

# THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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THE OLD TESTAMENT commandment to ‘Honour thy father and thy mother’ recurs frequently in early Christian teaching. It is on the lips of Jesus in Matthew 15.4, Matthew 19.19, Mark 10.19, and Luke 18.20. Paul the Apostle cites it in Ephesians 6.2. Far from being confined to Jews or the Jewish milieu in which the Bible was written, it was restated as a precept of Christian behaviour by two Christian philosophers in Greece—one in AD 125 (Aristides *Apology* 15), and the other around AD 177 (Athenagoras *Treatise on the Resurrection* 23)—as also by Bishop Theophilus of Antioch (*To Autolytus* 3.9) about the same time as Athenagoras, and by Bishop Irenaeus in France in the AD 180s (*Against Heresies* 4.12.5). Also in the second century AD, the command to honour one’s parents was included in a consolidation of the four Gospels and other direct teachings of Jesus into a single continuous narrative (*Diatessaron* 28.46). This became the standard text of the gospel in the Syrian church until the fifth century. The present article examines the extent and parameters of such honour in the light of the wider context of the New Testament.

These second-century authors enjoyed an advantage over us because they lived in an era when unwritten teachings and Bible interpretations of Jesus and His apostles were still fresh in Christian memory, and before there had been time for Christian observances and understanding of the law of Christ to be significantly altered. Irenaeus is a good case in point. His early Christian training came from men who had personally learned from and worked with the Apostle John, one of whom was probably ‘the angel of the church

in Smyrna’ addressed in Revelation 2.8, where ‘angel’ means any message-bearer, human or supernatural.

Origen Adamantius was another important witness to early Christian understanding. Raised in a Christian home, he became dean of the world’s foremost institute of Christian higher learning at an early age, and later the most outstanding Bible scholar, preacher, and teacher of the first half of the third century. Being called upon by bishops throughout the Middle East as an expert on the Faith, he travelled extensively and was therefore better able to observe and record church practice in different countries and regions than any other Christian author. In Christianity’s first book of systematic theology (*On First Principles* 2.4.2), and his *Commentaries on Matthew* (11.9), *on Romans* (2.9.1), and *on Ephesians* (6.1-3), he stated the commandment to honour one’s parents was still binding in his day. Just before the AD 250s, which coincides with the end of Origen’s ministry, an anonymous compilation of Christian precepts repeats the Fourth Commandment as still operative (*Three Books of Testimonies* 3.70).

Origen and his teacher Clement are known for their allegorical, or spiritual, method of interpreting Scripture. It posits that, whenever possible, an interpreter should look beyond the plain, literal sense of a passage to uncover the deeper, spiritual meaning—especially when a passage is unclear or difficult, or appears to contradict another part of the Bible. However, Origen taught, some biblical commands are so plain on their face that they require no deeper investigation but are to be understood literally. One such is the Fourth Command-

ment, which he characterized as ‘useful, apart from all allegorical meaning, and ought to be observed’ (*On First Principles* 4.1.19; ANF 4.368).

### *The Command to Hate and Love*

On the other hand, Jesus also taught that His followers are to hate their parents rather than love them (Luke 14.26). He also prophesied that the gospel will divide families and pit some household members into conflict against others (Matthew 10.34-37). These two passages were also quoted by His disciples, but seldom by the above-mentioned ones that counselled honouring one’s parents. Nor did most of those that restated the Fourth Commandment refer to Matthew 10.36f or Luke 14.26.

In the late second or early third century, both passages were regarded as binding by Tertullian (*De Corona* 11; *On Prayer* 8; *Scorpiace* 10). He had been a prominent lawyer in a system of secular law that prized the cohesion of the family and the authority of fathers over it, much more than the Mosaic Law or our own. After being converted, he became a prolific Christian author and the founder of Latin Christian literature. Somewhat strangely, *De Corona* 11 states that we are both to ‘honour’ and ‘love’ our parents—one of only two references to loving them in Christian writings before the mass apostasy and decimating epidemic of AD 249-251.

The other reference is in the *Gospel of Thomas* in the second half of the second century. As often with the contents of this *Gospel*, sayings on parents are ambiguous and contradictory. According to Saying 101, Jesus taught that whoever does not hate their parents cannot be a Christian, but then states that whoever does not love them as He does cannot be a disciple either. Saying 55 repeats the command to hate mother, father, and siblings. Nowhere does this *Gospel* touch on honouring them.



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### *Attempts to Reconcile the Precepts*

Can we love our parents and hate them at the same time? More *apropos* to our main topic: can we honour them without loving them?

Origen’s predecessor was Clement, who was the principal Christian writer of the AD 190s. He pointed out that a literal interpretation of Luke 14.26 would conflict with Christ’s other directives to love one’s enemies. If we are to love our enemies, wrote Clement, it stands to reason that we must love our families; and if we hate those nearest to us by natural affection, even more so would we hate our enemies.

Clement explained that even a literal interpretation of Luke 14.26 conveys a consistent intention. A Christian is to oppose and resist, even hate, anyone who tempts them to do anything detrimental to their soul’s salvation, or who constitutes ‘a hindrance to faith and an impediment to the higher life’ (*Quis Dives Salvetur* 22; ANF 2.597), be they family member or an enemy on other grounds. The key factor is whether they lead one to or away from Christ (*Quis Dives Salvetur* 23). I imagine the same could be said of honouring.

Clement did, however, deal directly with the seeming contradiction between the commandment to honour one’s parents and the command to hate them, but produced an allegorical interpretation that does not really answer the question. Clement’s harmonizing of the two produced the advice not to allow oneself to go astray through evil customs and irrational impulses, including sexual impulses

(*Stromata* 3.15 [97]). Origen later commented that Christians should sever relations with parents that hamper or retard their spiritual lives (*Commentary on Matthew* 13.25).

Thus, quoting different Gospel verses led to two lines of thought within ancient Christianity. Nevertheless, nobody before AD 250 said that the Fourth Commandment was no longer binding. Apparently, a Christian may hate their parents so long as s/he honours them.

### ***What Honour Entails: General***

We can determine where to draw the line, and what sorts of behaviour fulfil the duty of honouring, if we examine specific actions and attitudes that New Testament and near-Biblical writers said we should practise in relation to our parents. Then, to tease out the full scope and meaning of the Fourth Commandment, the present article will consider categories of other people that ancient Christian sources said we are to honour, and apply the implications of such honouring to relations with one's parents.

Early Christian literature, both New Testament and post-biblical, contains a number of specific precepts as to how Christians are to treat their parents, which presumably indicate what is entailed in honouring them. Starting with the strongest and most obvious, we are not to murder them. This is attested by 1 Timothy 1.19, the Christian philosopher Aristides of Athens AD 125 (*Apology* 9), Bishop Melito of Sardis in the third quarter of the second century (*De Pascha* 52), the Syriac recension of the anonymous *Oratio ad Graecos* in the first half of the third century, and the mid-second century *Acts of John* 48 (an account of the deeds and preaching of the Apostle John). Tertullian especially condemned 'parricidal lust' (*On Modesty* 14; ANF 4.90).

Melito also preached against assaulting one's father (*De Pascha* 51).

Jesus forbade cursing one's parents and

speaking evil of them (Matthew 15.4; Mark 7.10). He and Origen condemned annuity trust fund arrangements whereby an adult child could evade the obligation to support their parents in old age (Matthew 15.5; Mark 7.11f; Origen *Commentary on Matthew* 11.9f).

Ridiculing one's father and dishonouring one's mother are condemned by the Christian *Sibylline Oracles* (1.75), a collection of teachings ascribed to a pagan prophetess as predicting the coming of Christ alongside the Jewish prophets, into which collection Christian material was inserted. The Sibyl also denounced abandoning parents in old age (2.274), disrespectfully talking back to them (2.276), and hostility to them because of money matters (2.118).

On the positive side, the *Greek Apocalypse of Baruch*, also known as *3 Baruch*, implies that sons owe a duty to pity or have mercy on their fathers (4.17). This book was composed in the first or second century AD and was received as Scripture by some early Christians.

### ***What Honour Entails: Obedience***

Obedience to parents was inculcated by a few sources: Ephesians 6.1; Colossians 3.20; Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 3); and Origen (*Commentary on Ephesians* 6.1-3; *Homilies on Luke* 20.5). On the reverse side of the coin, disobedience by either Christians or non-Christians was condemned: Romans 1.30; 2 Timothy 3.2; *Sibylline Oracles* 2.275; and Origen *Homilies on Judges* 4.3.41-43. They included limits, qualifications, restrictions, and other factors relevant to such obedience. For instance, Origen pointed out that Ephesians 6.1 reads 'obey your parents in the Lord' rather than 'obey your parents in the flesh' and indicated that children are to obey only when father and mother command something that accords with God's will; they are not to obey their 'parents in the flesh' who command something contrary to it.

A problem arises when somebody outside

the family has an equal or greater claim on a Christian's obedience than parents. Hebrews 13.7 speaks of 'them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God', which can indicate only office-bearers in the church. A decade or two later, this was reinforced by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch when he exhorted: 'obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind' (*Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2; ANF 1.58), and said of a deacon in another congregation: 'whose friendship may I ever enjoy, inasmuch as he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ' (*Letter to the Magnesians* 2; ANF 1.59).

In the mid-second century, the oldest surviving Christian sermon outside the New Testament predicted a hellish afterlife for people that 'knew not and believed not and obeyed not the elders who show us plainly of our salvation.' (2 *Clement* 17.5; ANF 10.255f).

In the AD 180s, Irenaeus stated that

it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church,—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. (*Against Heresies* 4.26.2; ANF 1.497)

Complicating the matter is the attribution to Jesus in the mid-second century that all Christians are to love and obey each other (*Epistle of the Apostles* 18). The Apostle Peter would have us obey every human ordinance, not only Christian ones (1 Peter 2.13).

### *Honour Others*

Similarly, Christians are to honour people other than their father and mother. Here too are many categories of positions, roles, and offices in society and church that the ancient sources said should be honoured. By observing who these categories were, we can ascertain how and to what extent parents are to be honoured in our time and our lives. If we take

our cue from the way our own parents behave towards people in these categories, we will fulfil the duty to honour mother and father by treating our parents exactly as our parents treat these people.

First of all, Christians are to honour the clergy. Origen preached that, at a minimum, believers are to bow and exhibit courtesy to them and to 'other servants of God' (*Homilies on Joshua* 10.3; p. 112). Just as Jesus Christ submitted to Joseph and the Virgin Mary, so Christians are to be subject, not only to fathers, but also to their bishop and presbyters/church elders (Origen *Homilies on Luke* 20.5). A first-century manual of church and personal Christian practice mandated: 'My child, him that speaketh to thee the word of God remember night and day; and thou shalt honour him as the Lord.' (*Didache* 4.1; ANF 7.378). This manual was the *Didache*, which may have been composed before the Gospel of Matthew. About the same era, Hebrews 13.7 called for remembering rulers of the church who spoke the word of God to its readers. First Thessalonians 5.12f is to the same effect. In the opening years of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote: 'It is well to reverence both God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does [in reality] serve the devil.' (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 9.1; ANF 1.90)

'Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.' (1 Timothy 5.17) Does this mean double honour to church elders/presbyters, and apparently only single honour to parents? What acts manifest a 'double honour'? Describing a practice to which he was hostile, Tertullian around AD 210 deplored that for majority Christians it meant giving a presbyter twice as much food and drink at a church supper than to a layperson (*On Fasting* 17). This is corroborated by a Syrian church manual compiled in the first three decades of the third century, which inci-

dentally coincides with the first half of Origen's writing ministry and is roughly the time when Tertullian made his comment. According to the church manual, deacons are to be given twice the helping of 'widows' (forerunners of nuns), and the presbyters four times as much, 'for they ought to be honoured as the Apostles' (*Didascalia* 9). When honouring was done by way of food, parents were accorded no such privileged status.

The phrase 'double honour' calls for further examination, especially in light of the wide array of persons Christians were obliged to honour. Ought father and mother be honoured specially or more than other people? The ancient Christian evidence is mixed. Tertullian stated that Christian law demands that we 'honour and love next to God Himself' mother, fathers, and nearest kinfolk (*De Corona* 11). The *Sibylline Oracles* agrees. 'First, honour God, then your parents.' (1.60) On the other hand, the *Sentences of Sextus* has 'After God, honour the sage.' (244). A collection of practical maxims and instructions for the Christian life, the *Sentences of Sextus* proved very popular among Christians after its composition in the mid-second century and was often translated into other languages. Comparing it to Tertullian and the Sibyl reveals that there was not the agreement as to the degree and priority of honour due to parents that there was to the sentiment that they be honoured in some fashion.

However, if presbyters and other clergy hold the place of God in relation to an individual Christian, there is no conflict. This would render the Sibyl as directing: 'First, honour your clergy, then your parents', and Tertullian as 'honour and love parents next to clergy.'

Christianity before the mass apostasy and epidemic of AD 249-251 required that honour be shown toward all elders, not just holders of the office of church elder. In the middle or late first century, when some apostles were still alive, the church at Rome exhorted that at Corinth: 'Let us reverence the Lord

Jesus Christ, whose blood was given for us; let us esteem those who have the rule over us; let us honour the aged among us' (*1 Clement* 21.6; ANF 1.11). Describing relations within the Christian community about a century later, Athenagoras noted that believers regarded their age-mates as brothers and sisters, 'and to the more advanced in life we give the honour due to fathers and mothers.' (*Legatio* 32; ANF 2.146). Such honour included taking care that the older people remain free of sexual sins, such as kissing for pleasure (*Legatio* 32).

Husbands have a duty to 'honour' their wives (1 Peter 3.7). Both the Apostle Paul and Origen considered it 'fitting' that wives submit to (obey) their husbands (Colossians 3.18; *Homilies on Exodus* 13.5).

There are yet other categories of people Christians are to honour. First Timothy 5.3 instructs that well-behaved widows/nuns be honoured, as does *Three Books of Testimonies* 3.74. Origen called on Christian brothers to honour everyone that performs good works in the churches, especially women (*Commentary on Romans* 10.17.2). *Sextus* opined that anybody that does not honour seekers of knowledge and wisdom show ingratitude to God (*Sentences of Sextus* 229).

According to 1 Peter 2.13f and 17 and Origen (*Commentary on Romans* 9.29), Christians are to honour and submit to kings and other secular rulers. In our own day, Members of Parliament and cabinet ministers bear the title 'Honourable' in front of their names, and state lieutenant-governors and some judges are addressed as 'Your Honour'.

Indeed, all Christians have a duty to honour each other (Romans 12.10). Quoting Psalm 15.4, Origen preached that honour will be shown to all who fear God (*Homilies on Jeremiah* 16.6.2)

As if this were not broad enough, 1 Peter 2.17 commands 'Honour all people' in a context that indicates that it is to be shown to non-Christians as well. In a presentation of Christian ways to a pagan readership, Tatian

the Assyrian in the mid-second century wrote that ‘Man is to be honoured as a fellow-man’ (*Address to the Greeks* 4; ANF 2.66). The Apostle Paul would have a Christian honour his or her own body of flesh (1 Thessalonians 4.4).

### Conclusion

There thus appears great diversity and a wide range as to who is to be honoured and to what extent. Keeping this scope and variety in mind when we examine all New Testament writings in their Christian context as a whole, we must select the closest dictionary meanings of the verb ‘honour’ for the Fourth Commandment. These are ‘respect’, ‘esteem’, and ‘be courteous toward’. A person can exhibit all these to one person without diminishing those to another, and more honour can be displayed to one person than to another. Twice as much respect, esteem, and courtesy (‘double honour’) can be demonstrated towards one person or category of persons, and is compatible with showing a lesser degree to others.

In neither dictionaries nor early Christian literature does the Fourth Commandment require obedience or submission. Still less does it require an internal contest in priorities as to obeying one person or category of persons when another person or category mandates the opposite, for the answer in any such contest would be clear and automatic.

The thrust and meaning of the many exhortations to honour your father and mothers indicate, and require no more than, being civil to your parents and refraining from needlessly harming them. No more honour, respect, esteem, or courtesy need be shown to them than other people. Underage children, at least, are to render obedience to them, but only if it does not conflict with a higher duty of obedience to someone else. Except in the sense that Christians are to love their neighbours and everyone else, loving one’s parents is not mandatory for salvation, for it is advocated only by later authors rather than Scripture, and is contraindicated by others. Filial love is merely an elective, and applicable only when it promotes your spiritual growth.

### NOTES

Except where otherwise indicated, all patristic quotations are as translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. American Reprint of the Edinburgh ed by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885-96; continuously reprinted Edinburgh: T & T Clark; Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm B Eerdmans; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson), herein cited as ‘ANF’

The quotation from the *Sentences of Sextus* is from *The Sentences of Sextus* trans Richard A. Edwards and Robert A. Wild (Chico, California:

Scholars Press, 1981) © 1981 Society of Biblical Literature, p. 45

The quotation from the *Sibylline Oracles* is from the translation by J. J. Collins in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1 Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments pp. [327]-472 ed. by James H Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) © James H. Charlesworth 1983, p. 346

The quotation from the *Didascalia* is from *Didascalia apostolorum; The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments* by R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929) p. 90

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