

Fifth of the Ten Commandments

"Honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee, and that thy days may be long upon the earth."

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Coming now to the Fifth Commandment we see that God commands us to honor our parents and, as a reward for doing so, He promises us a long life. But what does it mean to honor or respect our parents—especially in these days, when so many families are so dysfunctional and many parents have failed to adequately “parent” their children and prepare them for life, both spiritually and emotionally?

To honor one's parents means simply that we must love them and do everything in our power not to offend them; it means to help them in all reasonable ways possible, most particularly in illness and old age, if they will allow us to do so. But especially it means that we must pray for them during their lives and particularly after their deaths. If they are Orthodox then we must make sure that they are commemorated at Divine Liturgies while they are still living as well as after death, and that all of the appointed services for the dead are done for them when they die.

What honoring one's parents does NOT mean, however, is to accept or put up with abuse of any kind, whether physical or emotional. This is important, and it's something I have often counseled others to remember: we are called to be martyrs for *Christ*, but not to be victims of abuse in our own families or elsewhere. If our relationship with a parent or other relative is toxic, then we must just do the best we can, particularly in terms of praying for them. But sometimes the “best we can do” means separating ourselves from them and their abuse.

It seems that so many families today are unhealthily enmeshed and dysfunctional, with parents still telling their children how to think and behave long after their children have entered independent adulthood, or adult children trying to control and run their parents lives long before their parents are need of such assistance. There seems to be little awareness of healthy boundaries.

The guideline for us as Christian parents and children, of course, is the example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God, who deeply respected His earthly parents, submitted to His mother and foster father St. Joseph and held them in high respect throughout His life. But, then, He did not have dysfunctional or abusive parents!

The most basic component of both human society and the Church is the family, and so the Apostles were always concerned with strengthening proper relationships among family members. In epistles we often find such instructions as: "*Children obey your parents in the Lord for this is right ... And you fathers do not provoke your children to wrath ... Wives submit to your own husbands as is fitting in the Lord ... Husbands love your wives and do not be bitter toward them*" (Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:18-20; 1 Timothy 5:4).



Entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple

Of course if it should happen that our parents should ask of us something contrary to the Law of God, then we must say to them what the Apostles said to their Jewish leaders when they insisted that the Apostles should not preach about Jesus: "*We ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 4:19, 5:29). When there is a conflict between the Divine and human we must be prepared to endure whatever the outcome might be, because suffering for the Christian faith is an integral part of our Christian calling and is rewarded in Heaven by God.

But this commandment is directed not just to children, but to parents.

Parenthood is not a merely legal institution, as it was for the pre-Christian pagans; rather, for us it is a *sacred* institution created and blessed by God. This means that theologically, spiritually, *ideally*, the father and mother of a family are to be *channels* of God's grace for their children. We don't see much of this now in our society, but for those of us who are starting out on married life, we must keep this foremost in our minds: the Lord expects us not only to make a good and healthy marriage, filled with loving self-sacrifice, but to be models of holiness and piety to our children, if we have any, showing them the joys of faith and teaching them the will of God for our lives.

As another has written, "The condition of our society today does not allow us to be proud of a good percentage of fathers and mothers who are included in the list of the causes of delinquency. Parents are commissioned with the rare privilege of making their home an altar of blessings, devotion and worship of the True God. They have been assigned a natural role, presenting themselves as an example walking in the path of God, in order to impose upon their offspring the image of good citizenship on earth and in heaven."

This ideal used to be commonplace in our society. Now, no longer. It is now the rare parents that organize and live their family lives around God, Church, love, self-sacrifice, and healthy parenting.

One of the interesting differences between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western Christianity is that in Orthodoxy we do not have the concept of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as the "Holy Family." We of course are very aware that, as I said earlier, the Lord very much honored His earthly parents, but we must realize is that this was NOT a "normal" family. The Lord's mother was ever-virgin; she was *Theotokos*—the literal birth giver of God in the flesh. How "normal" is that for a family? And the beloved spouse of the Virgin, St. Joseph, was an aged and widowed man, already having a family, who was specially chosen to be the protector of Mary's purity and virginity. Again, not a "normal" family model. Yet, still, a model of sorts, as we shall see.

Unlike the Mormons and some Christian groups, Orthodoxy has never taught the "eternality" of either marriage or the family. Our Holy Fathers teach us that man was originally created to be a kind of "terrestrial angel". "In the garden of delights," as Fr. Josiah Trenham explained in a lecture, "Adam lived with his partner in a perfect state of virginity, and in an intimate

union of *soul* with Eve, but this union, according to Chrysostom, was not yet marriage as we know it." With the fall of Adam and Eve, St. John Chrysostom explains, marriage as we know it since then came into existence. It is a function of fallen human nature, not part of our paradisaical nature, to which we hope to return through grace and spiritual struggles in this life. Even so, God gave marriage to our forefathers and foremothers as an aid, a help, in the struggle and storms of this life. St. John considers that the Patriarch Abraham and his family are the good models of what holy marriage and family life should be like. The home, he explains, is to be a "little church"—an extension of the parish church—and nothing should be done, said, or thought within that little family church that wouldn't be done in the parish church. In St. John's domestic vision, the Christian family should be like a small monastery, with the father as abbot and everyone living in mutual obedience, love, and self-sacrifice, working hard to acquire virtue. Thus, the Virgin Mary has come down to us in Orthodox tradition not so much as the "blessed *Mother*" (as she is called in Catholicism) but as the great Abbess of all monastics and the first Hesychast. For this reason she is often depicted wearing a monastic habit and sometimes the cloak of an abbess or archimandrite.

So in Orthodoxy we do look to the family of Christ for *some* modeling of what our families could be, but not in all ways, and certainly not in a sentimental or sociological sense. Yet, the family of the Lord actually challenges us in a very direct and perhaps hard way to "man up" to the responsibilities of what it means to be a parent, a family, with great emphasis on self-sacrificing love, being quick to forgive, and quick to help. It is an illustration of what the Fifth Commandment orders us to do.

Again, "**Honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee, and that thy days may be long upon the earth.**"

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