



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.4 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Fourth Commandment

The first three of the Ten Commandments fit under the First Table of the Law: “**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind**” (Matthew 22:37). The remaining seven commandments fit under the Second Table: “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**” (Matthew 22:39). Our closest neighbors from our birth are our parents. We should love them as we love ourselves. But the Fourth Commandment directs us not only to love our parents but to honor them as God’s representatives whom God Himself has placed over us for our good.

Here is how God spoke the Fourth Commandment at Mt. Sinai and how Moses repeated the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy:

- “**Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you**” (Exodus 20:12).
- “**Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you**” (Deuteronomy 5:16).

This Fourth Commandment is part of God’s moral law that still applies to us today, for it is repeated and explained in the New Testament. Jesus included this commandment when He answered the question of a certain ruler who asked Him about inheriting eternal life. Jesus said to him: “**You know the commandments: ... Honor your father and your mother**” (Luke 18:20). Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of nullifying the Fourth Commandment by their traditions. He said: “**Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God’ – then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition**” (Matthew 15:3-6). These Jewish leaders were teaching the people that it was good to give as a gift to God for His worship the money that they should have given instead to their parents, but Jesus said that God’s commandment to honor one’s parents must be set above the leaders’ traditions.

The apostle Paul also repeated this commandment, writing to the Ephesians: “**Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’**” (Ephesians 6:1-3). To the Colossians Paul wrote: “**Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord**” (Colossians 3:20). Paul also included being “**disobedient to parents**” (Romans 1:30) in his long list of “**things which are not fitting**” (Romans 1:28).

The *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Forth Commandment and Luther’s explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

The Fourth Commandment

You are to honor your father and your mother.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

Besides giving us our parents as His representatives over us, God has also placed other persons over us for our temporal and eternal benefit. Those who are substitutes for the parents in the home such as guardians, step parents, teachers, and older brothers and sisters are all persons whom we should honor and obey. Those over us in the church are spiritual fathers and mothers, and those over us in the government, in the schools, and in our employment are also gifts of God through whom He wishes to bless us.

The Bible clearly shows God's displeasure with those who despise parents and superiors, and who provoke them to anger. Consider the high priest Eli in the days of the judges. His two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, "**were corrupt; they did not know the LORD**" (1 Samuel 2:12). "**The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD**" (1 Samuel 2:17). Eli talked to them: "**Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear**" (1 Samuel 2:23-24). "**Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father**" (1 Samuel 2:25). God sent a man of God to tell Eli the bad news: "**This shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them**" (1 Samuel 2:34). And so it was that in a battle against the Philistines "**the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died**" (1 Samuel 4:11).

When David became king over Israel, his sons caused him much grief. His son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, and then his son Absalom killed Amnon to avenge this crime. Absalom was then banished from the land, but when he was allowed to return, he plotted against his father and finally stole the kingdom from him. First he "**stole the hearts of the men of Israel**" by telling the people that he would be a better king than his father (2 Samuel 15:6). Then he publicly declared himself the king, and David had to escape. Absalom publicly dishonored his father by openly committing adultery with David's concubines (wives in a lower level of status). When Absalom then pursued David, he was killed in battle. What is worse, there was no sign of repentance on the part of Absalom, and for that reason David bitterly mourned his death, crying out: "**O Absalom my son, my son**" (2 Samuel 18:33). We are reminded of the proverb: "**The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it**" (Proverbs 30:17).

Jacob had twelve sons, but he favored Joseph, the son of his favorite wife Rachel. As a result, Jacob's other sons hated Joseph, and when they had opportunity, they sold him into slavery and deceived their father into thinking that he had been killed by a wild animal. "**Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted**" (Genesis 37:34-35). For many years they continued this deception, until finally in time of famine God saw to it that the brothers had to go to Egypt to buy food. By this time God had made Joseph the second in command in Egypt, and Joseph used this opportunity to bring his brothers to a sense of their great sin of hurting him and lying to their father.

The Bible account includes other examples of God's sudden judgment on those persons, young or old, who make fun of their parents or leaders in church or government. Elisha was a prophet of God in the days of the kings of Israel. One day "**some youths came from the city and mocked him, and said to him, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!' ... And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths**" (2 Kings 2:23-24). It is a general rule according to God's promise that obedient children live longer and better lives than those young people who disrespect their elders and superiors.

The apostle Paul pointed out to the Romans that disobedience to governmental authority will call down a judgment from God on those who are disobedient: “**Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ... If you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**” (Romans 13:2-4).

Even though parents and other superiors have authority over those under them, they themselves remain subject to God. Therefore, God also calls on parents and superiors to carry out certain responsibilities. To parents, especially fathers, the apostle Paul wrote: “**You, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord**” (Ephesians 6:4). In a similar way Paul wrote to the Colossians: “**Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged**” (Colossians 3:21).

Taking care of one’s own family is important to God. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “**If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. ... But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever**” (1 Timothy 5:4, 8). Parents should provide for their children, and children should provide for their parents. This includes spiritual provision as well as material provision.

The duties of parents also include the rebuke and discipline of misbehaving children. The high priest Eli scolded his two wayward sons, but he did no more than scold them. He did not undertake any serious discipline. For this reason, the Lord said to Samuel concerning Eli: “**I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them**” (1 Samuel 3:13). Many people today think that it is wrong to use physical discipline on children. But God Himself approves of bodily discipline when it is needed. The book of Proverbs includes many encouragements to parents to use bodily punishment on unruly children. For example, we read: “**Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die**” (Proverbs 23:13). Again we read: “**The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother**” (Proverbs 29:15).

But such discipline can go too far; that is why the apostle Paul warned fathers not to provoke their children to wrath, lest they be discouraged. Child abuse is also a sin, especially when parents punish their children out of personal annoyance instead of as loving representatives of God. Paul told Timothy that “**in the last days**” children would be “**disobedient to parents**”, and people, including parents, would be “**unloving, unforgiving, ... without self-control, brutal**” (2 Timothy 3:1-3). Children should have natural affection for their parents, and parents should have natural affection for their children, but in the last days in which we are now living even that is sometimes missing.

The role of mothers in the raising of children is especially important. For this reason, Paul told Titus to instruct the older women in his congregations to be “**teachers of good things – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed**” (Titus 2:3-5). Paul instructed Timothy to encourage young widows to “**marry, bear children, manage the house**” (1 Timothy 5:14).

What is true of the family is also true of government. Both those who rule over others and those subject to them have duties under the Fourth Commandment. Government officials are over the citizens, but they are under God. The apostle Peter summarized their duties by saying that they are sent “**for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good**” (1 Peter 2:14). Citizens, on the other hand, are given this instruction: “**Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake**” (1 Peter 2:13). Paul told Titus: “**Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work**” (Titus 3:1).

These same principles apply to those in a master-servant relationship or an employer-employee relationship. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote: “**Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ, not with eyerservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him**” (Ephesians 6:5-9). The main thing to remember is that whatever job or task we have been given, we are to do our work for the Lord, and therefore do our best in everything we attempt. And, as Peter says, this means obedience and willing service “**not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh**” (1 Peter 2:18).

The only time we are excused from obeying our earthly superiors is when their commands contradict the commands of our God. In such cases Peter’s rule applies: “**We ought to obey God rather than men**” (Acts 5:29) and then accept the consequences of our disobedience cheerfully without grumbling, “**rejoicing**” with Jesus’ apostles “**that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name**” (Acts 5:41).

As we have seen, God is so serious about His Fourth Commandment, that He has even promised earthly blessings to the obedient. As Paul said, it “**is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth’**” (Ephesians 6:2-3).

When Jesus told a “**certain ruler**” that he should honor his father and his mother, the ruler replied: “**All these things I have kept from my youth**” (Luke 18:21). But of course he had not kept this commandment or any of the others, and neither have we. Rather we must say with David: “**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me**” (Psalm 51:5), and: “**Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to Your mercy remember me, for Your goodness’ sake, O LORD**” (Psalm 25:7).

This Fourth Commandment, like all the others, points out our failings, and curses and condemns us for these failures. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who was perfectly obedient to the Lord and His earthly parents in His infancy, in His childhood, in His adolescence, and even until the moment of His death on the cross. He was obedient in our place, and by His obedience He has removed our sins and given us His perfect righteousness, so that we stand before God as His well-beloved obedient children by faith in Him.

Questions

1. Which commandments fit under the First Table, and which under the Second Table?
2. Who are the first neighbors that we come into contact with on this earth?
3. Why are we to honor our parents and superiors as well as love them?
4. Provide evidence to show that the Fourth Commandment is part of God's moral law.
5. What bad examples did the sons of Eli, David, and Jacob give?
6. What are the duties of parents toward their children?
7. What are the duties of government officials?
8. What are the duties of earthly masters or employers?
9. What are some things to remember in the disciplining of children?
10. How do mothers contribute to the bringing up of their children?
11. When are we permitted to disobey those who are over us?
12. How did Jesus' apostles react when they were wrongly punished?
13. Why can we not be saved by obeying the Fourth Commandment?
14. What is the only way we can be saved?
15. What is the most common way children disobey their parents in your locale?
16. What is the most common way citizens disobey their government in your locale?