

Exodus 21:15, 17

I. Exodus 21:15–17

Whoever strikes his father or his mother **shall be put to death.**

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, **shall be put to death.**

Whoever curses his father or his mother **shall be put to death.**

Last week we saw that the punishment for *murdering* another person was death. We saw the reason for this in Numbers 35:

- Numbers 35:33 — Blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.

So the clear principle is “a life for a life” – the murderer’s life for the victim’s life. But here in these verses, we have the death penalty instituted in three cases where there was **no one** murdered, and **no** life taken. That’s what these three verses all have in common, and so that’s why they’re grouped together. Notice the repeated phrase, “shall be put to death... shall be put to death... shall be put to death.”

But why are they grouped in the **order** that they’re in? Why is the law about stealing a man and selling him stuck right in between two related laws about the treatment of one’s father or mother? Well, first of all, this is obviously another **sandwich** – just like we had last week. The sandwich structure immediately sets these three verses apart as a group, and it’s also a very helpful memory aid. So as we look at these verses, we’ll naturally look at verses 15 and 17 together.

II. Exodus 21:15 — Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

The Hebrew word for “strike” always implies a violent physical assault. So most commentators assume that this doesn’t include “minor” physical abuse like “slapping,” or “a single punch thrown in anger.” *Whether or not* that’s the case, the main thing I want us to see here is that this is the **only** time when a person must be *put to death* “simply” for striking (and *not* killing) another person.¹ So now we look at verse seventeen:

III. Exodus 21:17 — Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Once again, most commentators argue that this “cursing” envisions something really extreme. Like, for example, if a person “publicly, perhaps by an oath spoken in the name of Yahweh, assert[s] that he want[s] never again to have anything to do with his parents and [will] not respect or serve them any longer as their child, wishing only harm for them. Thus the curser would... neither obey his parents nor care for them in their old age as was the expected duty.” (Stuart) Once again, *whether or not* that’s the case, the main thing I want us to see here is that this is the

¹ There would be no sense in pointing out that someone who strikes and kills his parents must be put to death (cf. some commentators) as this would already be obvious from the preceding laws.

only time when a person must be *put to death* “simply” for cursing (and not even striking) another human being. So what does this mean?

IV. Exodus 21:15, 17 — Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death...
Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

The point is not that parental “*life*” is more valuable than other life, or that somehow fathers and mothers are of more worth in God’s sight than children. This is really, really important to understand, because we very quickly get into trouble when we start assuming that **penalties** always reflect on a sliding scale the **value** of human life. If this were the case, then, or course, the lives of fathers and mothers would be more valuable than most other life. On the other hand, we’ll read in verses 20-21:

“When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.”

And so one commentator dares to say: “Rather than being a picture of the slave’s worth, the opposite seems to be the case.” (Enns) This is a very foolish thing for this commentator to say. Just as the more severe penalty for a child striking or cursing his parents is **not** a reflection of the greater worth of parents in the parent-child relationship, so also the “apparently” less severe penalty for the master who strikes his slave is **not** a reflection of the “lesser” worth of the slave in the master-slave relationship. Enns has made the fundamental error of assuming that **penalties** always reflect on a sliding scale the value of human life. Later, we’ll look at verses 20-21, but for right now, the question is: If the severer penalty in the case of a child striking or cursing his parents is *not* a reflection of the greater worth of parents in the parent-child relationship, then exactly *what is it* reflecting? It reflects the fundamental, most basic, intrinsic nature of the parent-child **relationship**, in the same way that the penalty for the master who strikes his slave is a reflection of the fundamental, basic nature of the master-slave **relationship**. We can also think of how the death penalty for adultery (but **not** for all other sexual activity outside of marriage; cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:28-29) is a reflection of the most basic, most fundamental, intrinsic nature of the husband-wife **relationship**.

So, there’s something about the **relationship** of children to their parents that makes the **striking** or the **cursing** of parents (but not the striking or the cursing of anyone else) to be an offense that is justly and rightly punishable by **death**. Do we really understand what we’ve just said? My point this morning isn’t to analyze or try to define this relationship, but just to say that it’s obviously something exceedingly unique. Only of my parents can it be said that I “**came forth**” from them – and that’s saying something pretty astonishing. Only of Andrea and me could our children say that they “came forth” from us. And that’s saying something pretty wonderful and mysterious. So we read about Adam:

➤ Genesis 5:3 — When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son **in his own likeness, after his image**, and named him Seth.

Now this doesn't mean that *we created* our children or that *we* ultimately brought them into the world. The point here really isn't anything that any *parents* have ever done. There's a sense, here, in which all parents are just the "innocent bystanders." The point is *God's* sovereign **design**, which *He* hardwired into the creation itself when He said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply." (cf. Gen. 1:28)

And so, rooted in this reality that a child "comes forth" from his father and mother is this law that's also ingrained in the creation itself: **Children** are to **obey** and **honor** their **father and mother**. This explains why even those without God's law, and without any "special/redemptive" revelation of God's will are still held accountable to God for the disobeying or the dishonoring of their parents. Listen to Paul, in Romans chapter one:

- Romans 1:28–32 — And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, **disobedient to parents**, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things **deserve to die**, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.
- 2 Timothy 3:1–5 — But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, **disobedient to their parents**, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

So once again, we have to conclude that rooted in the reality that a child "comes forth" from his father and mother is this law, ingrained in creation itself: Children are to obey and honor their parents.

Contemporary Relevance and Application

Today, because we have denied the Creator *and* the Law-Giver, and exalted the autonomy and the independence of the creature, even if we want to defend the idea of children honoring and obeying their parents, we no longer have any solid basis on which to do so. If sexual reproduction is simply a product of the evolutionary process, and so there are no laws built into "creation" and there is no Law-Giver, then there is no ultimate ground on which to say that children should honor their parents, or even to interpret what this should mean. We see the effects of this in the world all around us – both in children and in parents. But I wonder if we can also see the subtle effects of this surrounding culture within our own Christian families. Are we faithful to live our lives not simply in light of "traditional" cultural values, but consciously and purposefully in light of the **law** of our Creator?

Now, of course, honoring one's parents will *look different* at different stages in the relationship, and also in different cultural contexts. There comes a point when children "leave" their father and mother (cf. Gen. 2:24) and are no longer accountable to "obey" them as they once did. A

married woman is no longer under the authority of her father, but now under the authority of her husband. (cf. Eph. 5; 1 Pet. 3) And yet the special and unique obligation of all children to faithfully honor their parents from the **heart** never goes away. We know this because no matter how old you get, it never stops being true that you came forth from your father and mother. The fundamental nature of the relationship never changes. And so one “law” that’s built into the fabric of every society on earth is the obligation of children to care for their parents as they grow older and are less and less able to care for themselves. (cf. Mat. 15:4-6; 1 Tim. 5:3-4, 8) I’m thankful to God for the many beautiful examples of obedience in this area that I’ve seen within our Church body. I’m especially grateful to see how these examples are motivated not only by love, but also by the desire of the children to be obedient to the Lord and honor Him.

But now I especially want to speak to all the children here who are still living under the roof and under the authority of their parents. I trust that none of you will ever actually strike or curse your parents, but think about the fact that these are sins that would justly *deserve* the *death* penalty and this will help you understand the full extent of your obligation before God to *obey*, rather, and to *honor* your parents from the heart. Children, you are to obey and honor your parents not because they are wiser than you, or better than you, or because they *deserve* your honor and obedience, but because this is the **law** of **God** – a law which you can see even in the fact that you came forth *from* your parents, so that you were conceived even in their image and after their likeness. After speaking first to husbands and wives, the Apostle Paul himself speaks directly to all of you here who are believing, Christian children as **equal and full** members of the body of Christ:

➤ Ephesians 6:1 — Children, obey your parents...

Not because of any merit or worthiness that your parents possess, but rather Paul says:

➤ Ephesians 6:1 — Children, obey your parents **in the Lord**, for this is **right**.

To all of you children here who have repented of your sins and put your faith in Christ, one of the most important ways that you live now as a new creation in Christ is by ***actively, diligently striving with all of God’s power that works within you*** to honor and obey your parents in everything – always remembering that this is ultimately your service and worship to the Lord **Jesus** Himself. I’ve been praying for you this week, that in your striving, God would truly give you His grace and His joy. And to all of you children who realize that you have not honored or obeyed your parents as God has commanded, I want to point you to **Jesus**. Luke says of Jesus:

➤ Luke 2:51 — And he went down with [His parents] and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.

Jesus always obeyed and honored his parents **perfectly** so that He might die in the place of sinners like us – who have not obeyed or honored our parents as we should. Look to Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing, and then look to Jesus as your perfect, wonderful **pattern and example**.

Now, our text this morning isn't technically about children obeying and honoring their parents; it's about the more severe penalty for a child who strikes or curses his parents. What we saw earlier is that this harsher penalty is not a reflection on the "worth" of children, but rather a reflection of the fundamental, most basic, intrinsic nature of the parent-child **relationship**. And so...

It's just as appropriate to think about what these verses mean for parents as it is to think about what they mean for children. I'm especially thinking here of Christian parents. When the Bible speaks of striking or cursing a parent, it's assuming a child who, in that culture, would have been considered an adult. So, understanding this first of all, how many fathers and mothers do you know who would be happy to think of their child being put to **death** – even their child who had assaulted or disowned them? I think of the "parental" quote made famous by the Cosby show: "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out." That's a truly terrible quote for all sorts of biblical reasons. And even though I know it wasn't at all meant to be taken literally, it is a sort of window into the arrogance of many parents – perhaps even *especially* Christian parents. What I need to have deeply ingrained into me is that my children are to honor me *not* because **I deserve** this honor, but rather because it's a fundamental law of God built into the very fabric and structure of creation itself. This is a huge distinction to make. No parent has ever *deserved* the honor and obedience of his or her children. And so what does this mean? In the first place, this means that I should never be *personally* **offended** when I am disobeyed or dishonored. This should cause us as parents to be truly **humble**, always avoiding even the thought or implication that we could have any fundamental, inherent worthiness in ourselves. We don't. In fact, the more we're aware of our own sins and failings, the more we'll feel **unworthy** of anyone's honor or obedience. But then it's precisely at *this point* that I need to go back, again, to the same place I just started from: The **reason** my children are to honor me is *not* because I *deserve* this honor, but simply because it's a fundamental law *of God*. And so now the same principle that replaces pride with a genuine lowliness and humility is also the principle that fills me with the loving **resolve** not ever to neglect my biblical duty as a parent. Some parents, today, may think it's funny to joke about taking their child out of this world, but it certainly wouldn't have been funny if you were living in the Old Covenant community of Israel. We read in the book of Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 21:18–21 — "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

Once again, the situation envisioned here is extremely serious. This is persistent, obstinate, heedless rebellion and wickedness with potential repercussions for the entire covenant community. Having said all that, these verses are certainly just as much a warning and exhortation to parents as they are to children. If my child could be put to death for striking or cursing me, or for living a rebellious and dissolute lifestyle, then what has just suddenly become my single greatest **goal** in life? Is it not to raise my child in such a way as to guarantee that this

will never, ever happen to him? As far as any *parent* is concerned, is not the application of these verses first and foremost **for me**, as a father who **loves** the children that God has given me?

Now, these “criminal penalties” for rebellious children were all given within the specific context of the Old Covenant community. There are important **biblical** reasons why these same penalties are *not* applied today in the context of the New Covenant community, and why the Bible doesn’t expect that they should *necessarily* be applied in our secular courts. But what we need to make sure we understand is that in the context in which they were given, these were the “**righteous judgments**” of God Himself. They were entirely **right** and **just**, revealing as they did the most basic, most fundamental nature of the parent-child relationship. And so even today, it’s *these* criminal penalties that should still be pointing us beyond themselves to the unchanging reality of **eternal** judgment. It’s here that we find the true biblical theology of the “rod.” A parent faithfully use the “rod” in discipline (whether literally and/or symbolically) only in order that he might *by all means* **save** his children from death.

- Proverbs 22:15 — Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.
- Proverbs 23:13–14 — Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.
- Proverbs 13:24 — Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.

The discipline of the Christian parent is intended to reflect the righteousness and the holiness of God so that the Gospel of the **grace** of Jesus Christ might come to be loved and embraced. May *all* that we do as parents truly be motivated by the single, driving desire for our children’s **salvation** to the glory of God.

- Ephesians 6:4b — Fathers... bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

And may this motivation be **pure** in us, untainted by the pride and arrogance that it’s so easy for any parent to have.

- Ephesians 6:4a — Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.

For all of us who have seen our failures—who see how we *have* provoked our children to anger—let us lift up our eyes to Jesus. Jesus exercised a perfect authority over His sheep (His disciples)—always mixed with just the right amount of gentleness, and always perfectly rooted in love. Think about that. And then He died in the place of sinful parents like us – who have all at one point or another abused our authority and betrayed our trust, even if only in our hearts. So let us, as parents, look to Jesus for His forgiveness and cleansing, and then also to Jesus for our perfect pattern and example.

May the parent-child relationships here at Living Word truly bring great glory to our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ.