We took a little break from our Fall sermon series last week, but we are back in it today looking at Deuteronomy 5—these ancient words that many of us are familiar with; but I hope that this series has been helping to provide a fresh perspective.

We've spent four weeks already looking at these ten commandments—these ten words of wisdom that Yahweh, the Israelite God and King, has given to His people after their exodus from Egypt. They were words that He gave as a part of His covenant relationship with them. This is how they were to live in the new land that He was about to bring them into.

And because these words are deeply connected to the covenant relationship that they share—as God and people—and because there is virtually nothing else like this in the Ancient Near East, it's so vitally important for us to read these words *in light of* this shared identity that they have together. Because how Israel lived in the land *represented* who their God was.

That relationship is implied in each of these commandments. All ten of them need to be seen with that in mind. Otherwise we very easily read these words through our own cultural lens and make assumptions that often turn them into rules or principles. They become legalistic very quickly.

As we've been seeing, reading these words in their context, through that ancient lens, makes them very applicable for us still today. **Read Deuteronomy 5:1-16.**

There's been a cultural trend in recent years—very much in the last decade—to analyze and criticize how different parenting styles play a role in the development of children. So if you're my age or younger, you've probably had a conversation with your peers about how your own parents' quirks, personalities, traumas, or brokenness has impacted you. And for those who are my age or older, you've probably had a conversation with your peers about how your own kids or other parents you see today parent very differently and allow things that you would never have allowed.

Now, there is ample evidence to prove both sides—that that family baggage indeed gets carried through the generations, and also that some modern parenting styles aren't helpful. So it's not like either generation is in the wrong.

But it all makes for a rather confusing situation. Because everybody's critiquing everybody. And young parents today find themselves caught between these two realities and worried that their own parenting will be subject to the same evaluation—either from *their* parents, or teachers, or later from their own children. Every parent today feels that at some point someone is going to critique them.

And interestingly enough, this isn't just with parents. I've heard the same fear spoken by some of my friends who are teachers. From aunts and uncles. From grandparents. So it seems to be the case that *everyone* is anxious about fathering and mothering in society today.

Why is this? Well, as I've mentioned before, we live in a very anxious world—an 'age of anxiety.' And on top of that, the world is currently a hot mess. So the inclination is to think that 'salvation' rests on the next generations to save us. That's who we're depending on to be a better version of humanity. To sort things out. And if that's the reality, it puts a lot of pressure on *us* to make sure that they turn out okay.

But it all makes me wonder if this commandment has more to say to us today than we realize.

Verse 16: *"Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you…."*

Now, in ancient Hebrew, this word 'honour' can be translated in a number of different ways. The meaning of the root word is simply 'heavy, or severe,' but depending on the form, it can be heavy in a grievous and burdensome way, or in a healthy and glorious way.

Either way, we're talking about something that has weight. When you honour something, you add weight to it.

So similar to how we would say that someone's authority carries a lot of weight, how the Israelites were to understand the role of fathers and mothers in society carried weight. There was a gravitas to it. It was important for their life together as a community.

Why? For two reasons.

First. Ancient scholars all recognize that showing respect for parents and caring for the elderly was the norm in the ancient world if a society wanted to maintain order. So everybody did it—more or less. And we could say the same is true for us today.

But in the case of ancient Israel, it wasn't just about order. **It was about preserving the covenant.**

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses speaks these famous words in Hebrew known as the 'Shema': *"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one* [or is God alone]. *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up…."*

Talk about them. With whom? *Your children. Your parents.* Everyone in your household—slaves and servants included. Talk about them when you all get up, when you all go to bed.

So the assumption being made here is that the imprinting of the covenant, the understanding of this shared identity with YHWH, is cemented into the people's hearts *at home.* Children were to honour their parents because their parents nurtured them in the covenant.

It's often been said that mothers are the culture carriers in society—and this is why. Because so much of the transferring of tradition, culture, and education happens in the home.

And so Israelite children—of any age—were instructed to honor, to 'hold with weight' their fathers and mothers because households were the primary place where the 'way' of this God was spoken about and discussed.

Even if it was burdensome, it was Yahweh's instruction to you to honour your parents because it also kept *your parents* connected to the covenant.

For example, think about the story of Ruth and Naomi. If you're familiar with it, you might remember that Ruth literally has no practical reason to stay with Naomi, her mother-in-law. All of their husbands have died. Her sister-in-law has already left because she can have a better life back in Moab. Naomi is pushing Ruth to do the same, because she can't give Ruth another son. But Ruth clings to Naomi and makes a bond with her that reflects Israel's covenant.

She knows that Naomi *would have no one else.* She would be a widow in Israelite society without any family to take care of her.

I heard this recently from scholar Dr. Cyndi Parker—that in Jewish culture, everyone knew everyone by way of their family, what tribe they belonged to, what their lineage was, that they're the son of so-and-so, connected to this family line, etc.

But this meant that anyone on the outside would have a hard time fitting in. So God had instructed the Israelites to pay particular attention to the widows and foreigners, who didn't have a 'name' connected to them and so *didn't have the social network to depend on.*

It's why the Lord said to the Israelites in verse 16, *"Honour [mothers and fathers]… so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you."* This is what Ruth was doing.

A *Moabite* woman, an outsider, demonstrates what this commandment was all about. She cares for her mother-in-law in exactly the way that this God desired of His people. And she was blessed greatly for it.

Because secondly, honoring fathers and mothers wasn't only about preserving the covenant, but also about **deepening the relationship that *this covenant God* desired to have with them.**

Let me explain this. Up until this point in the book of Deuteronomy, Yahweh has always been referred to as the 'God of your fathers.' The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites have just renewed their covenant—kind of like renewing your vows—and then Moses gives a final farewell to the people by way of a song.

And in that song, he says this: *"I will proclaim the name of the LORD…. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. They* [referring to Israel] *are corrupt and not his children…. Is this the way you repay the LORD, you foolish and unwise people? Is he not <u>your Father</u>, your Creator, who made you and formed you?"*

Wait, what? You have to realize; *we* know God as our Father. *They* did not. This is the *first time* that the Israelites are hearing this. They already know that Yahweh is a warrior God because of how He delivered them from Egypt. They know that He is a provider God, because of how He fed and nourished them in the wilderness. They also know that He is also a King, because He's given them instructions for living in the land.

And now, He's also their Father? Yes. Because He is the I Am. And He will not let Israel box Him into one of their own categories.

If Israel maintained a practice of honouring mothers and fathers, then their own relationship with Yahweh would be deepened because *this also* was how He desired to relate to them. They would 'live long' and it would 'go well with them' in the land *even more* because their identification with Yahweh would be strengthened.

And it stuck. Because look at how the tradition carried forward:

David calls Him *"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,"* (Psalm 68:5). The prophet Isaiah said, *"Yet you, Lord, are our Father…. we are all the work of your hand,"* (Isa. 64:8). And the prophet Malachi said, *"Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us?"* (Mal. 2:10).

So it makes complete sense, then—when we get to the New Testament—that we see Jesus also referring to God as Father—not only because Jesus is in fact God's son, but also because as the Messiah, He was taking on the identity of Israel and demonstrating how the true children of God should relate to Him.

It's why Jesus encourages His disciples to pray, *"Our <u>Father</u>, who is in heaven…."* That's how He wants to be known. Not because He's masculine, but because the term encapsulates the bond that He sought to have with His people.

I mean, lest we forget, God chose to enter into the story of humanity by means of a mother. The very idea of father and mother together was created by Yahweh.

So I wonder, then, how our overly anxious and highly critical society could benefit from followers of

Jesus taking back up this commandment and honoring it with this background in mind? How could we honour the relationship between parents and children in such a way that speaks peace into the anxiety?

I want to offer two ways. First, just like it was for Israel, the home can still today be a place where the ways of God are taught and nurtured. A place where our new covenant in Christ can be discussed and nurtured, morning and evening, when we wake up and when we lie down, when we walk along the roads together. We can practice the way of this new covenant *in our homes*.

And what this means, then, is that rather than feeding into the culture of criticism, we can inspire families to flourish *with the transforming love of the Father through Jesus Christ* as their main motivation.

Yes, we all make mistakes. We're all broken, and we all desperately need God's Spirit to help us—fathers and mothers included. So as a covenant people in Christ, we aren't focused on our own efforts to save or fix us but on the love of the Father to sustain and transform us.

Even for those of us who have an estranged relationship with a parent or child, *even then* the Spirit can yet surprise us.

In the Alpha video series, there's the story of a man named Paul Cowley who had, he said, a 'heavy' or weighty relationship with his father—in a burdensome way rather than a healthy way. His father was absent for most of Paul's life, either drunk or having an affair.

But when Paul became a Christian, he wanted to try connecting with his dad. So he tracked him down in a pensioner's flat in Manchester and hoped that his dad had changed like he had. But he hadn't. He was grumpier. He was vulgar, crude, sarcastic, drinking more. Nothing had changed.

But Paul started to invite him over to his family's home. So his dad would take the train, and every time that Paul would meet him on the platform, his dad would be moaning and complaining about something, usually money.

But one time, after his father had been sick and in the hospital for a week, Paul took him back to the train station. And as he was putting him in the train carriage and sat him down, he suddenly had this overwhelming feeling of love for his dad.

"It was really weird," he said, "I almost started to cry in the middle of the carriage. I looked at him and I felt really sad for him, that we never had a relationship. I don't ever remember eating a meal with my father. All that stuff came up."

And in his mind came this idea to upgrade his dad's ticket. So he bought a very expensive, single first-class ticket back to Manchester. He walked his dad into the first-class compartment, sat him

down, and kissed him on the head. And as he stood back outside on the platform, his wife Amanda said to him, "What on earth are you doing?"

And Paul said, "You know what, I have no idea. I just really wanted to see my dad happy."

And as they were standing there, his father turned to look at Paul out of the window, and he had the biggest smile on his face. It was like every birthday and every Christmas had come together. He was beaming.

"And that was the last time that I ever saw my father," Paul says. Three weeks later he died of a heart attack on his own in the flat. But Paul said he now has a peace with his father through all the years of arguments and fighting and drinking.

"The only image," he says, "that I've got of my father, is that picture of his face looking through that railway carriage as it drove off."

That is the power of letting God's relationship with us define every other relationship. When our honouring of Him translates into how we honour others, *this*—and even more than this—is what's possible.

Because secondly, because of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, 'family' in the kingdom of God now looks very different. It's not just about our own immediate families anymore. Jesus has 'upped the ante.' He's heightened the level of relationship and responsibility—but also reward. Because the boundaries of family have been broadened.

Jesus said in Mark 3, *"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."* Paul says in Acts 17 that we are God's offspring. And in Romans 8, Paul says, *"The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"*

We now—in Jesus—take on the collective identity *as God's children.* That role is now ours in Christ, as His brothers and sisters, with God as our Father, and co-heirs with Jesus in glory.

What this means is that *all of us* now, whether we are old, young, with children, without children, single, married, male, female, orphaned, widowed, *we take care of each other.* We hold with weight our covenant bond with one another in Christ. We honour our shared identity together as children in God's household.

This household is now the primary place where the 'way' of this new covenant is spoken, discussed, and engaged. The responsibility of preserving the covenant is now our collective responsibility as the household of faith. Again, it's not that immediate families don't still have a large role to play, but that is no longer where we find our primary identity.

It's why the early church was known for taking in widows and orphans, and for rescuing abandoned babies off the dump heap. Because family now had a new definition.

It's why I can say that, in this household, my kids are your kids. Because their covenant identity in Jesus means that the love of the Father manifests into *every* relationship they have with each one of you under this roof.

It's why I can hope that my kids—Spirit-willing—will extend this love to the elderly bachelor living on the top floor of our condo building who has no family, but who's become like an uncle to them.

What I believe this commandment is saying to us today is this: that honouring our parents is *one way* of 'holding with weight' the covenant that we have now in Christ. Because in Christ, we don't only seek to honour mothers and fathers but *all* who belong in the family of faith, recognizing that the love of the Father is meant to touch everything and everyone.

When *that* is what drives us, the anxiety and the criticism just doesn't make sense anymore.

Let me close with this. There's a beloved story that Jesus shares in Luke 15. A man has two sons. The younger one tells his father to give him his share of the estate—which, in an honor-shame culture, was a very dishonouring thing to do. He broke the 5th commandment pretty hard.

But when the son came to back to repent and apologize, Jesus says this: that *"while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."*

Why did Jesus tell that story?

To make it clear to us that it is the Father's love that makes us come alive. That the Father's love is what transforms us and enables us to honour, not just our own mothers and fathers, but all who are—or may yet be—in His household of faith.