

# When Honoring Parents Trumps Christian Duty



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**W**ith the recent changes in China, families can now have two children. Much has been written about this and the impact of this policy. I heard about a Chinese mother who was only able to have one child, a boy.

However, that boy died in a car accident in his 20s. Now, they suffer the pain of loss, complicated by the fact that they can't have more children, they grieve in ways most of us can not understand. I can't imagine the pain she and her husband feel.

Think for a minute how you might feel if this were you. What would be your biggest concern. She raised the question: who will take care of his grave when we are gone? Who will take care of our grave when we are gone?

While most westerners don't think in those ways, it draws us into the issue of family honor. All of it is impacted by how we look at God's law, "honor your father and your mother..." (Exodus 20:12) It is the only one of the ten commandments that comes with a promise: "that your days may be long..." Jesus chastised the religious leaders when they didn't do this. (Matthew 15:1-9) Paul talks about this and the promise in Ephesians 6:2.

Many Christians consider the "veneration of ancestors" is a form of worship and automatically reject. But a number of Asian mission and

church leaders I know take a different view. They believe taking care of parent's graves is a great way of honoring parents. Often, they came to faith when they were younger and rejected the family's annual trips to the grave—thus offending non-believing family. Later, one brother I know, came to believe he was wrong, and brought dishonor to his parents—which he did not need to do because of his faith.

Too often, we use biblical passages as "weapons" over others. In the U.S., the elderly are not honored, families are splintered. We don't even understand shame and honor. So we excuse our actions under the guise of "obeying God and not man."

So, let's apply this to an actual situation a global worker in Thailand experienced. For context: it is very hard for us to fully grasp the profound importance to a Buddhist mother for her son to serve in the Buddhist Temple/Monastery for a short time. To some this is the main reasons younger Thai men do not believe in Christ. The Thai young man in this story had promised his mother he would serve in the Monastery before he trusted Christ. After he believed, he said he felt relieved that he didn't have to (some Christians told him he must not.) After some discussion, the global worker asked:

"Did you borrow any money from the bank to go to school?"

Thai young man: "Yes"

Worker: "When did you borrow it?"

Young man: "As a freshman, prior to entering school."

Worker: "That is great, you borrowed it before you came to Christ, now there is no need to pay it back."

Young man: "What? What do you mean?"

Worker: "You made a promise to your Mom which you no longer consider binding because you came to Christ. Why would the promise to the bank still be binding?"

The worker went on to discuss God's sovereignty in his earlier promise. The first question to answer was if his promise was still binding—not *how* to keep it. Just because you may not know how to keep it doesn't mean it is not binding. Instead of thinking, "What will the Christians think?" he should consider, "How do I become a Monk and remain loyal to Christ?"

In effect, the worker was asking: are the sovereign acts of God no longer sovereign or binding because my birth place, nation, people, parents, culture...all happened before Christ entered my life? In Christ my sins are forgiven but I am still responsible.

Another friend noted that respect for our fathers/elders often includes dimensions of covenant with family and community that new believers are not released from in Jesus. Our commitment to Christ can increase our connectedness to family and community. We know some will reject us, but often even in hostile contexts, family members see the new lifestyle of a believing brother or sister as a clear testimony of Christ's power to change lives. Why cut off that witness unnecessarily. 