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## Children and Parents

### Ephesians 6:1-4

**Intro:** We are in the middle of Paul's application of all the biblical doctrine or Christian theology that he delivered in the first 3 chapters. He began in ch<sup>4</sup> by exhorting believers to live for God's glory and he uses a metaphor of walking to refer to how we are to accomplish this. The majority of the chapter is taken up by the exhortation to walk in unity and to walk in purity. As ch<sup>5</sup> opens, Paul goes on to exhort believer to be imitators of God, at least to the degree that we are able to, such as that of a child who imitates the chief characteristics of their parents. The application of this is that since God is love, Christians should walk in love; since God is light, Christians should both walk in light and be light and; since God is truth and that truth has been given to us through His Word and taught to us by His Spirit, believers should walk in wisdom. Paul goes on to explain what walking in wisdom should look like and the final characteristic is that of submission to one another.

Paul then spends the remainder of ch<sup>5</sup> and the first section of ch<sup>6</sup> explaining in glorious detail how submission should play out in the life of the individual believer and, by extension, the Body of Christ as a whole. The first place that Christian, Spirit-filled submission should be practiced is in the home and that's exactly where Paul starts. He addresses Christian wives first, exhorting them to submit to their own husbands as to the Lord (<sup>22</sup>). Then, not willing to leave well enough alone, he addresses Christian husbands by exhorting them to love their wives just as Christ also loved the church (<sup>25</sup>). These qualifying statements indicate that both the submission of the wives and the love of the husbands were not just exemplified by Christ but are actually an important part of their Christian service to Christ.

Again, while the exhortation for wives to submit to their own husbands may seem archaic and restrictive to the mindset of our modern society, even causing some to recoil in feigned offense at the Bible's attempt to reinforce and perpetuate the supposed evils of the patriarchy on women, the reality is that what Paul says here to the Christian women of his day was not only liberating but it provided them with a sense of security that women in the pagan world never had or ever experienced. Paul's command to husbands

meant that their wives, while fulfilling a different role in the household, still had agency in the household- their opinions and concerns now mattered greatly in the husband's role as head of the household. But, as radical and wonderful as this new freedom and security was for Christian wives of that day, it was nothing compared to the freedom and security provided to the next group Paul will address.

**1** – Paul returns to his original subject by addressing the duty of children toward their parents. It's another example of submission by Christians to Christians, going back to his thematic statement in **5:21**: Submitting to one another in the fear of God. But before we deal directly with Paul's teaching on children, it is worth noting that nothing in all history has done so much for the elevation and development of children as Christianity.

There's no question that Christianity greatly advanced the position of women in society but that elevation, great as it was, is overshadowed by the improvement in the status of children. William Barclay notes correctly that under the Roman law of *patria potestas* (the father's power), "A Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves; he could make them work in his fields, even in chains; he could take the law into his own hands, for law was in his own hands, and he could punish as he liked; he could even inflict the death penalty on his child. Further, the power of the Roman father extended over the child's whole life, so long as the father lived. A Roman son never came of age."

There was also the matter of child rejection or repudiation, which resulted in the exposure of the newborn. When a baby was born it was placed before its father. If the father stooped and lifted the child, the child was accepted and was raised as his. If he turned away, the child was rejected and was literally discarded. Such rejected children were either left to die, or they were picked up by those who trafficked in infants. These people raised children to be slaves or to stock the brothels. One Roman father wrote to his wife from Alexandria: "If—good luck to you!—you have a child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, throw it out." Against such pagan cruelty the new relations of parents to children and children to parents brought by the Christian gospel stand forth like sunshine after a dismal storm.

But, before we dig into exactly what Paul says about submission, let's consider the ramifications of how Paul goes about this particular

exhortation. The first thing that stands out is the fact that Paul addresses children directly, as if he expects them to read his letter for themselves – or at least to hear it read to them. In contrast to other household codes of the ancient world, which usually didn't address children at all since their obedience was assumed; here, children are considered as having agency of their own. They're not just to take up space in the pew or populate the Sunday School but they are to hear and accept instruction directly from the apostle rather than have their conduct determined entirely by their parents. As part of the household code, this instruction doesn't necessarily apply to grown children who have left the home; although, as we'll see, adult children are still expected to honor their parents.

As Paul addresses the duty of children to submit to their parents, he stresses 2 matters: obedience and honor. Obedience is the fundamental relationship of children to parents. Obedience is actually a subset of submission. Submission is a rather broad category with various types of expression – obedience being one type of submission. Of course, as we'll see, it's not an absolute obedience that Paul is referring to here (ie: if a parent should command a child to do a wicked or un-Christian thing) but it should always be obedience offered in the context of a loving parent-child relationship. Still, it's a true obedience that should be guided by love for the parents and love for Christ.

First, Paul exhorts children to obey their parents in the Lord. Clearly, Paul's entire dealing on the subject of submission is directed to Christians and this qualifying phrase indicates location, meaning in the sphere of Christ. This also indicates that a child's obedience to their parents is part of their obedience and service to Jesus Christ. The household behavior Paul exhorts here is characteristic of families that live under Christ's love and reign. Now, a child's obedience to parents is right whether either party are Christians or not but within the realm of Christ, families are to be characterized by striving for and consistently pursuing what is right.

What Paul has in mind as he speaks of the obligation of a child to obey their parents is natural law, that is, the law of relationships written upon the human conscience by God apart from special revelation. Children are to obey, for this is right – it is self-evidently appropriate! This isn't confined to Christian ethics either. It's recognized and taught by all the world's cultures, both ancient and contemporary. Children owe obedience to parents. It's true

that this duty has often been greatly distorted and abused, in Christian as well as in non-Christian circles, but it is still an abiding obligation nonetheless.

The obligation is not merely on the side of the child, who must obey, but also on the side of the parent, who must enforce the obedience. This is because the parent stands as a representative God in relationship to the child. To teach the child to obey the parent is to teach the child to obey God. To allow the child to defy and disobey the parent is to teach the child to defy and disobey God with all the obvious consequences.

On this point, John R. W. Stott reveals that in the traditional Christian handling of the 10 Commandments the rule Honor your father and your mother ([Ex 20:12](#)), which is the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 10, is placed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> table of the law which deals with human relationships, while in the Jewish handling of the 10 Commandments, it's placed in the 1<sup>st</sup> table, which deals with our relationship to God. Stott argues that the Jewish division is "surely right" because obedience to parents is part of our relationship to God and because disobedience to parents is at heart a spiritual rebellion. Stott points out that this is why under Jewish law the most extreme penalty of death was declared on anyone who cursed their parents or was consistently rebellious towards them ([Lev 20:9](#); [Deut 21:18-21](#)).

**2-3** – The 2<sup>nd</sup> duty Paul imposes on children in relationship to parents is honor, a duty which, he is careful to show, is based on divine revelation and not just on natural law. Again, it's in of the Big 10 and Paul says it's the first one that comes with a built in promise (**3**). Originally, this related directly to Israel's promised inheritance in the land of Canaan but Paul's adoption of the promise here indicates that, just as a child's obedience is a self-evident good, so it is also self-evident that a respectful and honoring relationship with parents will be good for children (it was for me).

The references to going well and enjoying long life point to human flourishing, while enjoying God's favor, which is what all good parents desire for their children – that they may do well and flourish in life. Of course, this is a general rule not a universal rule. We are well aware that in this fallen world, many well-behaved children have succumbed to untimely deaths. But, most people would also recognize that, barring any accidents or fatal diseases, children who took to heart the wisdom of those who cared for

them have a better chance of doing well and living long than those who rejected or rebelled against their parent's instructions.

An essential element of a healthy Christian household is the proper respect offered and expressed within each set of relationships. The contribution that children make to the household is to show honor to their parents. This is a self-evident good but it also benefits the children as they live according to God's design for the family. In every instance and position of the Christian life and life of the church, if we simply follow God's design – it will go well with us.

Of course, I realize this is a difficult area as not all parents live in such a way that their children can properly honor them, especially if the child has become a Christian and the parents are not Christians. What's a child to do if their father is an irresponsible alcoholic or emotionally / physically abusive or if the mother is immoral, undisciplined, and excessively worldly? Can a child properly honor such a parent? Should they? To link this duty to the preceding, should a child obey the commands of such non-Christian parents?

The answer is that a child, while he is a child, owes obedience to a parent in all areas except those that contradict the revealed law of God. In this, the child's position is the same as that of a Christian wife in relationship to a non-Christian husband or a Christian citizen who finds himself in conflict with an anti-Christian government. The principle is: "If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" ([Rom 13:7](#)). All owe obedience and respect to those over them, but not at the expense of the obedience we owe to God.

For example, if a non-Christian parent forbids a Christian child to be baptized, this is a matter in which the child can justly obey the parent. For, although Jesus commanded baptism, He didn't specify exactly when it was to be done, and it's possible to postpone baptism to a later time. On the other hand, if the parent commands the child not to worship and follow the Lord Jesus Christ in their heart, this the child can not obey because to abandon following after Christ would be to abandon Christianity altogether.

Notice this, as Paul encourages children in this paragraph, he provides 3 inducements. 1<sup>st</sup>, obedience and honor are right relationships; they're

grounded in natural law. 2<sup>nd</sup>, they're also a Christian duty; they're to be exercised in the Lord and are part of the 10 Commandments. 3<sup>rd</sup>, they are enforced by a promise, namely, that it'll go well with those who practice them and they'll enjoy long life on the earth. This last promise is not a blanket assurance that every individual who honors his or her parents will live longer than every individual who doesn't. But it's a general promise that God's material and physical blessing rests on those who work at being Christians in these relationships.

4 – It should be obvious by now that the duty placed upon children involves a correspondingly great responsibility for their parents, which is what Paul turns to next. For if children are to obey their parents, parents must, in turn, give them proper directions to obey. And if they are to honor their parents, their parents must rightly show themselves to be worthy of that honor. As such, fathers are instructed to avoid the self-evident trap of abusing their authority.

It's important that Paul gives instructions to fathers specifically. This doesn't exclude mothers, of course. It includes them in the same way the word "brothers" or "brethren" is used to include all Christians in other passages, and because Paul refers to parents (fathers and mothers) in the first 3 verses. Nevertheless, it's significant that Paul addresses fathers specifically for the simple reason that the responsibility for managing a home and raising children is primarily theirs.

Fathers are not responsible *entirely* for what their children become. Let's not forget that having agency in the family also means you have a responsibility to use that agency for the good of yourself and the family. So, a part of what children become is their own responsibility. But fathers are responsible for treating them in a non-exasperating way and for bringing them up in the instruction of the Lord.

Paul's words to fathers have 2 parts, one negative and the other positive. The negative part involves restraint. Fathers are not to exasperate or "stir up anger" in their children; rather, they're to exercise their authority as fathers in a balanced way. Let's face it, children will experience anger for a variety of reasons – some more legitimate than others – but it's the father's responsibility to make sure he doesn't unfairly inspire that anger. In a parallel passage in Colossians Paul tells fathers, Do not provoke [embitter]



your children, lest they become discouraged (3:21). That is, although there is a proper and necessary place for discipline; that discipline must never be arbitrary or unkind (children have a built-in sense of justice) or else they will become discouraged. Conversely, almost nothing causes a child's personality to blossom and gifts to develop like the positive encouragement of loving, understanding parents.

Certainly, fathers will occasionally inspire anger in their children for reasons that are entirely justified, like curbing dangerous behavior or administering appropriate discipline. Paul's not prohibiting these necessary actions just to avoid making children angry. Paul's referring to any unnecessary provocation to anger through overbearing strictness, abuse of authority, harshness or injustice, which was the norm in father-child relationships of the Greco-Roman society of the day. Children had little recourse for protection from a mean-spirited parent so the Christian father must take care to check himself. This exhortation would come as a surprise to most Jewish and Roman fathers, who might have instead expected an instruction to children to not anger their fathers through disobedience.

On the positive side Paul speaks to fathers about training, saying but bring them up in the training and admonition [instruction] of the Lord. The command to bring them up not only refers to providing appropriate nourishment for their physical well being but also to their growth and maturity in the Christian faith. Thus, Christian parents share a double duty of training and instruction, both to raise healthy, well-adjusted children and to nurture young believers in their own relationship with Jesus Christ.

How are fathers to do this unless they know what the Word of God teaches? How are they to teach with wisdom unless they have themselves learned in Christ's school? Obviously fathers will fail at this great task unless they are themselves growing with God. They will not be able to instill Christian character and conviction in their children if they lack those qualities themselves. They must be studying the Bible. They must be seeking to live by it and practice it in their own daily lives. Parents (esp. fathers) must be models. Christian author Howard Hendricks said, "Children are not looking for perfect parents; but they are looking for honest parents. An honest, progressing parent is a highly infectious person."

Still, there's the matter of the child's own responsibility. Children are their

own people, and they have their own set of responsibilities both before God and others. Consequently, although they may be taught wisely and raised morally and that instruction may have been supported by a godly parental example, they nevertheless sometimes do go astray, and that's not necessarily the parents' fault.

The first example of child-rearing in the Bible should teach us that. We know that Adam and Eve were a sinful man and woman after the Fall, as we all are. But they were undoubtedly model parents nonetheless. They were highly intelligent and knew God intimately. Moreover, they are numbered in the godly line of the age before the Flood, the line which contained such outstanding spiritual giants as Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah. There is no question but that they raised their children to know and honor God. Yet in spite of this their first child, Cain, turned out to be a murderer. Why? The Bible says it was the result of the out-workings of his own sinful heart.

So parents, if your child has abandoned the Lord and is living a worldly life, it's not necessarily your fault. It may be, but not necessarily. Don't abandon hope. God has called and reclaimed many such children. Your duty is to continue to live as Christians and pray for your child regularly. The Bible says the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much ([Jam 5:16](#)).

What about children who didn't have godly parents? The fact that your parents failed to teach you about the Lord or lead a consistently godly life is unfortunate for them and a handicap for you, but it's not an excuse for your failing to be what God would have you be as his followers. I spoke of Cain, an ungodly son of godly parents. But when I think of Cain I inevitably also think of Joseph, who is a great contrast. Joseph's father was not particularly spiritual, and he was raised in a family environment that was not conducive to any high standards of behavior. His brothers were spiteful, jealous and violent. Joseph was carried away to Egypt. He had no outward spiritual support. Yet he had determined in his youth to follow God, and he did it even through adversity. He was never turned aside by outward circumstances.

Sometimes those who are properly raised go astray, and sometimes those who are spiritually disadvantaged are models of Christian life and character. But these are exceptions; the normal pattern is the communication of faith



from generation to generation within the context of a genuinely Christian home. It's hard for children to learn to obey their parents. It is hard for parents to bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. But hard is **not** impossible and by the grace of God, Christian parents and children have been managing these difficulties for centuries. They can manage them in our own time too. God's in the business of building homes and He's on our side if we're truly trying to obey Him and follow His directions.

The world is against us. The world wants absolute independence from God and His design and it will attempt to destroy any established structure to get it. It will try to destroy our families. It will try to get us on its side. But it need not succeed. We can live as Jesus tells us to live and God can and will bless our homes. 😊