

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment

### By Ray Silverman

#### Lesson:

*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*

**Sermon:** The Ten Commandments are given in a divinely ordered series. They begin with the holiest of all commandments, the commandment to keep our focus on the Lord our God, Who brought us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. As this divine series progresses, we are commanded to let nothing deter us or distract us from this supreme focus, a love of God. As we keep in mind all that He has done for us, and all that He continues to do, we are moved with gratitude. We desire, freely and from love, to keep all the commandments, not so much because it is a duty or an obligation, but rather because it is a spontaneous act of love on our part. Because we feel gratitude and love for God, we desire to serve Him. As Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” And our response, over and over, is, “Yes, Lord, you have done so much for me. You have given me life. You have saved me when I strayed away from you. You have always been there to help me. You have never forsaken me or left me comfortless. You have brought me out of the land of selfishness, self-will, fear, lust and greed. You have brought me out of the land of Egypt, and are bringing me into a new land. Yes, Lord, I thank You. Yes, Lord, I desire to keep Your commandments. You are my only God. I will have no other gods before you.”

As we move through the divine series of the Ten Commandments, we find ourselves making a similar response to each successive commandment. When our Lord says to us, “Do not take My name in vain,” our response is, “Yes, Lord. I am profoundly grateful for all you have done for me. Your name is most holy to me. It speaks of Your everlasting love and everlasting wisdom. It speaks to me of all You have given me, the tender love I feel, the insights that come to me. You have not given me these blessings in vain. I will use them for Your glory. Your name is holy. Hallowed be Thy name.”

This acknowledgment that every benevolent emotion and every noble thought is a gift from God brings us into the state of Sabbath peace. The Lord says, “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy,” and our response is, “Yes, Lord, I confess that without You I can do nothing, that without You I labor in vain. You alone are the Lord of the Sabbath. In You there is rest and renewal. In You, all my labors are easy, all my burdens light. In You there is peace. I will remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.”

The Ten Commandments begin by focusing us on the one God of heaven and earth. They ask us to receive the bountiful gifts He bestows upon us and not take them in vain. And then they ask us to remember that these are gifts, freely given, but never to become our exclusive possession. If we feel love, it is the Lord’s love acting into and through us. If we grow in our understanding, it is the Lord’s wisdom acting into us, opening our spiritual eyes and showing us the wonders of His kingdom. This humble acknowledgment that all glory is to be given to the Lord is what is meant by “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.” We cease from thinking that we are doing the work and

labor of loving others, and acknowledge that it is the Lord alone Who labors unceasingly for our happiness, and the happiness of all His children. This is the culmination of spiritual understanding, the pinnacle of human wisdom: the simple idea that without the Lord, we labor in vain, that everything good and true proceeds from the Lord alone, and belongs to Him alone. This is why Jesus ends the Lord's prayer with words that honor God so eloquently: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever."

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he carried the Ten Commandments with him, written on two tablets of stone. The first set of commandments dealt primarily with man's relationship to the Lord. "You shall have no other gods before Me. Do not take My name in vain. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." These are the holiest commandments of all because they deal with man's proper relation to God. Therefore, they are given first. They are written on the tablet of stone which talks of God's love for man. The other tablet speaks of man's reciprocal love for God. He returns God's love through striving to love the neighbor. He shuns the tendency to hate his neighbor, to commit adultery, to steal from his neighbor, to lie to his neighbor, to covet his neighbor's house or his neighbor's wife, or anything that is his neighbor's. Whereas the first table focuses us primarily on the Lord, the second table focuses us primarily on the neighbor.

But between these two tables there is a transitional commandment, which leads us gradually from the greatest commandment – to love the Lord – to the second, which is like unto it – to love our neighbor as our self. This transitional commandment is stated as follows: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God has given you."

The commandment that calls us to honor our father and our mother focuses our attention first on the Lord, Who is our Father in heaven. As Jesus said, "Call no man your father upon the earth, for one is your father, He Who is in heaven." [Matt. 23:9] It is, of course, right and proper for us to honor our earthly parents. In fact, in honoring our earthly parents and showing them love, gratitude and respect, we lay an important foundation for the eventual transition that we all are called to make. The tender and beautiful love for natural parents gradually is changed into a similarly tender and beautiful love for our Divine Parent, the Lord Himself, our Father Who art in heaven.

The day comes when our allegiance begins to shift. Although we will remain eternally grateful to our natural parents, although we continue to love, respect and care for them, we begin to say, as Jesus did, "I must be about My Father's business." We are about our father's business when our concerns begin to shift away from self and towards others. We are about our father's business when our attention begins to focus not so much on natural life but on spiritual life. We are about our father's business when we linger, like Jesus, in Jerusalem, learning spiritual truth, striving to understand and do the will of our heavenly Father. Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" [Luke 2:49]

As we enter into spiritual life we leave behind our preoccupation with the natural world and material concerns. It isn't that we abandon all earthly concerns, or neglect our

families and parents. We continue to honor and love parents. But we begin to say with the angels in the book of Revelation, “Thanksgiving and honor and power and might be unto our God, forever and ever.” [Rev. 7:12] We begin to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We begin to be about our father’s business. To honor our father then, is to keep our focus primarily on Him, striving to do His will with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength. It summarizes everything that the Lord has spoken thus far in the giving of the Ten Commandments. The words “honor your father” contain the whole of what has preceded.

But there is another vital aspect to this commandment. We are not just to honor our father, but our mother as well. We have seen that our father is the Lord, who is to be honored above all people. But who is the mother that is to be honored? According to Emanuel Swedenborg, “honoring thy father and thy mother” in the literal sense means honoring parents, being obedient and attentive to them, and showing gratitude to them. In a deeper sense it means venerating and loving God and the church. Just as a mother on earth nourishes her children with natural food, so the church nourishes her children with spiritual food. [see AC 8899]

Swedenborg helps us to lift our gaze above the merely literal level of this commandment. He helps us see not only that the father is our heavenly Father, but also that our mother is the church. She nourishes us with spiritual truth, just as a human mother nourishes her children with natural food. She takes what the heavenly Father provides – heavenly bread, the Word of God – and presents it in a form suitable to the developing tastes of the congregation.

But there is more. Swedenborg takes us to an even deeper level. He writes, “In the highest sense, by father is meant our Lord, Jesus Christ, and by mother, the communion of saints, that is, the Lord’s church throughout the whole world.” [TCR 307] The communion of saints that Swedenborg here refers to is the invisible but powerful influence of all great souls, past and present, who touch our lives: St. Francis, Lincoln, Gandhi, Shakespeare, even the waitress at the coffee shop who always has a smile on her face and a kind word on her lips. All the great souls, taken together, this vast assemblage of human beings who strive to manifest the Lord’s will in their life, is called the communion of saints.

In the highest sense, this is the mother to be honored. It is the Lord’s true church; it is the Lord’s kingdom in people everywhere and at all times. To honor our mother is to honor and show gratitude to all people who have supported us and still nurture us on our spiritual journey.

As we journey from the land of self-will, called Egypt, to the land of selfless love, called Canaan, we do not always feel the direct influence of the heavenly Father. It would be too much for us to bear, like continual exposure to the blazing sun. So the Father moderates His love for us through the influence of other people- the communion of saints. Our job is to look for and honor this indirect influence of the Lord. To "honor our

mother" is to see the Lord working through others, to listen respectfully, to take counsel, to be inspired by their words.

We have called this commandment "transitional" because it serves to make the transition from honoring God to honoring the neighbor, that is, to honoring all the goodness and truth of the Lord that is reflected in the lives of noble souls everywhere.

This quiet transition from honoring God to honoring the neighbor prepares us for the commandments which now follow on the second table. The commandments which follow show us just how the neighbor is to be honored, respected and loved – by not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing or lying or coveting. In striving to honor both the Lord and the neighbor in this way, we experience a profound and beautiful blessing. We discover that the Lord has indeed brought us out of the land of Egypt, out of self-love, and is leading us into a new land. Every day we experience longer and longer periods of peace and inner contentment. Every day we experience longer and longer periods of childlike joy and wonder. As our states of peace and joy grow longer and longer, the nights of anxiety and sorrow become shorter and shorter. In striving to honor the Lord and our neighbor, we come to know that the Lord's promise is true: Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be *long* upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you.