



SUNDAY READING

SERMON.

The Fifth Commandment.

By VEN. F. W. FAIRBANK, D. D.,

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Preached in Westminster Abbey.

"Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."—Exodus xx. 12.

Those who consider the circumstances of the case, and the large share which symmetry always played in the mind of the Jews, will readily believe that on those two tables which lay enshrined in the Ark, the Ten Words were carved in their briefest form, each occupying a line, and that there were five on the first and five on the second table. It may be objected that then this Fifth Commandment, the law of reverence to parents, which is a duty to man, will not stand with the first four commandments, which are duties to God. But it is the special dignity of this commandment that it is a direct part of our duty to God.

Our parents are not merely our neighbors; they stand to us in a special and in a Divine relation. All true authority is founded upon and is a delegation of the authority of God. More especially is this the case with parents. During our early years they stand to us in the place of God. The word *pater* meant originally the duty of men to God reflected in their duty towards their parents. Hence you will see that the symmetry of the first five commandments of the first table in one word is *pater*, our duty towards God, and the symmetry of the second table in one word is *probitas*, our duty towards our neighbor. It is by its consecration of authority that the Fifth Commandment applies to every one of us, whether our parents be living or dead. It involves for each of us the enforcement of the truth that man is not meant to live alone, but in families and in communities; it is the corrective to each man's insolent tendency to make himself, regardless of all others, the centre of all the universe. The fifth commandment is the surest basis of all right government. Selfishness, the brutal predominance of individual appetites and interests, self-assertion, the vulgar claim of every man against his fellows, "I am just as good as you"—these are the disorganizing, the abruptive, the anarchic elements of society, which end in plunder, houses shattered with dynamite, and cities blazing with petroleum. But all the elements of noble progress, all the securities for peaceful happiness, all the fair sum of six thousand years' tradition of civility, depend on man's frank and glad submission to those whom God's providence has set over him. On the west front of the cathedral of Amiens the symbol of defiant vulgarity, debased by its own self-exaltation, is that of a man snapping his fingers with Cockney impudence in the face of his bishop. But of all these wider applications it is impossible now to speak. I must speak only of the direct commandment to filial duty which indicates divine self-repression, not worldly self-assertion, as the principle of all worthy life.

"Honor thy father and thy mother." We are bidden to honor because love is instructive and spontaneous. If honor towards our parents is love combined with reverence, the love must be honor touched with emotion. The word "honor" includes love. There can be no true honor without love. Of course a reciprocal duty is implied. If the commandment only says to every child, "Honor thy father and thy mother," it means no less distinctly, "And ye parents, provoke not your children to wrath." Into that side of the duty there is less need to enter, because, undoubtedly, the love of parents towards their children is far more intense and prominent than the love of children towards their parents. But the obliteration of this instinct on either side is one of the worst signs, on the one hand, of savage dishumanisation, on the other of civilised degeneracy. St. Paul's picture of Roman depravity in Romans i. culminates in the charge that men had become insolent, haughty, boastful, disobedient to parents, without natural affection.

Filial affection, however, though instinctive, may depend on education. The Jews, from whose wisdom we may learn so much, insisted upon it with intense earnestness. It lay at the basis of the first sweet patriarchal life. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are full of exhortations to it and denunciations of its neglect. In Jewish history Joseph the beautiful and pure was set up as an example of filial love as well as of youthful chastity. On the other hand, such was the execration of Absalom, the beautiful and happy, that to this day each Jewish child, as he passes by his legend, comb in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, is taught to spit at it and to hurl a contumelious epithet at the resting-place of the bad, rebellious son. The modern *canaille* of the world care nothing for their parents, but only for themselves; but the deepest feelings of the best men have been always mingled with their love to their parents. The sacredness, or shipwreck, of this love has furnished to literature some of its most impassioned themes.

Many of the most pathetic scenes in the records of human life turn on parental and filial love. In the bible think of Aaron's stricken silence when his two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, died by the foe of God, and Aaron held his peace. Think of Jacob's wail over his lost Joseph, "I shall go down into the grave upon my son mourning." Think of the hero David's outburst of weeping over that twice dead youth, when with voice choked with anguish he sobbed forth, "O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee O Absalom, my son, my son!" Think again in Grecian history of the noble Pericles placing the wreath on the brow of his dead boy, turning aside to hide the tears, the strong heart at last broken, which, amid all the calam-

ities of war and pestilence and the murmurs of the people had continued subdued. Think of Titus, so moved by the false accusation of intriguing against his father that he hurried back from Jerusalem with headlong speed and burst into Vespasian's presence with tears, "Veni, pater; Veni pater—I have come, my father; I have come." Think of our proud Norman King Henry I.:

Before him passed the young and fair,
In pleasure's reckless train;
The seas dashed o'er his son's bright hair;
He never smiled again.

Of Henry II., when among the signatures of his other rebellious children he saw the name of his youngest and best loved John. Or the great Frederick Barbarossa crying out bitterly on his son's death, "I am not the first who have suffered from disobedient sons, and yet have wept over their graves." Think of the wretched Henry IV. of Germany, treacherously arrested by his own son, falling on his knees before him with the cry, "Oh, do not sully thy honor and thy name; no law of God obliges a son to be the instrument of divine vengeance against the father!"

Again, how often has the thought of a mother been present even at the closing moments of life! When the young and gallant boy, Prince Conradin of Hohenstaufen, last of his race, was dragged to the scaffold at the age of sixteen, undaunted to the last he flung the gage of defiance among the multitude, but as he bowed his fair young face over the block he murmured, "Oh, my mother, how deep will be thy sorrow at the news of this day." And when Sir John Moore lay dying on that disastrous field of Corunna, the name of his mother was the last upon his lips. The truest men have never blushed to give public proof of this filial devotion. No record of the late James Garfield, the murdered President of the United States, won him warmer sympathy than the manly kiss which he gave to his aged mother before the assembled multitudes on the day of his supreme elevation.

I can but glance at a difficulty which may perhaps touch a few in this vast assembly. They may be so unhappy as to have unworthy parents, parents who have ruined their families and dragged them down by vice and shame. "Are we," they may ask, "to honor those who are dishonorable? Are we to reverence those to whom no reverence is due?" I answer that they must not be like those Jews whom Christ so bitterly rebuked because they tried to shift off one duty by another. Our parents have loved us, their children, in spite of all our intractableness, our waywardness, our indifference. Are the children to show no forbearance to the sins of their parents? Alas, for earth if unworthiness is to sever the bonds of love and of duty! Scripture gives us a very thrilling and terrible warning on this head. When Noah lay in his tent his son and his grandson, Ham and Canaan, earned an undying curse by their callous mockery, but Shem and Japheth earned an undying blessing for the reverent faithfulness which covered their father's shame. Oh, by all the tender memories, by all the sweet sanctities, by all the holy sorcery of home, let us never forget that in our families, everywhere, and always, we must bear one another's burdens; and it has always seemed to me one of the very strongest bonds of blessedness in a large family is, that each should remember that any fault or vice is a means to misery, and perhaps to ruin, of all those whom he must have dearly loved. Blood is thicker than water. The bonds of nature which unite us to every member of our families are indissoluble bonds. I knew a mother once whose boy was convicted of stealing at school. She lived in the outskirts of a little town, and so deeply did her boy's shame weigh on her spirits, that for years afterwards it was only in the deep twilight that she would ever enter the streets of the town by which she lived. I knew a son, a dignitary of the Church of England, whose father, also a man in high place, had disgraced himself by a dark and evil deed. By that deed he forfeited all, and his career was ended for ever. His son set in obscure darkness, while it was yet day. The world—which, being so wicked and so criminal itself, is ever the most remorselessly cruel to detected crime—utterly forgot the poor, guilty man; but his virtuous son did not forsake him; he shared that awful burden; he took his poor, shamed, disgraced, ruined father into his house until he died; for his sake he gave up all that makes life sweetest; for his sake he remained unwedded. It was a noble example of self-sacrifice, all the more because it was known to very few. But that good son received conspicuously the blessing of God for his filial faithfulness, and I am well assured that now in that far-off land, where all is judged of truly, he has received his hundredfold reward.

St. Paul calls this Fifth Commandment "the first commandment with promise," and at that promise I must now glance. "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." It showed infinite misapprehension when Heylyn, the biographer of Archbishop Laud, remarked, "How can the honor we pay to parents have anything to do with this commandment, seeing the promise is appended which points to Palestine alone?" It is the old error that God was giving local rules to the Jews, not eternal principles of morality to all mankind.

But perhaps you will be troubled with a doubt whether this promise holds true. Good sons, alas! die, cut off in the flower of their youth, who dearly loved their parents and truly honored them.

Yes, but that death may be in God's sight the reward—longer days in the better land. Oh, is it not true that, as a rule, the promise literally holds good, both to nations and individuals? It is not a mere bribe of feudalism; it is not intended to make us duteous by promising us a certain utilitarian result; it is simply a natural inference. Individually, even the

boy who loves and honours his parents will, as a rule, be more prosperous, be longer lived, be more happy, be more blessed, than the bad son. It is so in the nature of things. A distinguished officer in the army told me that, in the experience of a long life, he had found that exactly the same had been said of him by old and young, who said of all the midshipmen who had passed under his rule he had never known one to fail to turn out well who wrote weekly his loving letter to his home. It is the prodigals, not the good sons, who bring down upon themselves a curse. "Show me a boy who loves his mother," says a recent writer, "and I will show you one who will make a faithful friend, a noble lover, and a tender husband; show me a boy to whom home-life has no attractions, because it is too slow, and I will show you never to trust that man with anything which constitutes the happiness of others." A young boy was once going to sea as a midshipman, but as he got into the boat he saw his mother's springing tears: "Fetch back my trunk," he said, "I am not going to break my mother's heart." "George," said his mother to him, "God has promised to bless the children who honor their parents, and I believe He will bless you." That boy grew up to be George Washington, first President of the United States of America.

But the main intention of the promise was not individual, it was national; and all history has contributed its national fulfilment. "The corner-stone of the national life," it has been said, "is the hearthstone." The nation which produces bad sons will assuredly not have good citizens. Loveless sons very soon produce disorganized societies and decadent nations. Take but two ancient people by way of illustration. Why was one Spartan worth ten other Greeks upon a battle-field? It was because Spartan boys were trained in parental obedience. When the Spartan mother gave her boy his shield with the words,—"Bring back this or come back upon it,"—her word made him invincible. When the Spartan boy complained that his sword was too short, and the mother said, "Then add a stride to it," she armed him in triple steel. Obedient sons make unflinching patriots; and it was because honor to parents meant honor to our country that those three hundred Spartans stood against the vast host of Persia, at Thermopylae, and when they lay buried under the darts of their enemy Simonides wrote their epitaph—

Go, tell the Spartans, thou that passest by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

Nor was it otherwise with Rome in her noblest days. The irresistible grandeur which arrayed her warriors to conquer was founded on the paternal authority. Coriolanus spared Rome only at the tears of his mother, Volturna; and when Virgil wrote the great epoch of the republic he could find no greater name for his hero than *Pater*—father, and *Fidus*—faithful. Dryden translated the *Æneid*, but he could make nothing of those epitaphs—"sire," and "the pious hero," or "the one to whom his parents were also a law," would have seemed supremely ridiculous to the dissolute weaklings of a godless age. But the promise of the fifth commandment holds true eternally of old Greece and Rome. When Greece produced perturbed dandies like Alcibiades, and when Rome produced a jewelled debauchee like Otho, God began to wipe out their glory as when one wipes a dish and turneth it upside down. And when Napoleon, who knew something of the glory of nations, was asked what was the chief want of the French nation, he replied in the one word, "Mothers." The weakening of the bond between parents and children is always in nations a dangerous and evil symptom. Undoubtedly we in England need to be on our guard in this matter. Within living memory the respect, honor, obedience to the commands and wishes of parents was deeper than now it is. In a past generation men would have been disgusted and shocked at the petulant, disrespectful demeanor now often shown to parents; at the vulgar, dishonoring terms in which many even habitually speak of their fathers. I have heard the story told among the young almost with admiration how once a worthless undergraduate told his father that he really could not walk down the High Street of Oxford with him unless he dressed in more fashionable clothes. Many fine young gentlemen who are not worthy to tie the shoe-latches of the fathers on whom they depend, almost seem to think it derogatory to use the grand old honored name, "My father." For that term of respect and love a spurious conceit substitutes some cant or loveless synonym. There are fathers in all classes whose children take all the love and self-denial of parents as the merest matter of course, as something due to their own transcendent merits, and give nothing in return. The boy of the working class who is earning his own living at sixteen often thinks it quite intolerable that his parents should have the slightest claim upon him in their destitute old age. "Parental authority," says the man who is most experienced in London among the young, "seems among some classes to be at a discount, and the parents of children of seven years old sometimes come to me and say they have no sort of control over their own children." The tradesman's son, whose father has given him an education such as he himself never had, is ashamed of his father, because, though far superior to himself he drops his "h's," or does not know the conventions of etiquette; the daughter whose smattering of shallow accomplishments has led her to mistake herself for a lady, looks down on her worthy mother from the height of her inferiority, as a person to whom she must leave the whole domestic drudgery whilst she is reading sickly romances or murdering flabby music on the piano.

Oh, I would urge upon you all more care in the fulfilment of the Fifth Commandment. Each of you is somebody's child, and if all the world deservedly hate you, your father or mother, through good and evil report, will love you still. But you will not have that somebody always. "O, though you have lost a mother," said Richter, "thank God for it." And you, my young hearers, boys of the choir, boys of Westminster school, and other young persons in this assembly, whom the Greeks beautifully called "blossoming on both sides," with fathers and mothers yet living, I entreat you remember that while those parents are alive you can show them kindness, and do not by ingratitude fill the rest of your lives by regrets that must be for ever unavailing.

Late-Comers to Church in New Clothes.

The following notice has been distributed in the pews of a Massachusetts church: "It may not be inappropriate to call the attention of the audience to the bad habit they have fallen into of watching people who come in late, especially those who have new clothes. These late-comers are modest people, and it must be a serious annoyance to have their raiment made a subject of remark. They wear it unconsciously, and prefer that you would not notice them. The Sunday services are at half-past ten and at half-past seven for the benefit of all who desire to spend an hour in worship, but for all those who have recently visited the tailor, and milliner, and dressmaker, the morning service begins anywhere from half past ten to eleven, and the evening service ten minutes before eight. For the benefit of the very tardy ones the announcement is hereby made that the benediction will be the only portion of the service in which they are respectfully invited to participate."

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