

*A*polo^gia: Question Authority - The Fourth Commandment

By Nick Koschman

Introduction

Question Authority! It's a message that seems to be woven into our DNA as Americans. We live in a culture that fosters distrust, if not outright contempt, for those in authority. The lone rebel rising up against the system is a common theme in movies and literature. Cartoons and sitcoms are filled with idiot fathers and incompetent teachers just waiting to be mocked and abused.

Respect is no longer something that is given; it must be earned. This mind-set is difficult enough to address on its own. When you add corrupt politicians and absent or abusive parents into the mix, teaching the Fourth Commandment in today's world can become quite a daunting task.

Scripture Connect

In Ephesians 6:1-4 Paul comments on the unique nature of the Fourth Commandment. After instructing children on their obligation to their parents, he moves his attention to fathers.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (ESV)

In Romans 13:1-4 Paul writes about our duty to other earthly authorities. These authorities are given to us by God. They are set in place for our own good, but also have the ability (and duty) to punish those who violate the law.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (ESV)

Peter makes the same point in verses 13 and 14 of the second chapter of his first epistle.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. (ESV)

Doctrinal Quotation

The Fourth Commandment is very straight forward: honor your father and mother. However, its simplicity can cause us to pass it by without fully understanding its magnitude. Luther writes:

These are simple and easy words, and everybody thought he knew them before. Therefore, people pass by them lightly, crave other things, and do not see and believe that God is so greatly offended if these words are disregarded. They don't see that a person does a work so well pleasing and precious if he follows them. (Large Catechism, paragraph 140)

It is easy to overlook the importance of our duty to honor father and mother in our pursuit of other holy, God pleasing acts. There are many grandiose things done in the name of pleasing God that God has not commanded us to do. Yet here is a simple command that we too often neglect. Luther wanted to stress the

importance of this commandment. Comparing the work of a servant girl obeying her master to much of the work accomplished by monks he writes:

With her tidy work, for which she receives support and wages, she would gain such a treasure of good works. It would be unlike all those gained by people regarded by saints. Is it not an excellent boast to know and say that if you perform your daily domestic task, this is better than all the sanctity and ascetic life of monks? (Large Catechism, paragraph 145)

Luther also expands the scope of the Fourth Commandment in his explanation in the Small Catechism to include others in authority. We are commanded by God to honor our pastors, teachers, those who serve in the government and other positions of authority.

In this commandment belongs a further statement about all kinds of obedience to persons in authority who have to command and to govern. For all authority flows and is born from the authority of parents. (Large Catechism, paragraph 141)

The authority of all those who govern over us not only comes from God, but also flows from the authority He has given to fathers and mothers. Their service is intended to complement and support both the care and admonishment parents provide.

Application

We live in an environment that is extremely hostile toward the Fourth Commandment. How do we teach students to honor those who are in authority over us when our entire political system is based on our ability to remove from power those authorities who have displeased us? In a democracy, the power comes from the people. However, even though we have the ability to elect our leaders, their ultimate power does not come from below. It comes from above. No matter what their shortcomings may be, they have been placed there by God and are due our honor and respect.

Similarly, how do we teach students to honor their fathers and mothers when so many of them fall short of their duties as parents? Our world is filled with neglectful, absent and even abusive parents. Even the good ones have deficiencies. It's important to realize that the shortcomings of human authorities are a result of sin in our world, not of some failure in God's design.

There may be times when we find ourselves in a position where we must decide whether we will obey God or man. In those situations we must remember the First Commandment; you shall have no other gods. Yet it is this same God who instituted these and all other authorities. God has chosen to act in our world through the authorities He has set in place and we should be cautious any time we are tempted to go against them. We should encourage our students to seek ways to honor those in authority even when they seem least worthy of it. We trust that God can work His will despite the shortcomings of those He calls and sets in place. And we have this promise; that it may go well with us.