

EPHESIANS Part XVII

Ephesians 6:1-9; CHILDREN, FATHERS, SLAVES AND MASTERS

Please turn in your bibles to chapter six.

Today, as we begin chapter six, we should see the continuation of a pattern as Paul continues with what has come to be known as “household codes.” That is, a basic overview of how the Christian household is to run. Please recall that Paul is speaking to a mostly Gentile audience, which means that their coming into the family of God is something of a culture shock. They are no doubt hearing this letter read to them because they have not only heard what those who became Christians prior to them have said, but also because of what they have seen regarding how the people of what was regarded as a new sect of Judaism lived their lives. Things seemed to flow more smoothly. Women, and as we shall see, children were treated much better as were the slaves/ servants of those who were of the faith. There were some issues, however. We all tend to bring baggage from what we have always known into something we are beginning to know. And this was the case for these new Christians who grew up in a pagan world of debauchery and a class/ family system that seemed so different in many ways. There were some things that seemed to be more freeing, while other things seemed to be more restrictive. The matters of the home were much better for the wives, servants and children, but were upside down to the husbands.

Where does Paul get his ideas for all this? Well, his bible was the Tanakh – that is what we call the OT. Jesus came and showed the people how the Torah should be read. Paul took the words of Jesus and then extrapolated what He said and had to present it to the Gentiles. This was no easy task. Paul usually entered a city, found the synagogue and then found the jail. For the most part, he would eventually end up in both.

So, as Paul has been telling the new converts, mostly Gentiles, how they are to now live in order that they properly represent and image God, some of this stuff is hard to fathom, while some of it is welcomed. The women, children and slaves welcomed what was said, while I believe most of the men were less likely to make the jump. I’m sure it seemed, on the surface to look like everyone was gaining at the expense of the men. But Paul makes it clear that that is not the case. Let’s look at what Paul has to say.

Eph. 6:1 ⁵Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² ^t“Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, “but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Eph. 6:5 ^vBondservants,¹ obey your earthly masters² with fear and trembling, ^wwith a sincere heart, ^xas you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as ^ypeople-pleasers, but as

bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord,^a whether he is a bondservant or is free.⁹ Masters, do the same to them,^b and stop your threatening, knowing that ^che who is both their Master³ and yours is in heaven, and that ^dthere is no partiality with him.

Back to verse one.

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Paul begins with a statement that would have been regarded as correct in any culture of that day and time whether Jewish, Christian or pagan. That is that children should obey their parents. That has been a basic pillar of society from the beginning. If that isn't met, then all you have or ever will have is chaos. And God is not a god of chaos. There is and has always been a hierarchy of some kind. We have already seen how Paul is dealing with this as it regards the Christian home.

Children are exhorted to obey their parents in 6:1–3. The term *tekna* here can include adult children, but it certainly is not limited to them, who in any case would not necessarily be living in the household anymore. The children in view here have to be old enough to be conscious of a relationship to their Lord and to be appealed to on the basis of it, but young enough still to be in the process of being brought up.

The ground or rationale for the command is “because this is right,” or more literally “for this is righteous.” In Rom. 1:29–31 Paul identifies the disobedience of children as an all too common Gentile sin, but he is on common ground with the wider culture in that no one argued against children obeying their parents. Indeed, in the Greco-Roman world a child was under the control of his or her father until he died (the Greek custom) or until he was sixty (the Roman custom). Thus, it was sufficient to use the pragmatic appeal to what was generally recognized to be right. But Paul also applies the sanction of Scripture by quoting the fifth commandment (Exod. 20:12; cf. Deut. 5:16), which he says is the first among the ten that comes with an accompanying promise. In other words, there is a divine sanction for obedience to parents that further confirms that this is the right sort of conduct. The promise provides a further motivation for the children to respond appropriately (cf. 1 Tim. 4:8).

1 Timothy 4:8

Rather ^ttrain yourself for godliness;⁸ for while ^mbodily training is of some value, godliness ⁿis of value in every way, as ^oit holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

We also see in verse two that he bases this statement on Torah, which he cites.

Ex. 20:12 *“Honor your father and your mother, ^othat your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

Deut. 5:16 *“ ‘Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, ⁱthat your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

The sense of the word honor here goes beyond the way we think of the word. We tend to limit the definition to holding our parents in high esteem, and that is true, but in the cultural sense of the Jewish community, and now as it extends to the Gentiles who are now believers, it also carried the sense of taking care of your parents as they aged. There were no facilities as we have today. Elderly parents were taken care of in the home by the family. It was a duty that we see carries the blessing of God that the Israelites would do well in the Promised Land. Paul tells Timothy that there would also be blessings in the world to come by keeping this commandment. These together are what he means by a commandment that comes with promise.

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The parallel exhortation in 6:4 is probably addressed to fathers in particular. *Pateres* could on occasion refer to parents in general (Heb. 11:23), especially in light of the reference to discipline or admonition, which was traditionally the father’s role. This focus on the father is not entirely a surprise since, as we have seen, the children in view here must be old enough to educate, and since in the Greco-Roman world, after age seven and until about age sixteen the father ostensibly had charge of a son’s education, though a pedagogue and a tutor were normally enlisted to aid in the task. The education, besides learning to read and write, included training in ethics, religion, household management, philosophy, public service (liturgies), and the early exercises which would lead to a knowledge of rhetoric.

If we are paying attention to what Paul is saying in the household codes, we should see a pattern develop. Last week we saw that the ladies got 3 verses, while the husbands got 8. This week we see that while addressing children, Paul then turns to the fathers. He says nothing to the mothers. And in the following verses where he addresses servants, he then addresses the masters, who for the most part are the husbands and fathers of the household. That is notable.

You see, while the wives, children and servants are moving up in status and are to receive better treatment and respect, the husbands, fathers and masters, (usually the same person) appear to lose some of the respect/ fear they have always enjoyed. I don’t mean that they are to be respected any less than they have always been; however, they are now to temper how they deal with their wives, children and servants which would have been a big pill to swallow in

that day and time. Husbands, fathers and masters walked around with a great deal of swagger back then, having to answer to virtually no one for their behavior within their homes.

The father is in as much need of exhortation about proper behavior in relation to his children as the children are. The exhortation involves one remark about what is wrong for a father to do and one about what is right to do. The father is not to make his children angry (cf. **Col. 3:21**). As one scholar puts it, "Fathers are made responsible for ensuring that they do not provoke anger in their children. This involves avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs and sensibilities." (Lincoln; Ephesians, p.406).

While Paul was not the only advocate of such moderation, it is noteworthy that he insists on children not being treated as mere property. Rather, they deserve respect. This is addressed to the father knowing that discipline was primarily left to the father, especially with boys, since the son spent most of his time with his father from ages 7-16. The mother tended to such things with daughters and younger sons.

The exhortation to the father then suggests that a gentle and generous approach is in keeping with this education being done in a Christian way as well as having Christian content. This is strikingly different from what we hear in extra-biblical, pagan sources, which stress strict discipline including constant correction and beating so that the son will become like his father. Here the father is to model Christlike behavior as part of the way the Christian child learns. Fathers modeling virtues or behavior was seen as part of good praxis of managing the home and educating one's offspring.

Eph. 6:5 ¹*Bondservants,* ²*obey your earthly masters* ³*with fear and trembling,* ⁴*with a sincere heart,* ⁵*as you would Christ,* ⁶*not by the way of eye-service, as* ⁷*people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,* ⁸*rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,* ⁹*knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord,* ¹⁰*whether he is a bondservant or is free.* ¹¹*Masters, do the same to them,* ¹²*and stop your threatening, knowing that* ¹³*he who is both their Master* ¹⁴*and yours is in heaven, and that* ¹⁵*there is no partiality with him.*

This material is a perfect example, if taken in the wrong way (not recognizing the context and trajectory), of how a superficial treatment of the material will lead to conclusions opposite to what is intended. Paul is not endorsing slavery or providing a Christian rationale to bolster and undergird the institution. On the contrary, he is trying to reform an existing institution within the context of the Christian household. The argument here is a further step along the way toward what Paul will say in Philemon, and it is probably an adaptation and expansion of **Col. 3:22–25**.

In Philemon, Paul is, as one scholar puts it, ‘laying down a time bomb next to the idea and institution of slavery in order that at some point in the future, when the ideal comes to the fore, the institution will die.’ And that is exactly what happened when Wilberforce and Lincoln did what they did.

One scholar puts it this way, “The argument, succinctly, is that Christ is lord of all, and every action in the master/slave relationship should be done with the connection of both parties to Christ fully in mind.”

The slave’s service is ultimately to the Lord, and the master’s supervision is to be done with full cognizance that he is accountable to the Lord for what he says and does. In other words, the slave’s actions cease to be mere servitude to a human master, and the master’s actions cease to be those of one who has absolute authority over another human being. Both parties are called on to be proactive, not reactive to their situations. In both cases their eyes must be on the Lord and on how to please him, not on mundane or merely human considerations and factors. In 6:5, as in 5:22, 25, 29, the argument is based on the relationship to Christ.

This implies that both the supposedly high and the supposedly low are subordinated to the same highest authority. Therefore, before the Lord *and* before one another, parents and children, masters and slaves occupy the same position: all must obey (6:1, 4–7, 9). In this they are equals.

APPLICATION

Children honor your parents. Take good care of them. Understand that when you feel they are a little out of touch, that they grew up in a world vastly different than the one in which they now find themselves. Understand that they are probably more vulnerable than they have ever been since they were children. Things are changing at an ever-increasing rate. No... they/ we can’t keep up, but that doesn’t mean they/ we are stupid. There is still wisdom and insight to be had from our parents. Treat them accordingly.

Fathers... don’t take out your own frustrations on your children. They are learning. And if we are honest – so are we. They are coming up in a day and time where we no longer have their full time and attention. Yes, please limit screen time. But that vacuum has to be filled with something. And that something is time spent with us, in a constructive manner. That will solve many of the behavioral issues. Instruct them as a teacher would a pupil. Commands alone are nothing but harsh orders. Discipline according to the infraction and not out of anger or frustration. I’m preaching to myself here. Spend quality time with your children – and do that whenever possible with their mother – the whole family included. Build the family as a unit. Don’t abdicate everything to mom. Be a man!

When it comes to servants, most of us don’t have those anymore. But we may have someone who works for us in the capacity of a housekeeper, landscaper, plumber, electrician, etc. Treat them well. Pay them well. Treat them with dignity and respect, regardless of their economic

status. We do not lord over anyone! We are not better than anyone. Remember all of God's children are on equal footing at the foot of the cross. And if they're an unbeliever, then it is our job to be a good imager of God and treat them with the same grace as God has given us. Minister to them that they may also become a child of God. Take their presence in your circle of influence as a ministry opportunity. By doing that, we will take back sacred space and further the kingdom of God until Jesus returns. Go and make disciples!

Let's pray.