

Obedience to All Authority

By Rev. R. Cammenga

The first commandment of the second table of God's law, the fifth commandment, is: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee," Exodus 20:12. You might ask: "Why is this the first commandment of the second table of the Law?" It's not difficult to answer that question. The second table of God's law concerns my relationship to my neighbor. The very first neighbors that God puts on my path of life are my father and my mother. They are there, in fact, before I am even conscious of them, when I'm a little baby. It is to be expected, therefore, that this first commandment of the second table deals with my calling in regard to my father and my mother.

That calling is that I "honor" my father and my mother. That means that I must love them in my heart. But that means more than that. The commandment, after all, does not say "love," but "honor" your father and your mother. And honor is, besides love, obedience. I can love someone who is my equal. But honor is the special kind of love for someone who is my superior, someone who is in authority over me.

It ought to be plain to us that though the 5th commandment speaks of father and mother, the 5th commandment is broader than that. That is first; that is primary. The home and the parent-child relationship in the home is basic. It is the root of all the other relationships that exist in society and even in the church. But just for that reason, the 5th commandment is broader than the relationship of children to their parents. In fact, the 5th commandment addresses itself to every situation in which we confront authority and are called to obey God.

But what really is authority? Negatively, authority is not, most emphatically not sheer force or might or power. That is precisely the distorted notion of authority in the world today: "Might makes right;" "The will of the majority rules." But might never makes right. Might often usurps right. But in fact might has nothing to do with right. Authority has nothing to do with the question: Who is the strongest? Nor is authority based upon some kind of intellectual superiority. Authority does not either have to do with the question: Who is the smartest? Who has the greater knowledge and wisdom? Who has the most education? Who is the one with the college diploma? Young men and women are not called to obey their fathers and mothers, their teachers, or anyone else in authority because those in authority are so much wiser than they are. That, to be sure, can be the case. But knowledge and wisdom are not in themselves the basis for authority. Authority is not either based upon riches, or influence, or popularity. The rich man, the popular man, he is the man that the world sets up on a pedestal. What he says, others respect. He is able to impose his will on others. Yet, not riches, or influence, or popularity are the basis for authority. Authority is not due to some outward circumstance or physical condition, but is something spiritual.

Ultimately, all authority is in God. The bible teaches us that God is the sovereign Lord, the Lord of lords and King of kings (see Psalm 10:16; 29:10; I Timothy 1:17; 6:15; Revelation 1:5). He has created all things. And He sovereignly upholds and governs all things. The very beginning of the 10 commandments emphasizes this point, that all authority is in God: "God spake all these words saying, I am the Lord thy God." Nothing, absolutely nothing, is outside of the divine authority of Jehovah God. He is not a lord; He does not simply have authority. But He is the only Lord of heaven and earth. He is authority; there is no authority outside of Him.

This means that it is God Who bestows upon any creature authority. The authority parents confront in the different areas of their lives is authority over their children, because God gives them that authority. That's true in the shop. It's God Who places the employer over the employee. That's true in society. It's God Who places the president, the governor, the policeman over us. It is God Who says: "Honor your father and mother. Obey them because I have set them in authority over you." The Apostle Paul says in Romans 13:1: "the powers that be are ordained of God."

Because all authority is of God, for God's sake we must obey all authority. The obligation is not simply to obey, but to obey for God's sake. Do we? There's room here for self-examination. Young men and women, do you honor your father and mother? Do you willingly submit yourselves to them, at all times? Do you obey them because you

believe that God is pleased to have your parents rule over you? Do you understand that when you disobey your father and mother, in fact you are disobeying God? Do you obey your teachers in school? Do you behave in the classroom and do your assignments? If you do, you are obeying God. But if you don't, you are being disobedient to God.

This does not mean that parents and teachers are always right. It doesn't mean that they are perfect. They are far from it, and they are usually the first to admit it. But that isn't the point; that doesn't happen to make any difference. God has put them in authority. You must obey them, period! In its explanation of this 5th commandment, the Heidelberg Catechism states that part of our obedience to those in authority over us is that we "patiently bear with their infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand." Even when parents and teachers are not very nice, even when they are unreasonable, you must obey them. That's patiently bearing with their weaknesses.

And remember, you disobey your parents and teachers more than when you outrightly disobey and rebel against them. You are guilty of breaking the 5th commandment when you talk back to them, even when you talk against them behind their back. You are guilty of disobedience when you do what you are told, but do it reluctantly, sulkily; when you do it, but only because you are afraid of being punished if you don't.

But how about us grownups? The 5th commandment applies to us also. Those of you who are employed, do you obey your employer and honor your boss? Do you do it, not because you might get fired, but because God is pleased to rule over you through them? Is it so that really, inwardly, you can't stand your boss, that behind his back you make light of his authority, perhaps with fellow employees make him the butt of cruel jokes? Do you submit yourselves, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward, I Peter 2:18? And how is it with you wives? Is it so that you reverence and respect and obey your husbands in the Lord, Ephesians 5:24? Do you do that because God made man the head over the woman? And how is it with respect to the government? Do we submit ourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, I Peter 2:13-15? Or is it merely the fear of being caught, the fear of suffering the penalty of law that induces us to comply? And what about the authority which God has placed in His Church, especially in the special offices? Do we willingly and cheerfully submit ourselves to the oversight of the elders, Hebrews 13:17; I Tim. 5:17? Do we obey them with the conscious thought that when we do, we are being subject to Jesus Christ Himself Who has set these men in their offices? Or do we flout the authority of the officebearers, either openly or by gossip and backbiting?

Rebellion and lawlessness has gripped our world. Witness the widespread disobedience of the youth today. Witness the open rebellions against governments. Witness the ungodly women's movement. Witness the open disregard for the authority of Christ in His Church. We must not let this poison infect us!

There is one time when we may, in fact, when we must disobey authority. When those in authority demand of us something contrary to God's Word, demand that we sin against God, then our reply must be: "We ought to obey God rather than men," Acts 5:29. But even then, even when under such circumstances, we must disobey those in authority, we may not rebel. Never, never may we rise up against authority and seek to overthrow it. And if the authority we are forced to disobey punishes us, even then we must bear that unjust punishment, bear it even if it means the loss of life.

The 5th commandment itself makes plain that there is a great benefit and blessing of God for those who obey those in authority: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." The promise of the 5th commandment is: "that thy days be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." We must not imagine that the promise is the promise of a long life here in this world. If we are to understand this promise we must remember the typical significance of Israel's land, the land of Canaan. Canaan was a type of heaven; it represented the kingdom of God that was to come. The promise, therefore, is the promise of life in that heavenly Canaan, everlasting life and glory.

By contrast, those who are disobedient and rebellious fall under the judgment of God. They do not live long in the land, which is to say that they perish in hell. And that's exactly what the Apostle says in Rom. 13:2: "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves

damnation.” This judgment of God was typified in the Old Testament by the command of God that they who rebelled against father or mother should be stoned to death, Deut. 21:18-21.

Let God’s people, therefore, obey those who are in authority over them. Let them do that for God’s sake, out of love for the God Who has saved them. Let them do that laying hold on the promise that they who obey authority shall live long in the land.