

“The Sin of Ham”

Genesis 9:18-29

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4th Sunday of Easter

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This morning, as we continue in our series in Genesis, we'll be looking at Genesis 9:18-29 - the text is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to follow along there.

This is the account of what took place after Noah and his family and the animals left the ark, and God established his covenant with them.

It is, without question, a strange story. But it is also fascinating and rich and meaningful, and has much to teach us to today.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word. It is more to be desired than gold; even much fine gold. It is sweeter also than honey; sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb.

*18 The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) 19 These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.*

*20 Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. 21 He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. 22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. 23 Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. 24 When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, 25 he said,*

*“Cursed be Canaan;  
a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.”*

*26 He also said,  
"Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem;  
and let Canaan be his servant.*

*27 May God enlarge Japheth,  
and let him dwell in the tents of Shem,  
and let Canaan be his servant."*

*28 After the flood Noah lived 350 years. 29 All the days of Noah were 950 years,  
and he died.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

The first thing to notice about our text this morning is that this story is very clearly a kind of "fall" narrative, a recapitulation in many ways, of Genesis 3.

Noah is now the new head of the human race, just as Adam was.

God has graciously given the whole world to Noah, just as he did to Adam, and instructed him to rule over the animals and to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

And now, Noah, as the new Adam, plants a vineyard, which should remind us of the Garden of Eden.

But, just like the Garden of Eden, this garden of Noah becomes also a place of sin, transgression, and a kind of fall.

After planting the vineyard, Genesis tells us that "Noah drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent."

Now, this is undoubtedly the first thing that goes wrong in this passage.

Noah plants a vineyard, grows grapes, ferments the grapes, makes wine, and overindulges to the extent that he becomes drunk and lays down unclothed in his tent — presumably, he falls asleep.

The Scripture of course, do not forbid the making or the drinking of alcohol (for example, as Psalm 104 puts it: “God gave wine to gladden the heart of man”), but the Bible does forbid, on a number of occasions, becoming drunk on wine or other alcohol.

I don't think there's any responsible way to read this text without seeing Noah's actions here as sinful, and a failure in his responsibility as both Father and the head of the human race at this time.

However, we must also note that Noah's sin is mitigated by his actions after he becomes drunk, and his sin is certainly not the major sin in the text.

The significant problem with drunkenness, according the Bible, is that becoming drunk leads us to lose self-control, to lower our inhibitions, and to make us more prone to other, more serious sins.

Those who are drunk are more likely to fail to keep their obligations to others, they are more likely to speak wickedly in anger or commit sexual sins, they are more likely to commit acts of abuse or violence or manslaughter.

But notice what Noah does in his drunkenness. He goes into the privacy of his tent, he takes off his clothes, and he goes to sleep. He limits the effects of his sin.

But while Noah is asleep in his tent, a worse sin takes place.

His son Ham enters Noah's tent and sees the nakedness of his father — and then he goes outside and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth what he saw.

What happens here is very significant, and Ham's sin is the real "fall," and the major sin that takes place in this narrative.

Remember that the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden in Genesis 3 is fundamentally a sin of rebellion against the authority of the Father, and Ham's sin here is a sin of rebellion against his earthly father.

Ham invades the privacy of his father's tent (the equivalent of his father's house and bedroom) and deliberately looks at his father, sleeping naked, under the influence of wine.

But then, even worse, Ham, instead of covering his father's nakedness, instead of dealing respectfully with his father's weakness and sin, Ham goes outside and intentionally defames his father's reputation, telling his brothers what he saw.

The Scripture does not tell us explicitly what Ham's motives were in this act.

Was he simply foolish and reckless in his actions, or is something darker happening here — is he seeking to lead his brothers in some kind of rebellion against their father? The text does not tell us.

But either way, Ham's sin is significant, particularly because it is against his father, and his brothers' righteous response shows, by way of contrast, the wickedness of Ham's actions.

Notice what Shem and Japheth do in response to Ham's words about their father. The narrative gives us a great deal of detail here:

*23 Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness.*

With deliberate intention, Shem and Japheth respectfully honor their father in his naked and vulnerable state.

They enter his tent walking backward, holding a garment between them, and they approach Noah in such a way that they do not even see their father's nakedness — instead, they discreetly and respectfully cover the nakedness of their father.

Instead of taking advantage of their father's inebriation, or shaming their father in his nakedness, Shem and Japheth act as faithful sons, honoring their father by covering him.

Notably, this story is not only about the sin of Ham, it is also just as much or more about the righteousness of Shem and Japheth, and that pattern plays out in the curse and blessings that come after Noah awakes from his sleep.

Noah begins by cursing Canaan, the son of Ham — instead of being given authority, the son of Ham's authority will be taken away, and he will be a servant of servants to his brothers.

One of the odd things about this text is that Ham himself is not cursed by Noah, but instead Ham's son seems to receive the punishment for Ham's sin. Why is that? Ultimately the text does not tell us.

One possibility is that Canaan's character was like that of his father, he was in some way a part of the rebellion. Another possibility is that this is simply another Scriptural example of how the sins of the father are visited on his sons — Ham sought to elevate his position, and instead, his son was brought down low.

But again, notice that the emphasis in the text is not so much on the curse given to Canaan, as it is the blessings given to Shem and Japheth.

Noah blesses his faithful sons, saying:

*“Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem;  
and let Canaan be his servant.  
May God enlarge Japheth,  
and let him dwell in the tents of Shem,  
and let Canaan be his servant.”*

And then, with a summary statement, the story of Noah ends. His death is noted. His time on the page is finished. His last recorded act is that of blessing his faithful sons for how they honored their father by covering his nakedness.

So, how then do we apply this story? What is the meaning for our lives?

Now, of course, we could make some applications regarding the dangers of alcohol and drunkenness, particularly for those who hold authority. And certainly this story points to those things.

Alcohol is a gift to be enjoyed, but particularly for those who are responsible for others - parents, leaders, etc., alcohol is something to be enjoyed very carefully, wisely, and moderately.

But fundamentally, this story is a dramatic picture of the significance and meaning of what is commonly referred to as the “Fifth Commandment,” the commandment which reads as we heard in Deuteronomy this morning:

*Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

Now, I think it’s possible that in the landscape of the Ten Commandments, the Fifth Commandment might be taken less seriously than it should.

We can easily acknowledge that things like murder and theft and adultery and idol worship and lying are wicked.

But honoring our father and mother? Is that really an ironclad commandment? I mean, aren't there exceptions, aren't there disclaimers? What if your father or mother just isn't that righteous or kind or reasonable? What then?

Our relationship to this commandment gets even more complicated however, when we consider its full implications.

Our Larger Catechism states that the Fifth Commandment means that we are not only to honor our literal father and mother, but also that we must honor "all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in a place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth" [what we refer to today as "government."]

In other words, we believe that the fifth commandment requires that we honor all of those in authority over us — and particularly those in family, church, or government.

Why is the fifth commandment so important? Why does it matter so much to God - as we see both in this story, and in its inclusion in the Ten Commandments?

I think a large part of the answer to that question is that keeping the fifth commandment, honoring our Father and our Mother, and all those in authority over us, no matter the realm, is a way in which we take seriously God's sovereignty in our lives.

You see, generally speaking, we don't choose those who are in authority over us. We certainly don't choose our parents. God chooses them for us.

We don't typically choose whoever is our authority at work. But if we take God's sovereignty seriously, we have to acknowledge that he chose that person to be in that position.

The same is true, of course for our dealings with the government. We may have some small influence over who our political leaders are, but ultimately, God has placed those persons in the positions of authority that they hold.

And so, ultimately, honoring those in authority over us is a way of submitting to God's authority, God's right to sovereignly place persons in positions over us — even persons whom we personally might believe to be unworthy of that authority.

Clearly, to honor our father and our mother, is ultimately, to honor God and his sovereign rule — his wisdom, his right to determine the circumstance of our lives.

So what does it mean to honor our father and mother, as God commands?

Our passage this morning gives us some real insights, particularly when it comes to the question of what it means to honor someone in authority over us who is in a place of weakness and vulnerability and even failure in their responsibilities.

As we've discussed, this passage begins with the failure of Noah, the father. It was not right for him to get drunk. But Noah, like all us, was a mortal man, a sinner, and in this moment, in his weakness, he failed in his responsibilities.

Ham's behavior is a demonstration of what it means to break the Fifth Commandment in this situation. He invaded his father's tent, looked on his shame and his nakedness, and then shared what he had seen with his brothers.



Instead of honoring his father, Ham dishonors him. Instead of responding to his father's failure with care and gentleness and respect, Ham accentuates and even exposes his father's shame.

In contrast, Shem and Japheth show us in this passage what it means to faithfully keep the fifth commandment.

And it's important to remember that the fifth commandment is phrased by God as a positive commandment. We are not told "*Thou Shall Not Dishonor Thy Father And Mother*" — no, we're told as a positive command that we must fulfill — Honor your father and mother.

And Shem and Japheth show us what this looks like, particularly what it means to honor a parent in a moment of weakness.

When Shem and Japheth hear of their father's failure, they refuse to join Ham in looking on his nakedness.

Instead, they, with great intentionality and care, walking backwards with a cloak between them, cover their father's shame. And in this, they honor their father, as God requires.

I think what Shem and Japheth do here is a beautiful and profound picture of what it means to faithfully keep the Fifth Commandment in our lives. It's worth meditating on this picture of what they do here.

I mean, think of how gentle and careful and respectful they are to their father, in response to his weakness.

Think of these sons walking backwards slowly, carefully, to place a robe over their father's nakedness, to restore his honor instead of stripping it away.

All of us have parents, all of us have persons in authority over us, who fail us. Who fall short of the mark. But how do we deal with them in that place of failure and weakness?

Do we deal with them carefully and respectfully, seeking to gently cover their shame? Or do we expose and exploit their weakness?

Now, to be clear, there *are* times when we must expose the sin of our parents or the sin of those in authority over us — and doing so is not a violation of the Fifth Commandment.

If a parent or an authority figure is abusing their power, using their authority to harm or abuse or violate those under them, then it is absolutely righteous to expose their sin, despite the harm it may do to their reputation.

But that's not the situation in our passage this morning.

Noah's sin is a sin of weakness, of human frailty. He's not abusing others in his drunken state — he's sleeping in his tent.

And so, Shem and Japheth are right to cover their Father's shame, and to respect him — even in a moment where he has, in a sense, let them down and failed in his role as father.

And I think they do so in a way that is beautiful, and worthy of emulation.

As we close this morning, I just want to say that, in my years of serving as your pastor, I have had the privilege of watching many remarkable examples of what it means to honor your father and mother, particularly examples of what it means to honor your father and mother in their advanced age and weakness.

What I mean is that I have watched again and again as men and women in this congregation have patiently and kindly and respectfully cared for and served their parents in their declining years — all the way up to their deaths.

I have seen you all do this — honor your fathers and your mothers — in difficult, trying situations — and do it without complaint — rather, to do it joyfully and humbly.

And, as I have seen those things, it has been a profound and compelling picture of the gospel and the faithfulness of God.

Remember, beloved, as we seek to keep this commandment that it is, as Paul puts it in Ephesians, the first commandment with a promise. (And to be clear, this promise isn't just about long life or receiving land in an earthly sense — this is a promise that refers to the resurrection).

And as we keep this commandment — even in difficult situations, even with parents and other authority figures who fail us — I am convinced that God will be faithful to keep his promise as well.

Listen again, to both the command and the promise, and be encouraged:

*Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.