noticed that Jesus was missing from the huge caravan of extended families walking together. They had assumed he was with some other family members. So they rushed back to Jerusalem and spent three long days frantically searching for him. Imagine how his mother must have felt! When Mary finally found Jesus, he was in the temple conversing with the Jewish teachers. She said to him: *“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”* (Lk 2:48). He tried to explain to his parents why he had been disobedient to them and then returned home with them. Luke makes a point of saying that *“he ... went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them”* (Lk 2:51). Jesus was obedient to his parents Mary and Joseph. In other words, Jesus honored his father and mother. That is a point this beloved tale ultimately tries to drive home.

The fifth spiritual principle God gives us is to ***“honor your father and your mother.”*** Let’s think back for a moment to the story of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai carrying two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them. Tradition has it that there were five commandments on each of the tablets. The first five commandments are thought to relate to our obligations to and reverence for God. The second five commandments pertain to how we are to relate to others. One wonders how honoring one’s parents relates to having no other God before God, not making idols, not taking the name of God in vain, and imitating God by remembering and keeping the Sabbath holy. Shouldn’t honoring one’s parents be included instead with the other five commandments that describe how we are to relate to other people? The Jewish tradition, from which these commandments issued, strongly assert that this fifth commandment belongs to the first set related to revering God because our parents stand in the place of God because they co-partnered with God in our creation.

Kalas tells us that the “Talmud says that “When a person conducts himself by honoring his mother and father, God is heard to say, ‘It is as though I were living with them and they honored me.’ A thirteenth-century rabbi, probably Moses de Leon, put this relationship in very human yet very mystical light: Father and mother should be honored as God is honored, he said, because ‘all three have been partners in thy creation.’” (J. Ellsworth Kalas, *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*, p. 58) Remember that Psalm 139:13 states that ***“For it was you [God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”*** God, father, mother are all our parents for they all played a role in our creation. We owe our very lives to all three of them. And that also means that we have something of all three of them in us, including something of God. Our divine origin is so beautifully depicted by the minister William Martin, who, in his poem “Clouds of Light,” says of children:

They look so small and frail
but they are great and magnificent.
They are born of the same womb
that birthed the cosmos
and knitted together the galaxies.

If you could see them as they truly are,
you would be astounded.
You would see not little children,
but dancing clouds of light,

energy in motion,
swimming in an ocean of love.

They are so much more
than what you see.

As are you. (*The Parents Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents*, p. 45)

We are children of God, swimming in an ocean of love, as are our parents. Sometimes, though, we forget that our parents, too, are children of God. Christian scholars and contemporary psychologists alike agree that honoring your parent is neither easy nor automatic. The scriptures suggest that it probably was not always easy for Jesus even as an adult, as is hinted at when Jesus challenged his mother Mary's directive to him to change water into wine. In the normal and necessary process of needing to individuate by separating from our parents to grow into full adulthood, we can be disrespectful and belligerent. I know that some people actually feel uncomfortable praying the words "Our father, who art in heaven," because of the difficult relationship they may have with their biological father on earth. Indeed, there is no relationship more complex than that between parents and children. Perhaps it is because, at some deep level, our parents serve as a stand in for God. When other people criticize us, it can hurt. But when our parents criticize us, it can shake us to the core. As the old Yiddish proverb says: "Even a little hurt from one of your kin is worse than a big hurt from a stranger." (Felder, p. 109). We can become overly reactive and even carry that pain with us our entire lives. Parent / child relationships can be broken, sometimes permanently. There is nothing that makes me sadder than this.

It is perhaps because the parent / child relationship can be so fraught with difficulty and pain that the word "honor" rather than "love" is used in this fifth commandment. Love is an emotion that, after all, can't be commanded. We can't always, even by a sincere force of will, conjure up positive feelings toward parents we might feel estranged from or dislike, parents who may have struggled with psychological problems, been addicts, been so hurt by their own parents as children that they themselves did not know how to parent. We can find it difficult to have warm feelings toward parents who have hurt us, neglected us, or sadly, even abused us.

Our parents, of course, all did the best that they could within the confines of who they are and what life has thrown at them. Parents face so many challenges, which we will only fully understand once we are parents ourselves.

But even if we can't find a way to love our parents, we still can honor them even during times of difficulty. The Hebrew word *kavod*, which can be translated as either honor or respect, suggests that we are to treat another person with seriousness. Yet in no way does it call for unconditional obedience to someone who is unkind or abusive. It rather calls upon us to honor them with care and respect in the way we speak to them and treat them. Honoring another especially includes concrete acts of care. And, in my view, these concrete acts of care extend not only to our parents as they grow older but also to all those in our society who are aging. Rami Shapiro gets at this when he summarizes the fifth spiritual principle as follows:

Honor your mother and your father. Aware of the suffering caused by old age, illness, and death, I vow to care for my parents to the best of my ability.

Recognizing that no parent is perfect, I acknowledge the sacrifices that were made on my behalf and the role my own behavior played and continues to play in my family's evolution.

I vow to cultivate reconciliation with my parents and to merit their respect by living according to the highest that is in me.

I vow to promote the well-being of all elderly people, doing what I can to honor and respect both aging and the aged and seeing in the old a repository of wisdom and experience necessary for right living and a healthy and honorable society.

(Minyan, pp. 49-50)

One of the major reasons for the Fifth Commandment, according to many Biblical commentators, is that the ultimate test of honoring your father and mother comes when they are aging and are no longer able to take care of themselves. Jesus modeled honoring his own mother when, while dying on the cross, in the final hours of his own life he asked his disciple John to take care of his mother. He did not die until her future security was ensured (John 19:26-27).

In Jesus' day, it was a given that all elderly people would be honored by being taken care of. We no longer do that today. Youth is idolized. The elderly are neglected. Aging parents usually live on their own, later moving into nursing homes. Sometimes when I visit Spring Creek here in Murray, I will hear someone tell me about a resident whose children never visit, even while living only miles away. This breaks my heart. Many of the elderly in our community who live at home alone struggle to get by on limited savings and their monthly Social Security check and food provided by Meals on Wheels.

Without their Social Security checks and Medicare, they would plunge instantly into poverty, perhaps even be homeless. As Christians who have been commanded to honor our mothers and fathers and, by extension, all the elderly in our communities, we should be extremely alarmed by the current discussion about either postponements or eventual cuts to the payroll tax that fund Social Security and Medicare. While some might argue that this is a partisan political issue, I believe that this is a faith issue that is directly related to the keeping of this fifth commandment.

Are we concerned about the wellbeing and security of our parents and the elderly? The fifth commandment directly addresses this later stage of life. And there is a promise related to it. Let's listen carefully to the second part of this commandment: ***"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."*** What does this mean? The apostle Paul, an astute theologian and scholar of the Jewish law, points out that this is the only commandment with a future oriented promise and blessing if one keeps it. Paul says in Ephesians 6:2-3: ***"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."*** (Eph. 6:2-3)

How is it that by honoring our parents we might receive the promise that our ***"days may be long in the land"*** (Ex 20:12) and that ***"it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."*** (Eph. 6:2-3)? First of all, when we honor our parents and those who are aging, we create a healthy society in which all members of society are cared for. In ancient times, and in the days before social security and pensions and IRAs, parents first raised and took care of their children who then, later on, took care of their parents. There is a strong admonition in both the Old and New Testaments to take care of widows and orphans. People honored one another by taking care of one another and this increased the health and wellbeing of everyone. The elderly were respected for their wisdom. They did not have to worry about what would happen to them when they no longer had physical health or financial resources. They knew they would be cared for. When we honor our parents and the elderly we are doing something good for our society.

Yet there is an additional way, when we honor our parents and the elderly, that leads to the fulfilment of the promise that our ***"days may be long in the land"*** (Exodus 20:12). This relates to us as individuals. The profound wisdom of this commandment also tells us that the way we treat our parents is the way that our children will treat us. Our ***"days may be long in the land"*** when our own children see us treating their grandparents and the

elderly with honor in their old age. The chances are good that if we honor our parents in their old age that our children also will honor us in our old age. There is no better way to express the spiritual principle contained in the fifth commandment than by sharing a rephrasing of an insightful story by the Brothers Grimm that is in J. Ellsworth Kalas's book *The Ten Commandments from the Backside*:

“Once there was a little old man, of trembling hands and feeble eyes, whose uncertain table habits became increasingly offensive to the daughter-in-law with whom he lived, until one day she objected vigorously to her husband, the old man's son. She and her husband took the fumbling old man to a corner of the kitchen, set him on a stool, and gave him his food in an earthenware bowl. Now he was no longer troubling them by his dribbled food; now the tablecloth was no longer soiled by his trembling behavior.

One day, in his trembling, he dropped the bowl and broke it. Now the daughter-in-law stopped even her moderate civility. “If you are a pig,” she said, “you must eat from a trough.” And they made a little wooden trough, and he ate from it.

The pride of their lives was their four-year-old son. One evening they noticed the boy playing with blocks of wood in the serious fashion which children so often invest in their play. When the father asked what he was doing, the boy said with an engaging smile, “I'm making a trough to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big.”

For a while the man and woman just looked at each other, not saying anything. Then they cried; and then they went to the corner and led the little old man back to his place at the table. They gave him a comfortable chair and put his food on a plate. And never again were they really, deeply troubled by the food he spilled or by the dishes he occasionally broke. They had learned that, in honoring a parent, they possessed their own future.” (Kalas, p. 55)

Closing Prayer: God we live in a society that prioritizes the beauty of youth and feels burdened by the elderly. At this moment in history when so many of our elderly are falling victim to Covid-19 at alarming rates and there is discussion of policies that may be related to the funding of Social Security and Medicare that so many rely on for their basic survival, may we take it upon ourselves to prioritize honoring our fathers and mothers and all the elderly among us. We offer up this prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen.