

RUF Bible Study – Ephesians
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November 9, 2005
Ephesians 6:1-9²

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “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. 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants 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, whether he is a slave or free. 9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Paul has been instituting a new world order, one based on the principles and doctrines of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Our Father loved us before the foundation of the world and send his Son, Jesus Christ to redeem us from slavery, revive us from death and restore us to the proper path. And he sent the Holy Spirit to seal the benefits of salvation to us and to reside in our hearts. Not content with that, he placed us in a new society, the church, in which he overturns the natural patterns of relating and calls us to love each other, to use our gifts for one another, and to point each other toward Christ.

In this new society, many institutions are not abolished, but they are transformed. In our last passage, the end of chapter 5, we looked at marriage. Marriage does not go away, but takes center stage as a place where the gospel is shown forth most prominently. Paul even says, when he talks about marriage he is talking about the church. A man shall love his wife as Christ loved the church. A wife shall respect her husband. The two will become one flesh, enjoying the intimacy of full-live commitment in every area – socially, intellectually, financially, spiritually and yes, sexually.

And, according to the natural order of things, if this godly couple engages in this intimacy at the right times, then they will be blessed with children if God so pleases.

And so Paul continues to teach us how the gospel infuses our basic relationships. Here we see how families and work are affected by these doctrines.

Months ago, my daughter Anna, who is four, called Russ, a former student who had lived with us for awhile, on the phone. For some reason, Russ was singing a song to Anna, a song that told a story about a horse. It was sort of an opera song in an opera voice, calling for a response from Anna to fill in the blanks. “You have a great horse, Anna. A great horse!” She would nod. “What would you like to name your horse, Anna?” Russ sang. Anna thought and said, “Duty.” So Russ sang, “The horse’s name is Duty, and Duty is a fine name, Duty is a fine name!”

Let’s look at the duties of Christians in the new society.

The Duty of Children

Paul spends the first three verses talking to the children. *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “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.”*

The word for children, *tekna*, means all offspring, not just babies or toddlers or gradeschoolers. It means teenagers and college students and 35 year olds. It means my almost 60 year-old parents need to obey their 80 year-old parents. We’ll talk about what that means.

But it is also right to think that Paul is speaking to little children. And gives them a great status. They are worthy to be talked to when this letter is read. That must mean that they are in the room and listening. Paul doesn’t say, now go and get the kids from children’s church and tell them what I said. They are right there in the service, listening alongside their parents, able to comprehend the message Paul gives them.³

Paul says, *Obey your parents for this is right.* The first thing we notice is that Paul doesn’t give this command to wives. They are not told to obey, but to voluntarily submit. “It is a voluntary self-giving to a lover whose responsibility is defined in terms of constructive care; it is love’s response to love.”⁴ Children, though are to obey.

And Paul says this is right. It’s in the realm of natural justice – this does not depend on special revelation, but is a part of natural law written on all human hearts.⁵ All cultures have taught this obedience of children to parents.

And you will be tempted to forget this in the moment. Your child will be acting up and you won’t want to do what it takes to teach obedience. But it really is right for the child to obey – don’t doubt it, but you will doubt it.

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² Sources: commentaries by Tom Wright, Peter O’Brien, John Stott, J.M. Boice; sermons by Rev. Tim Keller, Rev. Rob Rayburn, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson and Dr. Bryan Chapell

³ I do think there is a place for children’s church – for very small children and for families who haven’t yet trained their children to sit still and listen in church. But I don’t think it’s the ideal.

⁴ Stott, 238

⁵ Stott, 239

When your kids are young, you should expect them to obey in three ways – we called it “quickly, quietly and completely.” They need to do what you ask without complaining and do it all the way. Don’t get into the habit of telling your child three times, or else she’ll think it’s the third time that you really mean it. Don’t allow back talking. And don’t allow a bad job to be done. Quickly. Quietly. Completely. Make sure your child understands what you are asking and then expect it to be followed through. Parents should give a firm but kindly discipline.

Do not be over-strict – this type of parent, especially the father is the number one indicator of juvenile delinquency. But also don’t be absent – this leads to a child without any sort of boundaries, one who feels he has a sense of entitlement and will not do well in the world. This is from an old study, evident since I don’t hear too many people talking about juvenile delinquency very often anymore, but I still think it applies to our day and age. “Harvard University sociologists Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck developed a test (that proved to be 90 percent accurate) to determine whether or not five and six-year-olds would become delinquent. They discovered that the four primary factors necessary to prevent delinquency are: the father’s firm, fair and consistent discipline; the mother’s supervision and companionship during the day; the parents’ demonstrated affection for each other and for the children; and the family’s spending time together in activities where all participated.”⁶

Teaching your kids to obey is important, for they are learning to obey God through obeying you.

Obeying your parents is a part of natural law. But there is an aspect of special revelation, and we know this because Paul quotes the Decalogue in this passage. Paul writes, *Honor your father and your mother*.

This is the fifth of the ten commandments. Some have divided the law into two parts, our duty to God and our duty to each other. The question is which part does this commandment go with? Many would say this begins the second part, meaning that the last six commandments talk about duty to your neighbor.

But others say that this commandment goes with the first part, with duty to God. This is the normal Jewish view, and is significant because it brings the honoring of our parents into our duty to God. When we are children, parents represent God and mediate his authority and love. Thus, honoring our parents is honoring God, acknowledging their God-given authority, so we give them our obedience, love and respect.⁷

This may help explain why the Old Testament takes irreverence for parents so seriously, calling even the death penalty for any who curses his parents. (Lev. 20:9).

Commentator and pastor John MacArthur claims that over 8 million assaults on parents by their children take place every year in America. Can that be true? What is going on here? That is for sure not honoring your parents.

Some of your parents aren’t very worthy of honor by their actions. They have hurt you. But they are still your parents and you are called to honor not only their position, but them. You might start by honoring the position of father, the position of mother. But you need to also honor your father and your mother. That can be hard, but through the gospel, we are freed to love in a different way, the way Christ loved those who mistreated him.

But Paul focuses on the promise, not the threat we see in the Old Testament. He says, this is the *First command with a promise*. “What is promised is not so much long life to each child who obeys his parents, as social stability to any community in which children honor their parents. Certainly a healthy society is inconceivable without a strong family life.”⁸

So with all of that how do we honor and obey our parents?

As I said, we always obey and honor them, but I do think there are different stages depending on our ages. Wise parents understand this and makes it easy for their children to transition through the stages and still obey. Foolish parents don’t recognize these stages and make it difficult for their children.

As children growing up, we should obey them quickly, quietly and completely. In some respect, our parents represent God to us at that age. We are learning how to do things, the grammar of life, so to speak.

But then we start to make our own associations, to see things in our own way, and a wise parent gives some more freedom in this stage. The time you have spent teaching honor and obedience as a parent comes to bear in this stage.

By the time you are in college, you are transitioning toward relating to your parents as an adult to an adult. But are you an adult? Are you trustworthy? Dependable? Responsible? Your attitude toward these things can go a long way toward your parents trusting you and giving you the freedom you crave.

Your parents love you and want the best for you. But most of them have no idea what to do. Many of them have non-Christian ideas about life and the problems you are facing. Sometimes they will give you bad advice or ask you to do things that are not the best. But you should seek to obey and honor when at all possible. If they are not asking you to sin against God, then you should start with the position of doing what they are asking you to do. If you have honored them in the areas you can, if you seek out areas to obey them in and respect them, then when you have differences, these will be easier to talk about. You need to be able to communicate, open up the lines of communication with your parents in order to have these sorts of discussions.

When they ask you to sin, you just can’t do it. But that isn’t very often, I would guess.

In the Lord

⁶ *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, 1950, quoted in MacArthur, 316

⁷ These thoughts come from Stott, 239

⁸ Stott, 241

Why do we do this? Why don't we write off our parents, especially if they aren't good ones? We obey our parents because we are Christians and have a relationship with Jesus.

“What has changed relates to the ravages of the fall. For the family life which God created at the beginning and pronounced ‘good’ was spoiled by human rebellion and selfishness. Relationships fell apart. Society was fractured. Love was twisted by lust, and authority into oppression. But now *in the Lord*, by his reconciling work, God’s new society has begun, continuous with the old in the fact of family life but discontinuous in its quality. For now all our relationships are *in the Lord*. They are purged of ruinous self-centeredness, and suffused instead with Christ’s love and peace. Even obedience to parents is changed. It is no longer a grudging acquiescence in parental authority. Christian children learn to obey with gladness, ‘for this pleases the Lord.’ They remember the loving submission which Jesus himself gave as a boy to his parents. Now this same Jesus is their Lord and Savior, and the creator of the new order, so they are anxious to do what pleases him.”⁹

We are to bring about grace into the household. Our goal as parents needs to be the allowing the goodness of the grace of God to dominate a child’s life - this is true for us, for how God treats us.

For some of you it will be only in the care of children you will discover your most noble purpose, and your most Christ-like nature. It will be when you sacrifice for your own child that you finally “get it.”

The Duty of Parents

We move on to the next relationship, focusing on the parents. It’s interesting that there is only one verse here: *4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

We would be right to understand this both as speaking to fathers but also to both parents. The word can carry both meanings, but we don’t want to neuter everything right away. I think fathers have a particular responsibility to the family, but of course both mother and father will stand accountable before the Lord.

So there’s one verse here. One implication we can draw from this is that the relationship between a husband and a wife is essential in their parenting. If they will only concentrate on their relationship and making sure it is godly and healthy, then the children will be so much better off than any sort of tricks and books could ever help. The Christ-like authority of a husband will be bringing the reality of the grace of God in his wife’s life. The Christ-like respect of wife will be bringing the reality of the grace of God into her husband’s life. This intimacy in the parents’ lives, this oneness, will flow out into their children’s lives.

The greatest gift parents can give their children is to love each other intimately. Children long for this. You can never love your child by slighting your spouse. Children learn by modeled intimacy.

I would encourage all of you to read Judith Wallerstein’s *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*. In this amazing book, she paints the picture of grown children whose parents were divorced and puts those stories alongside children whose parents had stayed together even in difficult marriages. The stories are powerful and moving as they paint the destruction divorce has on people.

One lie we have to stop believing is that divorce will be better for the children in the long run. No child ever wants his or her parents to get divorced. They never really understand, and it forces them into a position that is just wrong. Please read this book, especially if your parents are divorced or if you are dating someone who comes from a divorced family.

Paul calls parents to be self-controlled, gentle and patient – these were not the norm in Paul’s day or in ours.

The head of the Roman family was the *pater familias* who exercised a sovereign authority over the members of his family. This father had the right to punish, kill a newborn or expose it, or dispose it as a slave, make them work in his field in chains, punish as he liked, inflict the death penalty. Children would die, especially girls. Children would be scooped up by slave traders and reared so they could be sold into slavery or into a life of prostitution. It is Christians, after the model of Jesus, who loved children in a new way, who would redeem them from the garbage pile and adopt them as their own.

In this new way of thinking this new society, instead of the *Pater familias* approach, Paul says, *Do not provoke your children to anger.*

“What we do know is that parents can easily misuse their authority by making irritating or unreasonable demands which make no allowances for the inexperience and immaturity of children, or by harshness and cruelty at one extreme or by favoritism and over-indulgence at the other, or by humiliating or suppressing them, or by those two vindictive weapons sarcasm and ridicule.”¹⁰

There is a place for discipline, but we must remember that the best is encouragement of loving, understanding parents.

How might well-meaning parents provoke their children to anger?

One way is by overprotection, by being overly strict and not trusting in where a child can and can’t go and do. “Children need careful guidance and certain restrictions, but they are individual human beings in their own right and must learn to make decisions on their own, commensurate with their age and maturity. Their wills can be guided but they cannot be controlled.”¹¹

Another way to provoke anger is by favoritism. Isaac preferred Esau over Jacob and Rebekah Jacob over Esau. This proved deadly for their relationship (or almost literally deadly). Resist the temptation to compare you children with each other. This never goes well. Pick another example of good or bad, not a sibling.

A third way parents can provoke their children to anger is by pushing achievement beyond reasonable bounds. A child needs to be encouraged to do his or her best, but not to achieve a certain standard in order to be loved and accepted. This is really

⁹ Stott, 244

¹⁰ Stott, 246

¹¹ MacArthur, 317

damaging – in school, in dating, in sports, in test-taking, in behavior, in anything. I will love you even if you flunk out of college goes a long way to communicating unconditional love to your child.

Paul gives a second injunction to parents, telling them to: *Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

It is your responsibility as parents to care for your children's discipline and instruction. "Parents must jealously guard their responsibility, delegating some of it indeed to both church and school, but never entirely surrendering it."¹²

What/who will influence your children? Really there aren't that many major categories: Home, School, Church, Society, and Peers. And you need to think about the interplay between those areas. How much time is spent in each? What is being communicated in each?

I think parents and the covenantal community of church partner to raise up a child and teach him or her about Jesus. I'm not for the father and the family being the sole leader. I think the elders of the church have a greater role than that. So I'm not into total headship in that sort of way because I don't think it's biblical for the father to be the only pastor of the family.

And I think the father needs to consider what is best for his children's education. It could be homeschooling, public school or private school. It could be different for each child and different for one child in his or her different stages of growth. Julie and I have done all three options. We try to look out for what is best, and also try not to have a school-stance righteousness. I have some opinions about it, but they are just that – opinions.

The thing I get most aggravated about, however, is the apparent ease and willingness of parents to turn their precious children over to daycare and school-as-daycare. Some women have to work. They *have to*. They are not the ones I'm talking about. But many, many women think they have to work, because they want to maintain a certain lifestyle and position, and their children will not allow them to do that unless they are in daycare. It is a serious thing, in my opinion, to leave your one year old, your two year old, your three to five year old in the hands of other people for the majority of the day. How can that be a good thing?

And then to ship them off to a school without considering if this is the best. These are tough conversations, but ones we should be having without communicating a sort of righteousness about them, without enacting church policy, but while calling on fathers, on parents to THINK about what is happening.

I have good parents, really good parents. Ones who love me and tell me so and demonstrate it. Ones who love each other. Ones who love my sister and our children. And love their children's spouses. And support us. And I am so thankful for that. It makes it easy to honor and obey them, though of course they have their flaws. Many of you do not have that. So what do you do?

Before we can parent, we must understand what it means to be parented. We have to understand God as Father. He says he is over and over again in Ephesians. Look again and see.

Yes, we become our parents. Yikes. What if we cannot get away from that? God is our father. He enables us to parent. I often parent out of my insecurities. I start to discipline my children when I look bad, when I'm embarrassed. My insecurity brings out the worst in discipline. Others won't discipline because they're afraid of being unloved by their children. Under discipline, over discipline, what are we supposed to do?

God says, I have loved you before the foundation of the world. He says, I am your Father. He says, I have adopted you and I think you are amazing. He says, I love you no matter what and have shown you how much I love you in real ways. He says, I still discipline you because you need it, but it's out of love. He says we are in relationship and that the heart is the most important thing. He says the heart is demonstrated by our actions, that we're growing closer and closer together.

And that matters.

The Duty of Slaves

Paul next talks about our working relationships. Except that he talks about slaves and masters. And this might make us cringe. Masters and slaves must have been sitting together to listen to the word of Jesus Christ. So they are both hearing this together, just like wives and husbands, children and parents. And that is cool.

Experts estimate that some 35% of the population was in slavery at the time, so this was a large portion of the population. Others have estimated that it might be half, which would mean that half was in slavery to the other half.

This, and passages like this are sometimes embarrassing to Christians. They want Paul to say more, to take the stage and call for the abolishment of slavery.

Why didn't he? Paul didn't a few reasons. The first is that slavery was just simply a given. It was like electricity today. It was the way the world worked. So to conceive of a world without it was practically inconceivable. The second reason is that slavery was not a permanent state like we think of in America. Many slaves had the hope of being freed and would achieve that end in their lifetime. Another reason might be that there were in fact humanistic efforts at the time of Paul to make the status and life of a slave better. Perhaps Paul had these in mind.

We never should make an apology for slavery. The worst part about it is being the property of someone else. Of being thought of as a thing, as goods, as something that can be bought and sold. Or killed.

But many are in real and actual slavery to things our day. To status or a job, or money or an addiction or.... Anything. The welfare state could be thought of as a kind of slavery. Perhaps a state of something more like an indentured servant might be more dignifying than our current method of welfare checks. I'm not sure.

¹² Stott, 248

But it was Christians who brought about the end of slavery. Many of them were slow in coming around, and many of them justified slavery from the Bible, but eventually the gospel did win out. We many have wanted it to happen more quickly, but it did happen.

Paul speaks to slaves in the state of slaver. Paul was in chains while writing this. His heart had been set free, the word of God was not bound, the gospel is able to invade any and every social order and bring about transformation. He says to the slave:

Obey with fear and trembling

Obey with a sincere heart

Obey not by the way of eye-service, as people pleasers but as servants of Christ

Obey with your reward in mind

Paul is telling the slave to listen to the master, but when he does that he must listen to a far greater master. He says that the slave's focus isn't to be on the earthly master, but on the Lord Jesus Christ. He says to the slave, Look to Jesus! Obey as you would Christ. As servants of Christ. Rendering service as to the Lord.

This then becomes the marvelous secret that transforms the experience and service of the slave. It puts on the slave the marvels of the gospel even in the context of slavery. It doesn't justify the slavery but says the man who is in service to another is in fact free, because he is in bondage to Jesus. If properly understood, this has the power to transform, liberate and inject joy into the slave's service. George Herbert, in his poem, *The Elixir* writes:

THE ELIXIR.

TEACH me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

All may of Thee partake ;
Nothing can be so mean
Which with his tincture (for Thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

Not rudely, as a beast,
To run into action ;
But still to make Thee prepossest,
And give it his perfection.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine :
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye,
Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heav'n espy.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold ;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine: Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws, makes that and th' action fine.

Think of the young slave girl who takes Namaan to get healed. Because of her faith, because of her generosity, she becomes the conduit to marvelous, divine blessing. He becomes the servant, she is the master.

Paul isn't saying, Try and be a good slave and there will be a reward at the end of the day. That's not P's message. Paul is saying, The Great Master will bless you with reward.

Like I said, this had application to you as workers, not as slaves (though some of you may voluntarily put yourself into a type of slavery to an employer).

Tom Wright tells the story of his first job at a building site. The men were paid by the hour, so they would lounge around, doing as little work as possible until the foreman came around. Then they'd look busy. Nothing got done, so the foreman would ask them to stay and work overtime, in which of course they were paid more. They of course agreed, and then would do all the work in an hour, but bribe the night watchman to punch their time cards after three hours so they could all get more money. Needless to say, Wright wasn't impressed with the English work ethic of the day.

And there are countless stories of this. Keely told me there was tremendous peer pressure at one of her jobs. The other workers would get onto her for working too fast and too well because she was making them look bad.

Sinclair Ferguson tells the story of his friend who went to work and noticed the typing pool (wow, a typing pool. That is back in the day). One room held one person who was always typing, way faster and more often than anyone else. He asked about it, and the person said, Oh that's Sally. She's a Christian. Huh? He wondered, What is the connection with the way she works and the things she believes on a Sunday?

What is the connection with the way you work and what you believe on Sunday? Is there any? Do you know the number one theft from companies is from employees? Do you know how many hours are wasted on the job site, or in the office, or by bad practices? Christians are honest. We look to the real master, the one who gives the real reward. We obey with a sincere heart.

That word sincere is a compound word meaning, "without wax." Antique dealers and other owner would try to patch up a defective produce by putting wax in the cracks to make things look better than they were. Sincerity meant it had no wax. It was just as you saw it. Are you sincere? Are you honest? Are you a hard worker? Do you love Christ?

The Duty of Masters

Paul turns to the masters last here, and even that not for long. He says: *9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.*

Isn't it a great picture to think of these people being in the same room hearing this together. Professors and students. WalMart employee and stock owner. Coach and football player. Small business owner and cashier. Multimillionaire and his cleaning lady. Don't we all need the gospel? But doesn't it stretch the imagination to think of these people being in the same church? That stinks. We need to be in the same church. I'd like to imagine a church that had the union and the owners in the same worshipping community, both committed to putting out a great product and taking care of people in a fair and honest way. Is that possible?

Paul writes:

Do the same to them

Stop your threatening

Knowing that Jesus is master of both slave and free, there is no partiality with him

Paul calls upon gospel methods – these are the things that eventually, a long time later, led to slavery being outlawed. Paul says that in the exercise of their authority, these masters need to recognize that *they* are under authority. To say, *I* am under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is telling them that these men and women are your slaves, but they are property of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is their true master. Remember, they belong to Jesus, not to you.

Social standing means nothing to God. Do you believe that? No, you don't, and I don't either. You've worked hard to get the social standing you've got. Me too. I have a Bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. Do you know what that means? I have a Master's of Divinity from Covenant Theological Seminary. Do you understand that? I am ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America. Does that mean anything to you? I've written a book, one that you can buy on amazon.com. Have you done that? My titles and my achievements so often become me. I am very reluctant to give them up. A part of that is natural and okay. A part of that is wrong and evil.

Because God really isn't too interested. He is interested in who we are.

This goes back to the fundamental bible principle that God is no respecter of persons because we are *all* are made in his image. And he wants to know, what is happening to my image?

Think now on Jesus. He is your Master. Over and over again in the Scriptures, people come up to him and call him Lord. Master. Teacher. Rabbi. We refer to Jesus as prophet, priest and king. He is over all.

Think of God as Father, whom we've referred to again and again even in Ephesians. And think of Jesus as the Son, the beloved son in whom the father is well-pleased.

And yet Jesus, this master and son, became a slave and servant for his people. He did so willingly, evidenced most particularly when he washed the feet of his disciples out of love and devotion for them, the very ones about to betray and deny him. And look at him upon the cross – despised and rejected. Stripped naked in shame. Pierced, whipped and beaten for crimes he did not commit. Thought of as the worst kind of criminal.

All for you. This is an example for us to follow as we attempt to live in the ways Paul shows us. But it is more than that. It is our life, our hope, our power, our strength, for Jesus is in us if we are in him.

If Jesus and God is all this for us, then Duty is a fine name.