

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT:
HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER

A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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“Honor your father and your mother; that your days may be prolonged upon the land which Jehovah your God is giving you.” (Exodus 20:12)

When He was in the world, the Lord taught the two great commandments: that we ought to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind; and that we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves. “On these two commandments,” Jesus said, “hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40). The first three of the Ten Commandments align with the first Great Commandment, to love God, and the final six commandments align with the second Great Commandment, to love the neighbor. The fourth commandment bridges these two: it commands us to honor both our heavenly father *and* our parents on earth. As such, it is the beginning point for love to the neighbor, and it stands above all the commandments that follow.

We read about this in *Arcana Coelestia*:

As by "father and mother" are meant the Lord and His kingdom, therefore this commandment is the fourth in order, and surpasses in holiness those which follow. The commandment concerning the worship of Jehovah, that is, the Lord, is first and second, because the most holy one. Next comes the commandment concerning the Sabbath, because by this in the supreme sense is signified the union of the Divine Itself and the Divine Human in the Lord. After this follows the commandment concerning honoring parents, because by this is signified the love of the Lord and the consequent love of good and truth which are from the Lord. (AC 8899)

Beside explaining the commandment's place among the commandments that come before and after, this passage highlights two aspects of the internal sense. In an internal sense, “father” means the Lord, and “mother” means His kingdom. Or, to put it another way, “father” means the Lord as to His goodness and “mother” means the Lord as to His truth (AC 8897). It may not be obvious at first that the Lord's kingdom and the Lord as to His truth are synonymous; but the Lord's kingdom exists where people live by the truth, and it is the Lord's living truth that makes the His kingdom to be His kingdom, rather than anything that belongs to us. Even though that

truth, the Mother, and the goodness, the Father, belong to the Lord, from our perspective we *choose* to live by the truth and then the Lord flows in to infill us with love.

If we stay on this high level, this commandment might seem a little abstract, but not necessarily very challenging – it’s easy to think positive thoughts and feel positive feelings toward the Lord and His kingdom without getting into the practical question of what that actually calls us to *do*. But this commandment becomes more challenging as we come down from the celestial level to the spiritual level and then the natural level. As we descend, we stop talking just about the Lord and acknowledge more and more the people through whom we come to know the Lord. And while the Lord is perfect – both in Himself and as He flows through angels – even angels aren’t perfect, and humans on earth certainly aren’t. Which can lead us to the question: how am I supposed to follow this commandment in the spiritual sense, loving the church, when I clearly see how flawed the church is? In the wide natural sense, how can I love an imperfect country? In a narrower sense, how can I love my country’s imperfect leaders or my state’s imperfect leaders? And in the most literal sense, how can I honor my imperfect parents?

We read this morning the story of Noah and his drunkenness. In this story, Noah represents the ancient church, which arose after the downfall of the Most Ancient Church. In the uncorrupted most ancient church, people had a perception of truth and falsity. The ancient church approached religion intellectually – their will had fallen, which meant they had to reason about the things they learned. When a church like this begins, it is inevitable that it will fall into some errors through faulty reasoning. This is represented by Noah becoming drunk and uncovered in his tent.

When Noah’s middle son, Ham, discovered his father’s shame, he told his brothers Shem and Japheth. Rather than joining in Ham’s disdain for their father, Shem and Japheth took a garment, walked backward so they wouldn’t see their father’s nakedness, and covered him. *Arcana Coelestia* n. 1088 explains the internal sense of their faces being turned away from their father’s nakedness. We read:

This signifies that... such things as errors and mistakes from reasonings should not be attended to.... For such was the character of this parent church, or of the man of this church, that he did not act in this way from malice, but from simplicity, as is evident from what presently follows, where it is said that “Noah awoke from his wine” that is, was better instructed.

The attitude of Shem and Japheth point the way to honoring the church – and honoring parent figures in other contexts. We do not have to pretend that their faults do not exist – there is still the need to walk backward and cover Noah – but we can choose not to focus on those faults as *the* defining feature. *Arcana Coelestia* n. 1088 continues:

As regards the matter here treated of, we may say that those who are in no charity think nothing but evil of the neighbor, and say nothing but evil; if they say anything good, it is for their own sake, or for the sake of him whom they flatter under the appearance of friendship; whereas those who are in charity think nothing but good of their neighbor and speak only well of him, and this not for their own sake or the favor of another whom they flatter, but from the Lord thus working in charity.

We honor flawed parents and an imperfect church in the same way that we are called to love anyone – by focusing on the good in them.

And it is vital that we do this, because we have no choice but to start with what we receive from our parents or those who stand in the place of parents. *Divine Providence* 172 says, “The Word can only be taught mediately through parents, teachers, preachers, books, and especially through the reading of it. Nevertheless, it is not taught by these, but by the Lord through them.” The first step towards a deeper sight of the truth is living by the truth as we have received it from others. We do not stay there, though. As we grow older, and especially as we continue to live by truth as we have been taught it, we gain the ability to go to the Word itself to see the extent to which our church’s doctrine lines up with what the Word teaches. *Arcana Coelestia* 6047 explains:

First there must be learned the doctrinal things of the church, and then the Word must be examined to see whether these are true... When this is done from the affection of truth, then the person is enlightened by the Lord so as to perceive, without knowing whence, what is true; and he is confirmed in this in accordance with the *good* in which he is.

We do not stay in a historical faith – but we also need a historical faith of some kind of to give us traction toward living the kind of life that will allow us to see deeper truth in the Word. Perhaps because of this vital function, *Arcana Coelestia* 6047 says, “If the truths [a person find in the Word] disagree with the doctrinal things [of his church], let him be careful not to disturb the church.” To honor the Church as our Mother, then, we love it for the genuine truth that makes it the Church, but we do so with the acknowledgment that it will get things wrong – and that this does not negate its good.

The Lord Himself when He was in the world demonstrated something of the need to both look beyond what we have been taught by others *and* to live by what we are taught unless we have seen something else indicated in the Word. The Lord's experience as a 12-year-old illustrates this well. When Joseph and Mary found Him in the temple and told Him how worried they had been about Him, his response was, "Why is it that you have sought Me? Did you not know that I must be in what is My Father's?" (Luke 2:49). Here we have a clear picture of the Lord going beyond what His mother and Joseph had taught Him – He was emphasizing His need to live by His true Father, the Divine Love at His core. And yet despite that – even though He had already progressed to the point of recognizing His true parentage – this episode concludes with these words:

And He came down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them; and His mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in age, and in grace with God and men.

Despite His identity as the Son of God, as God with us in the world, Jesus was *subject* to Mary and Joseph – He lived by what was good in what they taught. There was still a need to receive guidance from them.

As we get older and older, we more and more shift from focusing on our literal father as father and instead focusing on the Lord. Swedenborg described a dream in which he spoke of this to his own father:

My father once appeared to me in a dream, and I spoke to him, saying that after he has become responsible for himself a son ought not to acknowledge his father as his father, as he did previously. For the reason why he should acknowledge him when he is being brought up is that at that time his father stands in place of the Lord; and during that time he does not know, except as his father leads him, how he should act. But when he becomes responsible for himself and can think for himself, and it seems to him that he can control his life for himself, the Lord must be his Father, in whose place his natural father had previously functioned. (*Arcana Coelestia* 6942)

Elsewhere we read that in heaven, only the Lord is acknowledged as Father, in accordance with what the Lord said to His disciples: "Do not call anyone your father on the earth; for One is your Father who is in the heavens" (Matthew 23:9).

But the fact that we must shift our focus to the Lord as our Father does not mean we do away with the need for other people. We are called to honor our Father and our mother, and our

spiritual mother – the Lord’s kingdom, the Church, the communion of saints – never stops being something that comes to us through other people as vessels. The highest angels, the celestial angels, do not preach or talk about truth, because they perceive truth from goodness and keep truth in their will rather than their intellect. And yet, even in the celestial kingdom, they value hearing the truth from others – according to *Heaven and Hell* 225, “although the angels in the celestial kingdom perceive and see truths, still there are preachings there, since by means of them they are enlightened in the truths that they already know and are perfected by many truths that they did not previously know.”

It is not just through ministers preaching and teaching that the Lord’s kingdom as mother instills truth in us. The role of preacher is just one small role among countless others in heaven, and *every* angel plays a part in the Lord’s kingdom, that is, in the embodiment of the Lord’s truth. When you perform your role as a parent, a grandparent, a student, a lawyer, a doctor, a judge, a patient – whatever role you are in – with honesty and justice – you allow the Lord’s kingdom to come, as in heaven, so upon the earth. The work you do there, and the way you do it, nurtures other through its direct effect and in the example it offers others, in the same way that a mother nurtures her young children.

To *honor* the Lord’s kingdom as mother is to *love* the Lord’s kingdom; *Arcana Coelestia* 8897 says, “In heaven one loves another, and when he loves he also honors, for in honor there is love.” To love the Lord’s kingdom is to participate in it, to live by the truth. And this makes one with loving the Lord as Father; as Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him” (John 14:21). As we said earlier, there is a marriage that takes place between truth and good, between mother and Father – we intentionally live by the truth as if from our own power, and the Lord flows in with ever increasing goodness without our awareness. We read in our lesson from *True Christian Religion* that “the spiritual offspring which are born from this marriage are the goods of charity and the truths of faith” (*True Christian Religion* 307).

There is a picture of abundance in this commandment. This is expressed in the promise connected with the commandment – honor your Father and your mother *that your days may be prolonged upon the land which Jehovah your God is giving you*. For the days on the land to be prolonged symbolizes the ever-increasing goodness that arises when we seek to live by the Lord’s wisdom (as we receive it from the Word and the church) and pray for Him to fill us with

His love. It's the kind of abundance we just celebrated in our Thanksgiving services and feasts, the kind of abundance we hope for as we share with those who have fewer worldly possessions than us. It's the kind of abundance and eternal life we look forward to as we anticipate the celebration of the Lord's birth, because it is the Lord Jesus Christ – not an abstraction, but a loving, human God – who is the Father we are called to honor. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "For unto us a Child is born to us, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, God, Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the multiplying of His government and peace there shall be no end." (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 9:20-27, Luke 2:41-52, *True Christian Religion* 305-307 (excerpts)

TCR 305-307. In the natural sense, which is that of the letter, "to honor your father and your mother" means to honor parents, to be obedient to them, to be devoted to them, and to return thanks to them for the benefits they confer, which are that they provide food and clothing for their children, and so introduce them into the world that they may act in it as civil and moral persons; and introduce them also into heaven by means of the precepts of religion, thus providing both for their temporal prosperity and their eternal happiness. ... In a relative sense it means that if parents are dead, guardians should be honored by their wards. In a broader sense, to honor the king and magistrates, is meant by this commandment, since these provide for all in general the necessities which parents provide in particular. In the broadest sense this commandment means that people should love their country, since it supports and protects them, therefore it is called fatherland from father. In the spiritual sense, "to honor father and mother" means to reverence and love God and the church. In this sense, God who is the father of all, is meant by "father" and the church by "mother." In the heavens little children and the angels know no other father and no other mother, since they are there born anew of the Lord through the church. In the celestial sense, "father" means our Lord Jesus Christ, and "mother" the communion of saints, which means the Lord's church spread throughout the whole world. That the Lord is the Father, is evident from the passages [that include the following]: Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. His name is God, Mighty, Father of eternity, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). The spiritual offspring which are born from the marriage [of the Lord and the church] are the goods of charity and the truths of faith; and those who are in these from the Lord, are called "sons of the marriage," "sons of God," and "born of God."