

Sunday, April 19, 2026

Children And Parents

This is the fourteenth in a series of sermons through the book of Ephesians, and today we will be entering the 6th, and final, chapter, covering verses 1-4. Having exultantly described and prayed about our redemption in Christ wherein God has graciously created us anew unto good works, Paul builds on that foundation by laying out very practical examples of what those good works look like. As children of God, all our works should unfold in the following context: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20). This isn’t just “nice to know” information – it governs today’s passage. Christ not only saved us; He lives in us. If you miss that, you’ll misunderstand and misapply the passage. A high-level outline may help you recall where we are in the book:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (2:10)

“Therefore...walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (4:1)

“Walk not as other Gentiles walk” (4:17)

“Walk in love” (5:2)

“Walk as children of light” (5:8)

“Walk circumspectly” (5:15)

“Be filled with the Spirit” (5:18)

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (5:21)

Wives and husbands (5:22-33)

Children and parents (6:1-4)

Servants and masters (6:5-9)

Following the section on wives and husbands which we covered last time, he rather logically proceeds to address children and parents in today’s passage:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4)

The way in which many people treat this passage would be a prime example of our propensity to works-righteousness. For example, maybe there is some friction going on at home, and

you, as a parent, have resolved that you're going to fix it, so you go looking for a checklist of what you need to do to solve the problem. Next thing you know, you pluck these few verses out of the context in which they were written, you weaponize them, and you're screaming at the child to "Obey!" All the while, you've missed the doctrinal truths that these commands are built upon. You've missed the foundational "whys" that undergird them. This passage isn't a hermetically sealed list of behaviors – it's part of a bigger picture. It describes how Spirit-filled children of God are supposed to be living in this very important relationship between parents and children. This isn't merely about having a peaceful coexistence, although there will be joyful peace when all parties are loving and obeying God. Rather, how you behave in your role is a barometer of your spiritual well-being, as one who has been quickened together with Christ (Eph 2:5). Are you living like one who has life in Christ, or are you living like one who is dead in trespasses and sins? If the precepts in this passage aren't being pursued in your house, if they are minimized, if breaking them is excused or justified, it is symptomatic of a much larger problem. If this is your settled pattern and you are excusing it instead of fighting against it, you are in a dangerous spiritual position. "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith." (2 Cor 13:5). What does it reveal about whether the Holy Spirit is at work in a soul who continues living that way and refusing to repent?

But beloved, if you mourn for these sins, do not despair and do not try to fix it yourself - "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 Jn 2:1). This needs to be said plainly: when people feel guilty about a sin, they often respond by engaging in a flurry of feverish activity to try to get back in God's good graces. This might temporarily make you feel better about yourself, but it does not reconcile you to God. I understand that people can get into a dark and confused state of mind, but if you rest on your works to make you right with God, you are repudiating the gospel – it is no gospel at all. "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel...Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal 1:6, 3:3). Instead, go to your Advocate. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn 1:9).

Exhortation To Children

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. (Ephesians 6:1-3)

The first thing to note here is that Paul is addressing children directly. Remember, most people at the time of writing couldn't read, and these epistles were intended to be read aloud when the church met. Paul expected the children to be present when the church met. And

children are not just spectators – they are held morally accountable to listen and apply the preaching to their lives. Those who are members of the body ought to be treated as full participants in the body. Unfortunately, children are often treated as appendages. But the Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior of children just like He is the Savior of adults. “But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 19:14). I understand that this scene in Matthew 19 was representative of a much larger truth, but you can’t escape the fact that actual little children were involved.

The fundamental command to the children is “obey your parents.” Obedience means that you do what they tell you to do, when they tell you to do it, without putting up a big fight or doing it begrudgingly. I’m not saying you have to leap with joy every time your parents give you something to obey. And I’m not saying that you can’t talk to your parents about it if you have opinions. What I am saying is that your posture should be willing obedience because you love your parents, and you love the God who gave you those parents. And if you hear this and know that that’s not what is going on in your heart, I’m not going to tell you to try harder. I’m going to tell you to bring it to the throne of grace. And understand that it is not “obey this command so that Jesus will accept you and you can get right with God.” It is “obey this command because Jesus has already made you right with God.” The particular obedience that Paul is talking about here has four characteristics:

1. It is to be done “in the Lord.” This tells me that his primary audience is children who are members of the body. It is those children who are in Christ. Your service to God includes obedience to your parents. It is His will that you obey your parents, with the limitation that in obeying them, you must not disobey God. But there are many children present who are NOT members of the church. That does not remove your obligation to obey your parents, but it does expose your need, because you can’t obey your parents in the right way for the right reasons unless you are “in the Lord.” This is a heart issue, and you can’t change your heart. Only Christ can do that. So, if you see and feel the weight of your disobedience, the solution is not behavior modification or self-improvement – the solution is coming to Christ. That’s His desire. He commands you to come to Him. It is only in Him that you will find sanctification (obedient, holy living). This isn’t just bare obedience that Paul is calling for – it is obedience “in the Lord.”
2. It is right. That is, it is righteous. It is built into nature that children should obey their parents. It is manifestly “right” when you see a child who willingly obeys his parents. Everyone knows by instinct when they see a disobedient child that it is simply wrong, the very opposite of right. Other words to describe unrighteousness are wicked, ungodly, evil, lawless, disobedient, perverse, foolish, unjust, unholy. These words describe what disobedience is in the sight of God. It is no accident that in Lev. 19, the very first command under the heading of “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am

holy” is “Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father.” How many of you children, particularly you young men, persistently don’t have a proper fear for your mother? This passage says you are unholy. Does this convict you? It should. This is why I say that you must come to Christ. He has obeyed where you have rebelled, and He will not cast out any sinner who comes to Him in sincerity.

3. It is commanded by God. To further explain why it is “right,” Paul appeals to the 5th commandment of the 10 commandments. Obedience is part of what it means to honor your parents. Honor also involves revering, highly esteeming, being subject to, loving, covering their weaknesses and deficiencies. It excludes cursing, contempt, causing shame. Jesus gives an excellent example of failure to honor parents in the Corban episode of Mark 7:9-13. I would also highly recommend the entire book of Proverbs. But the point is, God commanded it. As a creature, you are obligated to obey your Creator. God commands only what is good and right. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.” (Rom 7:12). And He commands only what is “for our good always.” (De 6:24). To disobey your parents is not only to disobey a good and righteous God; you are wronging your own soul (Pro 8:36).

Since the command came from the OT, let me say that when we consider the OT, there are two fatal errors that we must avoid. Some discard it entirely – “Well, that was in the OT!” Others affirm it as God’s word, but do not read it with Christ and His atonement at the center, as if it’s just a set of rules to keep – “when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart.” (2 Cor 3:15). By quoting it in the context of “in the Lord,” Paul puts us squarely in the kingdom of Christ and nicely eradicates both of those errors. Christ said, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” (Mt 5:17). The law still stands, but you can only understand it properly in terms of Christ fulfilling it. When He fulfilled the law, He didn’t abolish moral standards or obedience; rather, He established the law’s proper use. We are still obligated to follow the moral law as our rule of life, providing the standard by which we live. We can’t very well adhere to Christ’s words that “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15) if we don’t know what His commandments are.

4. It has a promise. In fact, he calls “honor your father and mother” the first commandment with promise. If you read the word “first” as part of a simple sequence, the problem is that it is not, in fact, the first one with a promise associated with it. But the word “first” also means “first in rank” or “principal.” I think he’s simply saying, “This is a foundational, highly important commandment, and the importance is shown by the fact that it has a specific promise tied to it.” And this promise, like every promise, is ultimately fulfilled by Christ (see 2 Cor 1:20). The promise is two-fold: 1. It will be well (good, prosperous) with you. 2. You may live long on the earth. In the OT, the promise was tied to the land of Canaan. But in Christ, who has fulfilled the old covenant and

inherited all things, it has been expanded to “on the earth” (i.e., the whole earth; see also Rom 4:13). So, the promise hasn’t been abandoned – it has been fulfilled and enlarged by Christ.

The promise is not a mechanical guarantee that every obedient child is going to live a long and trouble-free life. Scripture says otherwise. Our experience says otherwise. The reality of life in the Roman Empire when Paul wrote this epistle says otherwise. Rather, this is a general rule: if you obey your parents, life is going to go better for you, and you will be spared from destructive lifestyles and dangerous situations that would tend toward an early demise. Ultimately, God wisely defines and apportions what “well” and “long” mean for each individual. But it also extends beyond the individual. What’s going on in the home spills over and impacts the life, the blessings, the longevity, the prosperity, etc., of the church, and even of society itself. Obedience in the home brings stability and blessing. Disobedience brings destruction and disorder.

But the promise goes even deeper than that. For those in Christ, it isn’t limited to this life. In fact, eternal life begins now! “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” (Jn 5:24). The blessings begin now – new creature, new life, adopted into a new family. We already have an earnest of the eternal inheritance now. Ultimately, the promise is fulfilled in all its perfection and glory in the world to come. “It may be well with thee” indeed. “Thou mayest live long” indeed, even for eternity with the Lord in the new heaven and new earth.

So, we have these four things: it is in the Lord, it is right, it is commanded by God, and it comes with a promise. But if this is not enough to convince you children of the importance of obeying and honoring your parents, let me give you two negative reasons and two positive reasons. Negative reasons: 1. “Disobedient to parents” is one of the sins listed in Romans 1 where the utter depravity of mankind is laid out, and in 2 Timothy 3 as one of the characteristic sins of the perilous last times. 2. Not honoring your parents is a sin so heinous that God required the death penalty for it. Jesus Christ said: “For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.” (Mt 15:4). Positive reasons: 1. Before David defeated Goliath, does anyone know what he did? He obeyed his father. “And David rose up early in the morning, and left the sheep with a keeper, and took, and went, as Jesse had commanded him.” (1 Sam 17:20). If you’re disobeying your parents, you’re rebelling against the authority that Christ Himself has placed over you and are therefore not fit to engage in spiritual warfare. 2. Our Lord Jesus Christ obeyed and honored His parents. When he was a 12-year-old child, we read that “he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them.” (Lk 2:51). And of

course, one of His final acts was to make sure that his mother was taken care of: “Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.” (Jn 19:27). He has set an example of humility for all children to follow.

Exhortation To Fathers

And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

The first thing to notice here is that this is addressed only to fathers. This is because fathers are the head of the household. It's the father's responsibility to make sure that the children are raised properly. It is the duty of the father to figure out how to apply Bible principles wisely in his own house. One implication of this is that you should be very cautious about trying to impose your will in another man's house. This duty of fathers is an extraordinarily sober duty. My experience is that being a father is an especially weighty responsibility, for the simple fact that God has entrusted you with a soul, and you have the primary influence over that soul for only a short period of time. (Clearly, if someone is in a situation where there is no father present, these same principles apply to the mother, or whoever is raising the child.)

The first command here is “provoke not your children to wrath.” In other words, don't sinfully stir up anger or exasperation in your children. This does not mean “don't ever do anything that might make your children upset.” If you read and apply it that way, your children will hold you hostage. There is also scripture like, “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Pro 13:24). That must be followed as well if you're going to be a faithful parent. Both things must be true – children must be chastened, but in a way that does not provoke them to wrath. Today's passage addresses the sin of the father. The problem is not your parenting techniques – the problem is your heart. Deep-seated sins of the heart, like anger, impatience, discontentment, selfishness, envy, unbelief, or inability to control your spirit. In other words, the types of things that are the precise opposite of the fruit of the Spirit that would be visible in someone who is filled with the Spirit. That is the root of the problem, and the fruit is sinful patterns of behavior that result in provoking your children to wrath. Here are some of the ways that fathers provoke their children to wrath:

Instability

Some fathers provoke by inconsistency or harshness. Standards and expectations change without warning. The house is ruled by whatever mood the father happens to be in. The children never know what kind of response they'll get, so they learn to walk on eggshells. Reactions are often unreasonably severe, driven by anger, selfishness, or irritability. Words

are spoken in rage rather than righteousness. “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.” (Pro 25:28). Children soon learn that it’s not about right and wrong but about survival - what they can do to avoid the next uproar. The child has no consistent, stable foundation to trust and rest on.

Hurtfulness

Some fathers provoke by neglect, cruelty, or discouragement. Children are treated as nuisances or burdens. Concerns that are important to them are dismissed. They are ignored, ridiculed, humiliated, mocked, insulted, or demeaned. Sometimes it moves into the category of “abuse” - physical, verbal, emotional, or spiritual. Words and actions that should nurture, correct and edify instead leave deep wounds. Often, words leave the most lasting scars: “There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword.” (Pro 12:18). Correction is constant; encouragement is absent. What is wrong is always highlighted; what is right is rarely acknowledged. Effort is never rewarded; growth and improvement are overlooked. Nothing is ever good enough. “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” (Col 3:21). Instead of the child being built up, he is beaten down and discouraged.

Unfairness

Some fathers provoke by injustice or hypocrisy. They don’t listen to or care about the child’s side of the story. Motives are assumed. Words are twisted. Accusations are made and conclusions are reached without understanding the facts. Discipline may be excessive or come prematurely. Expectations are unreasonable, with no regard for the child’s age or abilities. Favoritism may rear its head. Often, the father demands standards that he himself doesn’t (or can’t) meet. “Ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.” (Lk 11:46). Fathers often forget that their children struggle with the same types of sins that they do. The child is left feeling wronged and resentful.

Unfaithfulness

Some fathers provoke by tyrannical control, legalism, or spiritual neglect. The father seeks to dominate rather than shepherd. He emotionally manipulates and coerces to get what he wants. The child is pressured to conform outwardly to appease the father, while the sin-sick state of the heart is never addressed. Standards are enforced, doctrine is taught, but in practice, grace is absent and Christ is not central. If you don’t direct your children to the Savior, no matter what else you do, you are an absolute failure as a parent. The result will be a home dominated by rules and performance. This type of environment produces different fruit, but all from the same root: works-righteousness. Some children become arrogant and

self-righteous (“I’m better than other people because I keep these rules”). Others despair (“I try, but I can’t keep these rules”). Others learn to be hypocrites (“I want to look righteous in front of other people, whether I am or not”). And others rebel (“I’m not going to follow these rules at all; I have my own standards”). When Christ is not made central, something else will take His place. (Don’t misunderstand me. God can save anyone in any situation. And children raised in the godliest homes won’t necessarily be saved. My point is that parents in this case are blameworthy.)

These are the types of things where, if this describes your settled pattern - not struggling over it, not grieving over it, not mourning over it, but justifying it and refusing to repent - how can you claim that you have the Holy Spirit? I understand that children have a special ability to try your patience, but this does not give you the right to disobey and insult the God who put you in that situation. Remember how God has treated you and treat your own children likewise. Have you done wrong here? The solution is not to read a parenting book and change a few techniques because the root cause of all of this is a sinful heart. The solution is the grace of God and sincere repentance. Including an authentic apology to the children. Yes – even to your children. It’s the same principle as Jesus saying, “first be reconciled to thy brother.” (Mt 5:24). If you’re so arrogant that you can’t bring yourself to apologize, you haven’t really repented, and you may look up one day realizing that you have sowed the wind and now you are reaping the whirlwind (Hos 8:7). It will do your soul good, and it will do your child’s soul good, as you model repentance to them. But none of it can be done in your own strength. “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9).

The close relationship between a parent and child provides a lot of opportunities to do the wrong thing. It provides a lot of opportunities to do long-term damage. A child can be absolutely crushed by a parent. Your temporary bad mood can leave permanent scars. Your behavior can have multi-generational impacts, as you pass your folly in raising children on to the next generation. The fact is that parents and children can uniquely break each other’s hearts. That is the nature of sin and the curse. That is the thing that the Lord Jesus Christ came to deal with. But this close relationship also provides a lot of opportunities for fathers to bring their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

To “bring up” is the same Greek word as is translated “nourish” in 5:29. It has the elements of rearing to maturity, helping them flourish, helping bring them before the Lord, fondly cherishing. The word “nurture” refers to the child’s training and education. It includes both spirit and body, and involves correction, chastening, teaching, discipline, etc. And “admonition” literally means “to place before the mind.” It refers primarily to spoken words of exhortation, warning, instruction, rebuke, drawing attention to, teaching with a call to action, encouragement, reproof, advice, spurring on, reminding. One commentator said the

basic difference is that “nurture” is what is DONE to the child, while “admonition” is what is SAID to the child. And it is the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” That phrase gets us into the realm of the Lord Jesus Christ. Anyone can teach their kids good morals. There’s nothing particularly “Christian” about that. But the nurture and admonition spoken of here is to be done to acquaint your children with Christ. He told you to do it. The teaching and standards come from Him and they are about Him. Another way to look at it is that the nurture and admonition BELONG to the Lord. Behind every godly parent stands the Lord Jesus Christ, using that parent to bring the child up. Just as we saw back in 4:20-24, where we read of learning Christ, hearing Christ, and being taught by Christ. Christ Himself teaches through human instruments, and He has chosen fathers for this task when it comes to rearing children. You don’t have time? Redeem the time. You don’t have the ability or the energy? Yes you do – you have a full supply of grace from God. “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb 4:16). Your parenting ought to involve much prayer and communion with Christ.

Finally, let me quickly address one question that may arise – “what if my child isn’t one of God’s elect?” Well, that is none of your business. That’s God’s business. He didn’t tell you to pry into His secret counsel and try to figure out who is and isn’t one of God’s elect. If you have a child who hasn’t made a profession of faith, it is just as dangerous to conclude that he’s one of God’s elect as it is to conclude that he’s a reprobate. The one will end up with a false hope and assurance that he’s an object of God’s eternal love and will go to heaven when he dies. The other will end up with a despair that he’s an object of God’s eternal hatred and is irreversibly damned to hell. God didn’t tell you to make those final judgments, and it’s rather presumptuous of you to think you need to, especially since you don’t have all the evidence and information. “Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come.” (1 Cor 4:5). But He did tell you to bring your children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. So do the thing that He’s revealed for you to do and leave the secret things with Him (De 29:29).

The child-parent relationship is foundational. It is a very serious matter. Neither child nor parent is going to make it through without an innumerable number of sins. It does no good to minimize it with language like “I did the best I could” or “it’s not my fault how it turned out – I didn’t do anything wrong.” Nor does it help to melt down into a puddle of despair with language like “if only I had...” What is good is to own the sins, be especially forgiving to one another knowing that “charity shall cover the multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8), and above all things, remember that it is for those very sins that Jesus graciously died.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen. (2 Corinthians 13:14)