

Honor and the Promise

David Harbach

The motivation for writing this article arises from the observation that we need to remind ourselves of the meaning of the word “honor”. More importantly we need to remind ourselves how to honor. I have only to look at the numerous instances in my own life where I have failed to honor a fellow saint, to see that the importance of this word has slowly been pushed aside or pushed into the background of our daily life. Perhaps I can put it this way, we don’t care to honor our neighbor because the word has little meaning to us. I assure you the word honor is extremely important and worth our time learning the meaning.

Webster defines the word honor as 1. A high regard or great esteem given, received or enjoyed, 2. A keen sense of right and wrong, e.g., he conducts himself with honor, 3. something done or given as a token or act of respect. Words similar in meaning are deference, der, respect, reverence, and obeisance. Deference means 1. A yielding in opinion, judgment or wishes, 2. Courteous regard or respect. Defer means to be respectful, e.g., she defers to her father’s wishes or decisions. Respect means to feel or to show honor or esteem for. Reverence means a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe. Obeisance means an attitude to show respect or reverence.

In order to give a complete picture let us consider one word that has the opposite meaning, the word contempt. Contempt means 1. The feeling or actions of a person toward something he considers low, worthless, or beneath notice; scorn, 2. The punishable act of showing disrespect for the authority or dignity of a court, as by disobedience and unruliness. The meaning becomes more clear when we change the second definition to read, “the damnable act of showing disrespect for the authority or dignity of a fellow saint as by disobedience and unruliness.

Our study of the word honor as it is used in God’s Word will focus on three passages, Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 6:1-3, and Matthew 15:4-6. All three passages concern the meaning and importance of the word honor as it is used in the fifth commandment of God, before we begin this study in the Holy Scriptures, a few words of explanation are needed.

You get the impression from the dictionary’s definition of the word honor that all men are capable of showing respect, reverence and deference. The reason for this is the definition does not take into consideration the point of view of the child of God. From an outward point of view the definition is correct for all men. At least outwardly we can see in the world of men respect for authority. Outwardly children do obey their children and those in authority over them. Yet, let us not be fooled into thinking that all men are always showing honor. Certainly the antonym of honor is true in the world. We see that there is much contempt present in the world. Children openly hate their parents. They defy their parents, rebel against their parents, and even sue their parents. But the question arises, Is natural man able to show honor? We must reply, No. Natural man, unregenerated man, cannot show honor. The reason why he cannot show honor lies in the true definition of the word. Understand that only God’s children can show honor. Understand also that the word honor has its most important meaning as it is used in the fifth commandment.

Exodus 20:12, “Honor thy father and mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” The second table of the law finds its roots in the first table of the law dealing with our relation to God. The second table of the law deals with our relation to the neighbor. We love our neighbor for God’s sake. At the beginning of second table of the law we find the command that speaks to children. We honor our parents for God’s sake because He has determined that they be our parents. Only believing children can honor their parents because in so doing they loving God. Only God’s children can love Him who has given them that wonderful love in their hearts. To honor our parents implies our loving God.

The fifth commandment is the first commandment with promise. Ephesians 6:1-3, “Children obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.” We have seen that only God’s children can honor their parents. We see in Ephesians that only God’s children can and do receive the promise of long life. However, I must point out the fact that the word honor must be taken in the spiritual sense. By our spiritual act of honoring our parents we receive the promise of long life. We become aware of the fact of the spiritual aspect of the promise itself. The regenerated heart tells the believing child that he or she shall have a long life. That long life in the spiritual sense is eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. Therefore, we see the fulfillment of this promise in the new heavens and the new earth, where we shall see God in Christ face to face.

The importance of the word honor can also be seen from the account in Matthew 15:4-6, “For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightiest be profited by me; And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.” Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem who had come to him complaining about His disciples, who had transgressed the law. Jesus rebukes the hypocrites of Jerusalem for violating the law themselves. How did they violate the Law? A child who gave all he could spare to the treasury, which they considered the most worthy cause, was free from assisting his parents when they needed help. Jesus points out the fact that to deny our parents service or relief is the same as cursing them and is therefore an act worthy of death. This sin is as terrible as showing contempt for our parents. The keeping of the fifth commandment carries a promise, but the violation of the fifth commandment carries a curse unto death. Jesus himself shows us the importance and blessedness of honoring our parents.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Lord’s Day 39, question and answer 104 of the Heidelberg Catechism. “What doth God require in the fifth commandment? That I show all honor, love and fidelity, to my father and mother, and all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.” May we, by the grace of God, so honor our parents that our days may be long in the new heavens and new earth.

Originally published in:
Volume 38 No 5 October 1979