

“HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER”

By Ian Pinto, *slb*

There is a touching story told of the famous Dr. Samuel Johnson. Samuel's father, Michael Johnson, was a poor bookseller in Lichfield, England. On market days he used to carry a package of books to the village of Uttoxeter, and sell them from a stall in the marketplace. One day the bookseller was sick, and asked his son to go and sell the books in his place. Samuel refused to obey as he felt that it was an undignified task for an educated child like himself.

Fifty years later, Johnson became a celebrated author, the compiler of the English Dictionary, and one of the most distinguished scholars in England; but he never forgot his act of unkindness to his poor, hard-working father. So when he visited Uttoxeter, he was determined to show his sorrow and repentance. He went into the marketplace at the time of business, uncovered his head, and stood there for an hour in the pouring rain, on the very spot where the bookstall used to stand. “This,” he says, “was an act of contrition for my disobedience to my kind father.”

After the three basic commandments concerning the just relationship between man and God, in the commandment to honour one's father and mother, the Decalogue contemplates at once the whole gamut of filial relations. It captures concisely the spirit of filial relation and

obligations in that one phrase: “Honour your father and mother”. This commandment, even while concerning first and foremost one's own parents, can and must include more broadly any physical, moral, intellectual, or spiritual authority to which a person owes credit for his/her being.

What does it mean to honour one's father and mother? The verb “to honour” or *timaō*, in Greek, is a term whose importance we cannot underestimate, since it applies not only to the form of relations between a person and his/her parents and to his/her superiors in a hierarchy, but also to the relationship between a person and God. To honour a person means to give him/her a place of honour and to do him/her honour (not just verbally). To give a place of honour means, firstly, to have a great esteem for him/her and also to bear witness to the consideration and respect he/she deserves.

The Greek verb meaning “to honour” likewise means “to reward”, “to give thanks”. Therefore, honouring someone would also mean showing gratitude to that person for all that he/she has done either to oneself or to a larger entity. This is a vital component of the fourth commandment. Children may never completely understand the love of parents until they become par-

ents themselves. It is not easy to be parents, not by a long shot. The amount of sacrifice, pain, trouble and heartache that one must go through just so that one's bundle of joy turns out to be just that ‘bundle of joy’ to the world, is daunting and so, commendable.

There is that famous story of an 85 year old man who sat on his chair by the window while his young, educated son busied himself reading the newspaper. A crow happened to sit on the window sill and the father asked the son, “What is that?” The son replied, “That's a crow, dad.” A few seconds later, the father asked again, “What is that?” Again, the son said, “That's a crow.” Hardly a minute went by before the father's voice was heard again inquiring, “What is that?” The son's patience grew thin and he burst out, “Can't you see, that's a crow! A crow, dad!” On seeing the son's reaction the father pulled himself up from the chair with difficulty and hobbled into his room. From a drawer he pulled out a dusty old notebook and brought it to his son. “Will you read the page that is bookmarked with your childhood photograph?” he quietly asked. His son began reading, “Today is my son's fourth birthday. We were enjoying the morning, playing together on the couch when a crow perched itself on the window ledge. My son was curious and asked me, “What is that?” I answered, “That is a crow, son.” Again my son asked, “What is that?” Again I answered, “That is a crow, son.” Again and again my



son repeated the question; he asked me the same question 23 times. Each time I gave him the same response along with a tender hug and a kiss. I didn't get irritated or upset that he asked me the same thing 23 times. After all, he is my son and I love him. On reading this, tears gushed forth from the son's eyes.

This heart-rending story makes a strong point. Parenting is no laughing matter. There are definitely moments of great joy, success and satisfaction but they are often preceded and even anteceded by tough and trying moments. Honouring our father and mother consists much less in showering them with particular acts of deference or gratitude than in living our lives as men and women in all that they have that is beautiful, good, true, and great: such a thing could not help but incite joy and inner pride in those who have given us life and the capacity to make of it what we wished. This is perhaps the best way we can show honour to our parents and is the best gift we can give to them.

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians notes that the fourth commandment is the “first com-



mandment accompanied by a promise" (Eph 6:2). The two versions of the Decalogue contained in the Old Testament, in effect, with very slight differences, consist of the same promise: We read in the book of Exodus, "Honour your father and your mother, so that YHWH your Elohim will give you a long life on earth" (Ex 20:5); and in Deuteronomy, "Honour your father and your mother, as YHWH your Elohim has commanded you, so that you may have a long life and prosperity in the land which the YHWH your Elohim is giving you: (Deut 5:16). This second version has the merit of better emphasizing its essential aspects: first, the fact that what is at stake is not a human commandment but a commandment of God; and also the triple promise that entails its faithful observance. To the one who honours his mother and father, God promises, "a long life and prosperity". These two promises are intimately connected to the third which modifies them and confers on them a new, fuller meaning: the promise of the land that God himself would give.

The land referred to here is not simply soil in the empirical sense or a new country but refers to the land promised by God to humanity: Heaven. Far from being

a fantasy or myth, heaven represents the very reality of God, as the first words of the prayer of Jesus suggest: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Heaven is the "place" where the will of the Father is perfectly done, his kingdom is perfectly come, and his name is truly hallowed, for which this earth, can do nothing but desire and pray: may it be "on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:9-10).

Jesus once made reference to the fourth commandment when the Pharisees reproached his disciples for not observing the tradition of the elders, because they did not wash their hands before eating. "It is with good reason", he told them, "that Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites: 'These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine human precepts.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." And Jesus went on to say: "How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever curses his father or mother shall die.' Yet you say, if a person says to his father or mother, 'Any support you might have had from me is *korban* (meaning, dedicated to God), you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother, thus nullifying the word of God in favour of your tradition..." (Mk 7:6-13).

For Jesus, the commandment to honour one's father and mother does not reduce itself to empty words. It implies every-

thing contained in the love of neighbour. This is a commandment of God. Religious in its roots, divine in its origin, it explains to man how the true worship God expects from him is in large part, identical to the love with which God loves man and asks him to love his neighbour. You wish to honour me other than with words; you wish to draw your heart closer to my own, God says to man, well then, love your father and mother, assist them as I myself love them and would wish to assist them.

I will conclude with five simple and practical things all of us can do to honour the fourth commandment, borrowing from Tim Challies who says:

1) Forgive them: There are no perfect parents. They have made unwise decisions, have had unrealistic expectations, have said and done things that have left us deeply wounded. Jesus shows us that it is possible to forgive even those who have hurt us deeply when he forgave all those who had a part in his gruesome murder.

2) Speak well of them: There is no virtue in speaking ill of others. Some people have the wrong notion that speaking ill about someone might change the person or at least help one cope with the other's behaviour. This is absolutely untrue. We need to speak well of our parents while they are alive and even after they have died.

3) Esteem them publicly and privately: Parents long to see

how they have impacted their children, how their children are a reflection of their strengths, their values. We often fail to realize how important it is to give them credit for what we have received from them. A simple, "You know, everything I really learned about generosity and kindness especially towards the less-fortunate, I learned from you", can make a parent's day.

4) Seek their wisdom: We honour our parents when we seek their wisdom through life's ups and downs. The Bible constantly associates youth with folly and age with wisdom (Prov 20:29; Job 12:12) and tells us that those who have lived longer lives have generally accumulated greater wisdom. We do well, then, to lean on them for understanding and to seek their input when faced with major decisions.

5) Support them: Financing their health and other requirements is one of the basic ways of supporting our parents. Besides, we also need to support them with our love and care. When we are young we gain strength and long for independence. Our parents raise us to be strong and free! But there is a trade-off here, a passing of the baton, for as our parents age they become feeble, they begin to lose their independence. We honour them by giving them the assurance that we will not forsake them in their old age. Just as they cared for us and provided for all our needs, we ought to do the same for them. This is our responsibility. □