

Lord's Day 39

104. Q. *What does God require
in the fifth commandment?*

A. *That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness
to my father and mother
and to all those in authority over me,
submit myself with due obedience
to their good instruction and discipline,¹
and also have patience with their weaknesses
and shortcomings,²
since it is God's will
to govern us by their hand.³*

¹ *Ex. 21:17; Prov. 1:8; 4:1; Rom. 13:1, 2; Eph. 5:21, 22; 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-4:1.*

² *Prov. 20:20; 23:22; 1 Pet. 2:18.*

³ *Matt. 22:21, Rom. 13:1-8; Eph. 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-21.*

LORD'S DAY 39

FIFTH COMMANDMENT: RECOGNIZING THE PARENTAL OFFICE

Text: Lord's Day 39

Reading: Deuteronomy 6 : 1-9

Matthew 10 : 34-39

Psalm 44 : 1, 2

Hymn 1A

Psalm 78 : 1, 2, 3

Hymn 7 : 6

Psalm 73 : 1, 4, 5, 9

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

When we come to the fifth commandment about the honouring of our father and mother, we immediately realize that here, too, we have a commandment about which there has been much debate and discussion, even strife and fighting. It is the commandment about the lawful authority which God has placed on earth, and, as you know, especially in our age there is a despising of authority and a refusal to submit to those who have been placed in positions of rulership and leadership.

Especially after the second world war, we came into a period of emancipation, of anti-colonialism, anti-establishment, and anti-government. Civil rights and free choice were emphasized. We can say that in the sixties there was a decisive change towards personal freedom and individual expression. In a few decades the western world in particular underwent great changes. Some have dubbed this time accurately as the "crisis of authority".

The crisis of authority, indeed. Still we cannot say that all the changes were for the worse. It was the right time for colonial nations to begin to govern themselves and to assume their own responsibility as free nations in the world. It was good that women's rights became more acknowledged. Through industrialization and redistribution of wealth, the relationship between em-

ployer and employee did change, and workers were made less dependent on the goodwill of their boss. We need not say that all this is wrong.

Still the scale often swings too far the other way. That's what happened and now a tremendous crisis of authority exists. In our time we face the breakdown of the nuclear family. Divorce is common, and many children are left to fend for themselves. Labour relations are determined by force, through threats and strikes. In many countries governments rule through tyranny or are in danger of being overthrown. I think of Latin America and South America, where the theology of revolution has gained so many followers.

In such a world comes also today the commandment of the LORD concerning authority. "Honour your father and mother". The Catechism immediately extends this to "*all* those in authority over me". The Reformed Churches have seen from the start that this commandment is not restricted to only our parents, but deals by implication with all lawful authorities. It is a matter of respecting the God-given *offices* in this world.

Of course, the first office which we meet in life is that of our father and our mother. The family remains the primary unit in society. That is also where the Catechism lays the emphasis. I summarize this Lord's Day as follows:

In the fifth commandment the LORD calls us to recognize lawful office bearers, especially the office of our parents.

1. the purpose of this parental office

2. the submission to this parental office

3. the promise with this parental office.

1. Why does the office of parents exist, and why does God give us this commandment that we shall honour our father and our mother? Some try to explain this commandment in a purely *evolutionist* manner. They reason that cultural development was possible only if parents passed on their knowledge to their children. We can only build on what previous generations have given us, on tradition.

This was especially so when education and tradesmanship were taught *at home*. A son took the trade of his father; a daughter was prepared for marital life by her mother. So there was a very close tie between parents and children which grew into one of authority. And, evolutionists say, in order to help the children submit to this, some kind of “command” was invented with an appeal to a higher being: honour your father and mother. It was a necessary social measure.

You can see the direction of this reasoning. For today, we are told, children are much *less* dependent on their parents. Now we have books and modern media, while education is available for all children. The state now assumes the responsibility for the children and guarantees them an education and a job. Children really do not need their parents as in years past, and so also this commandment functions in a less rigorous manner. Parental duties are now being minimized, and also parental rights are being cut back. That is the mentality of today!

Over against this we may continue to see the office of the parents—and all lawful offices—not as a human utility, but as a divine institution. The parents have a God-given responsibility and authority, and this accords with the purpose and task of their office! This office has not changed at all.

The office of parents, according to the Word of God, is not in the first place to teach the children a certain trade or to secure for their children a social status. The first task of the parents is to instruct and nurture their children in the ways and the service of the Lord!

Parents do indeed have an instructive duty. They must instruct their children in the *covenant* of the LORD, their God. The Catechism speaks of this when it says, “I must submit myself with due obedience to their *good instruction and discipline*”.

Let us lift that out for a moment. What is meant by “Good instruction and discipline”? Well, good instruction is that kind of instruction which leads to further understanding of God’s Word and covenant! Is that not what we read in Deuteronomy 6:6: “And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise . . .” Teach them diligently *to your children*, Deuteronomy says.

It is the Lord God who establishes a wonderful covenant with the parents and their children. He even has this relationship signed and sealed (in Holy Baptism) and then He says: your *first task* is to teach your children about Me, My way, My Word, and My will!

Good instruction then simply means that parents themselves keep the Word of God and also pass it on in everything to their children, and so lead their children to the heavenly Father. You will understand that this kind of instruction is more than just trying to prepare your children for the harsh realities of life and teaching them a certain trade. It is that, and *more*. The heart of parenthood is to show the children that there is no life outside of God, that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

You may have given your children all the worldly things they need. You may have prepared them fully for independent life here on earth in this society. But if you have not shown them the way of life in Christ Je-

sus, you have only given them up to the devil and to death!

The parents are the first teachers of their children. In the course of time also institutions of education *outside* the home came into being, like the *schools*. These may certainly be used for the benefit of the children, but these schools only benefit when they have the same commitment as the parents to lead the children to deeper understanding of God's will. Otherwise you allow forces outside of the home to destroy what you are trying to build up inside the home! That we have our reformed schools which seek to provide covenantal education is an expression of the parental task and an extension of the parental duty. The goal is that our children know that they belong to God. That is why we promise at baptism not only to instruct our children ourselves, but also to *have* them instructed in the doctrine of life to the utmost of our ability!

The Catechism also speaks of "discipline". The old form had "correction". Doctrine and discipline always go together. The teaching has to be applied and enforced. From the early beginning of their children's lives, parents must show consistency in discipline. They have to keep a firm hand. Not many rules are needed but there is a need to stick to the rules which you do make. This is a prevalent teaching in the Bible. I think especially of the Book of Proverbs, where the serious warning is heard: if you love your child, discipline him or her. Whoever does not discipline the children, contributes to their downfall!

The New Testament brings the same rule: the fathers are to nurture their children in the knowledge and discipline of the Lord. They are certainly not to do so as unyielding tyrants, but as loving parents, kind and understanding, yet firm and demanding.

I know that today there is much debate about parental discipline. The prevalent idea today is to let the kids make up their own mind, to give them room to breathe. But this kind of upbringing reaps disastrous results, for then our children go their own ways and do what they want, without consideration for others.

It strikes me that as parents you generally have to make your children do something, and that you have to say something repeatedly before it is grudgingly done. We are all slow to obey, quick to rebel, and so we require discipline from our infancy onward. This parental discipline must be so consistent and effective that it leads the children to self-discipline.

Parents make the basic decisions which will affect their children throughout their life. Parents make decisions about going to church regularly, about attending reformed schools, about a Christian way of life, and about commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. If the parents make the right decisions here, and so lead their children in a positive way, they may pray and expect that the Lord will bless their parental office.

2. We have seen the important purpose of the parental office. Let us now see how the Lord requires submission to this office. The Catechism says: "I [must] show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience . . ."

The commandment itself speaks only of *honouring* father and mother. The word "honour" that is used in the Hebrew indicates something or someone that has *weight*, not physically, but in the sense of *importance*. Someone who must be honoured is very important; he has great weight and authority!

This is true of our parents. They carry weight. The same word is sometimes used of God in the Bible. He is important, He has sovereign authority, and majestic glory. Well, the idea in the Hebrew words is that God takes some of this weight and puts it in the parents, and in earthly magistrates and rulers as well.

Therefore parents may ask respect and honour of their children. The worst thing that a child can do is to consider his/her parents as nothing, to disregard them completely as if they carry no weight whatsoever. Instead, they must show respect, also when parents have become old maybe difficult and senile.

"Honour" is sometimes taken as showing *outward* respect, as giving public recognition. Rachel for ex-

ample called her father, “my lord” (Genesis 31). King Solomon bowed before his mother when she came to visit him (I Kings 2). In some cultures—I think of the Chinese culture in which ancestors are worshipped—this respect has become idolatrous and formalistic. Then it is wrong. But still it must be seen that we honour our parents by being polite and showing good manners towards them. If we do not learn to show honour to our parents at home, we will have a hard time giving due honour to teachers at school, or to our employer at work and our neighbour in society.

Still, the commandment means more than outward forms of honour. The Catechism therefore adds that we are to love them. I must give honour to my parents because I do love them. We love them for what they mean to us, for what they have done for us, and for what they have given us. We love them, despite their weaknesses and sins.

The Catechism does not give the impression that parents are perfect, or that children must idolize their parents as people without flaws. On the contrary, it says: “[I must] also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings”. The older you become, the more you see how flawed your parents are. They are not what you once considered them to be. Is that a reason then to show them less honour and respect? To love them less? Of course not! The commandment still stands. We are to have patience with them, also when they grow old and cannot handle life as they once could. You must have patience with them in love when you discover that they are, like you, weak and sinful people, who have often failed in life and in the service of God.

Honouring father and mother also implies “faithfulness”, says the Catechism. Faithfulness means that we do what we must do and *persevere* in it. Parents must be able to depend on their children. If you say you are going somewhere to do something, then your parents should be able to depend on you. Do not lead your parents down the garden path. This is so easy to do. How many youth don't quietly work their way

around Mom and Dad, and laugh about the fact that their parents are so gullible? It's so easy to say one thing and do the other. But in time it will come out that you are not faithful.

To be faithful means that your parents can also depend on you, when they cannot care for themselves. Submission to the parental office is a lifelong task. As long as our parents live, we must show them all honour, love, and faithfulness. In the love of Christ, we must surround them with the love with which they surrounded us. For He is here our example and our Saviour. We fail every day with respect to our parents, but of Him it is said: He submitted to his parents and was obedient to them. He cared for them as well as He could, until the day of His death.

And so submission to the parental office means concretely that we faithfully obey all those lawfully placed over us. We obey them whether they are considerate and reasonable or not. We love our parents deeply, despite their shortcomings. The only limitation to this love is that we must love Christ above all. As we read in Matthew 10: “He who loves father or mother *more than Me* is not worthy of Me . . .” The love for Christ goes before all and above all! If we have to chose between our parents and Christ, between our earthly family and the Family of the Church, then we must chose the Lord and His Church! This is perhaps hard to accept but it is vital! We should say: I love my parents, and I love my family, but I love the Lord more, and I serve Him only! How often are we led by family considerations or pressures to do things which are really against the will of the Lord? Christ said: honour your father and mother. Give them *due obedience*, says the Catechism, but do not love father or mother more than Christ! I come to the last point.

3. I want to point out yet that this commandment contains a very specific *promise*: “that [it may be well with you] and that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you”. The Catechism

doesn't deal with this promise, but I certainly may make some remarks about this promise.

The promise is simply that whoever honours father and mother will receive a prosperous and long life. Now we must not make this an absolute promise without exceptions, nor should we make it a vague statement which does not really function.

There are exceptions. Those who die young are also spared many afflictions and trials. Here we stand before the sovereign wisdom and free counsel of the Lord. But still, even if it brings much experience of sorrow and vanity, a long and prosperous life is a special blessing of the LORD, given as a result of obedience.

There are still many questions here. It does not always seem to work out that the righteous have a long and prosperous life. That's the problem of Asaph in Psalm 73. He notices that the wicked are secure, that their wealth increases evermore, while of himself he can only say: "All day long I suffer here, and with new grief each dawn draws near . . ." (Psalm 73:4). Job struggled with the same issue. Why are the afflictions of the righteous many, while the ungodly seem to prosper? In answer the Bible tells us to look at the *outcome* of the wicked. The Bible reminds us that all who go astray from God will perish!

So this promise of a long and prosperous life is not an absolute promise. We may not cling to this life, as if there is nothing else. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and we look for a lasting city with real foundation. Our life is eternal and will be forever prosperous. The promise of this commandment ultimately directs us to the life on the new earth, which is our true land of Canaan!

Still, the promise has meaning also for this life. Whoever honours father and mother may expect the blessing of the Lord already in this life. Whoever obeys the lawful authorities need not fear them. The Book of Proverbs tells us that lack of discipline and unwillingness to submit to discipline leads to death. Fools do not listen, and they cause trouble for themselves and others. How many have died what is called "an untimely death" because they did not listen to their parents or to others in authority over them and rejected the admonitions of the wise?

Whoever does not honour father and mother, whoever despises parental teaching and wisdom, will learn the hard way. Many youth complicate and endanger their lives because of wrong friends, alcohol and drug abuse, recklessness, playing with sex, or through marrying someone who will not serve the Lord. And they do all this against the teaching and discipline of the parents. Many people bring themselves into great danger because they will not obey the laws of the land. Don't thousands die in many countries at an early age because of civil war, violence, crime, and the resulting poverty and hunger?

When the structures of authority which God has laid break down, the result is anarchy. "No god, no master", people shout. And anarchy leads to a bloodbath. The revolution devours her own children. But those who serve the Lord and who begin with honouring father and mother and all who are placed over them with due honour, love and faithfulness, will experience in their land the blessing of God, the development of life, and may look forward to perfect prosperity and happiness in the land of promise, the new Jerusalem. AMEN.