

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON ONE HUNDRED)

“CHILDREN, OBEY YOUR PARENTS”

EPHESIANS 6:1-9

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.

2 Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise;

3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.

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

5 Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ;

6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;

7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men:

8 Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.

9 And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.

Warren Wiersbe made the following remarks in the introduction to his commentary on **Ephesians** chapter **6**:

"After watching a television presentation about rebellious youth, a husband said to his wife, 'What a mess! Where did our generation go wrong?' The wife calmly answered, 'We had children.'

It seems no matter where we look in modern society, we see antagonism, division, and rebellion. Husbands and wives are divorcing each other, children are rebelling against their parents; and employers and employees are seeking for new ways to avoid strikes and keep the machinery of industry running productively. We have tried education, legislation, and every other approach, but nothing seems to work. Paul's solution to the antagonisms in the home and in society was regeneration—a new heart from God and a new submission to Christ and to one another....Paul indicated that this spiritual harmony begins in the lives of Christians who are submitted to the lordship of Christ."

In chapter **6**, Paul continues to emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit's filling and the principle of mutual submission, relative to the interpersonal relationships of believers. In verses **1-4**, he focuses on the interpersonal relationship between children and parents.

It is very important for us to understand that in the Roman Empire of the first century, there existed a great insensitivity, and often a cruel disregard of fathers in particular, with respect to their children. The Scottish theologian, **William Barclay**, informs us of this in his "**Daily Study Bible**." The following excerpt deals with the **Patria Potestas**.

The **Patria Potestas**, which means, "power of a father" in Latin, outlined the power that the male head of a family exercised over his children. **Barclay** explains,

"Under the **patria potestas** 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 punish as he liked and could even inflict the death penalty. 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. Even when he was a grown man, even if he were a magistrate of the city, even if the state had crowned him with well-deserved honours, he remained within his father's absolute power....It is true that the father's power was seldom carried to its limits, because public opinion would not have allowed it, but the fact remains that in the time of Paul the child was absolutely in his father's power.... When a child was born, it was placed before its father's feet, and, if the father stooped and lifted the child, that meant that he acknowledged it and wished it to be kept. If he turned and walked away, it meant that he refused to acknowledge it and the child could quite literally be thrown out.

A Roman baby always ran the risk of being repudiated and exposed... Unwanted children were commonly left in the Roman forum. There they became the property of anyone who cared to pick them up. They were collected at nights by people who nourished them in order to sell them as slaves or to stock the brothels of Rome."

Brothers and sisters, it was into such a nightmarish scenario that the Gospel of the grace of God shined forth, lighting the way for children to be set free from this horrible darkness and despair.

In verse **1** Paul writes, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.*" The word "*children*" is a translation of the Greek word **teknon**: (**tek'-non**), which refers to a child of either sex. It refers to a child as viewed in relation to his or her parents or family. In the context of Paul's discussion of the relationships in which a believer lives out the reality of a Spirit filled life, it is apparent that the children to whom he is addressing his exhortation were themselves believers or at least, the children of believers.

These children are charged to obey their parents “*in the Lord.*” The word “*obey*” is a translation of the Greek word **hupakouó**: (**hoop-ak-oo’-o**) which literally means, “under the hearing” or “to listen under.” The idea is of listening with attentiveness and then responding positively to what is heard. The sense is that one listens with a readiness to carry out what has been requested or commanded. It implies an **inward attitude** of respect and honour, as well as the **external act** of obedience. The word pictures the one hearing as being under the authority of someone else. Obedience involves conscious listening. If we do not really listen, we cannot really obey. That is why parents are always saying to their children, “Listen to me!”

The Greek word **hupakouó** is in the **present imperative** in the Greek. Paul is issuing a command to children to obey their parents as a lifestyle. In the present context of Paul’s extended description of Spirit-filled individuals, we should probably understand him to be exhorting Spirit-filled children to continually put themselves under the words and authority of their parents. They are to continually exhibit a readiness to give respectful attention to their parents’ commands and instructions. The only two ways that a child, who is rebellious by nature, can ever obey this Scriptural injunction is for he or she to be, not only saved, but also filled with the Spirit and therefore controlled **internally** or **willingly**, or for he or she to be controlled **externally** or **unwillingly** by the parents’ exertion of some kind of force.

In the context of family relationships, it is notable that the wife is not commanded to **obey** her husband, as children are commanded to **obey** their parents. In **Ephesians 5:22-24** Paul wrote,

*22 Wives, **submit** yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

*24 Therefore as the church is **subject** unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.*

The word “*submit*” in verse **22** and the word “*subject*” in verse **24** are translations of the same Greek word. The word is **hupotassó**: (**hoop-ot-as’-so**), which describes submission between **equals**. However, as we have just explained, the word Paul uses to speak of the obedience that children are to render to their parents is not **hupotassó** but **hupakouó** which speaks of the submission of an inferior to a superior, as in the case of a slave to a master. In other words, a husband is to treat his wife as an equal and not as his servant or as if she were a child. The husband is not to order his wife about, calling on her to respond to his every wish and command.

“*Children, obey your parents **in the Lord**.*” What does the phrase “*in the Lord*,” mean? Paul’s point seems to be that this prescribed obedience to parents is the child’s obligation to **Christ** whether or not the parents are believers. Children are to obey their parents, **for Christ’s sake**. As we saw in regard to the wife, who is to submit herself to her husband “*as unto the Lord*” (**Ephesians 5:22**), so it is with the child to the parent. The phrase “*in the Lord*,” would therefore define the **quality** of the obedience that a child should render to his or her parents by defining the sphere in which that obedience is to be carried out. How else could supernatural obedience be carried out except in a supernatural sphere? This argument is an application of the theme of the entire section, which is “*and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (**Ephesians 5:21 New English Translation**).

Brothers and sisters, when a person becomes a Christian, he or she is not released from the normal obligations of life. In fact, his or her faith in Christ should make him or her a better human being, whether they are child or an adult.

The obedience in this context describes a Spirit-filled child in communion or fellowship with Christ. His or her obedience should be as if to Him, as if obeying the Lord Himself. It also follows that children are **not** commanded to obey their parents if such obedience demands of

them to **disobey** the Lord! The same principle is outlined in **Acts 5:27-29**. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

27 When they had brought them, they stood them before the council, and the high priest questioned them,

28 saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood on us!”

29 But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people.

The Lord Jesus gave the perfect example of the obedience expected of children in **Luke 2:51**: *“Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. But his mother kept all these things in her heart”* (**New English Translation**).

The word *“obedient”* in this verse is a translation of the Greek word **hupotassó** which as we explained earlier, describes submission between **equals**. His submission was an internal and willing submission. Children are not simply to follow the example of Jesus when He subjected Himself to His parents, but they must also realize that both they and their parents are under the authority of Christ. They are to obey, not merely because this is what their parents want, but because this is what the Lord Jesus wants. This is their responsibility to Christ. They cannot possibly fulfill their desire to belong to him, and to reflect his life, unless they are willing to obey their parents.

Paul exhorts the children in the church at Ephesus to obey their parents in the Lord because it is *“right”* for them to do so. The word *“right”* is a translation of the Greek word **dikaíos**: (**dik’-ah-yos**). The word refers to an expected behaviour or conformity, not according to one’s own standard, but according to an imposed standard, in this case, the standard outlined in the Word of God. The word describes that which is in accordance with what God requires and so is in accordance with His

compelling standards. Paul is speaking of that which is right, not just in the sense of being suitable, or appropriate, or fitting, but in the sense of being righteous because it harmonizes with the law of God.

Brothers and sisters, it is God's righteous design for children to obey their parents in the Lord. It is His template for a family life of order rather than one of utter chaos. Therefore, it should not surprise us to discover that virtually every sensible, self-respecting culture and society recognizes the importance of children respecting and obeying their parents and is built upon that premise.

Warren Wiersbe writes, tongue in cheek that, "The 'modern version' of **Ephesians 6:1** would be, 'Parents, obey your children, for this will keep them happy and bring peace to the home.' But this is contrary to God's order in nature."

It has been observed that the first lesson that a soldier must learn is obedience to those in authority. He must learn to follow orders. It is the same for a child. After the soldier has learned to obey, then he is in a position to be promoted to the rank of an officer where he now gives commands to others. To know how to give orders depends largely on how the soldier learned to obey. The basic training of a child's obedience to authority should be learned in the home, not in Sunday school. The lack of basic home training in which obedience to authority is taught is one of the great failings of our society, including our churches!

In verse **2** Paul writes, "*Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise.*" The Greek word translated "*honour*" is **timaó**: (**tim-ah'-o**), which means, "to estimate, to fix the value of something belonging to oneself; to respect, venerate, regard highly." To show respect to someone is to recognize their worth as a person, and, if they are a parent, to recognize the validity of their role and their authority. Therefore, **timaó** means to ascribe worth to someone. To hold such a person in awe. The idea is to treat as precious! To honour is a

social action describing how people within a society should evaluate one another. Honour usually results in people being elevated in the eyes of the community. Honouring involves a proper **attitude** as well as appropriate **behaviour**.

To honour is to manifest an attitude of love, respect, and disposition of one's heart which in the context of the child/parent relationship yields the fruit of obedience.

The word **timaó** is in the **present imperative** which is a command for children to continually honour their parents. It is singular, so Paul is addressing each child individually. Every child is to demonstrate this attitude of honour, respect, and reverence toward his or her parents for all of his or her life!

John MacArthur has an excellent comment regarding this matter. He states that, "Honor is the **attitude** behind the **act**. The **act** is obedience, and honor is the **attitude**. Remember that an act without the proper attitude is hypocrisy. If you do what your parents tell you to do but you hate it and you're unwilling and nasty about it, then you're a hypocrite. If you do what your parents tell you to do but you're bitter, fearful, reluctant, and selfish, that's not the right spirit. God is after the attitude much more than He's after the act, because if the attitude is right, the act will follow. But a right act with a wrong attitude is nothing but hypocrisy."

To put it another way, honour describes the **disposition** out of which obedience is born. Obedience is the **duty**; Honour is the **disposition**. To honour one's parents means to show them respect and love, to care for them as long as they need to be cared for, and to seek to bring honour to them by the way one lives.

When children get married, their **relationship** to their parents changes, but not their responsibility to honour and care for them. Paul emphasizes

this in **1 Timothy 5:3-4**. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

3 Honor widows who are truly in need.

4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn to fulfill their duty toward their own household and so repay their parents what is owed them. For this is what pleases God.

Meeting the physical and material needs of one's family is a part of Christian stewardship. Believers should manage their personal resources in a responsible way in order to care for the needs of their family. Paul is making the point that children are not merely to manifest an attitude of honour but they are to back it up with appropriate action, including financial support if that is needed. This is God's design for the family.

In **Exodus 20:1-17**, God gave the Israelites Ten Commandments, which were a summary of the entire Law. In verse **12** He outlines the fifth Commandment: "*Honor your father and your mother, that you may live a long time in the land the LORD your God is giving to you*" (**New English Translation**). In **Ephesians 6:2**, Paul makes reference to this commandment and applies it to the New Testament believer. This, of course, does not mean that believers are "under the Law," for Christ has set us free from both the **curse** and the **bondage** of the Law, according to **Galatians 3:13, and 5:1**). But the **righteousness** of the Law is still a revelation of the holiness of God, and the Holy Spirit enables us to practice that righteousness in our daily lives, according to **Romans 8:1-4**. All of the Ten Commandments except the fourth, "*Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy,*" are repeated in the New Testament epistles for believer to observe. Paul is saying in effect that it is just as wrong for a New Testament believer to dishonour his or her parents as it was for an Old Testament Jew.

The fifth commandment is so important that God attached to it the inherent motivation of a promise, because this commandment is the key to all human relationships and the passing on of a godly heritage. God

designed the family and if this commandment is not honoured, that design will be disturbed. One of the reasons for the breakdown in family life worldwide is the failure of children to honour their parents.

What is the promise that is attached to the commandment? According to **Exodus 20:12** it is, *“that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”* When Paul restated the promise connected in **Ephesians 6:3**, he changed it. He wrote, *“That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”*

Warren Wiersbe explains that God promised obedient Jewish children long life in the Promised Land. Since He has not promised Christians a particular piece of land, Paul stated the more general promise that lay behind the specific promise, namely longer physical life on earth. He substituted the word “earth” for the word “land” and tells us that believing children who honour their parents can expect two blessings. It will be well with them, and they will live long on the earth. This does not mean that everyone who dies young has dishonored his or her parents. Paul was stating a general principle: when children obey their parents in the Lord, they will escape a good deal of sin and danger and thus avoid many of the things that normally threaten or shorten their lives. But life is not measured only by **quantity of time**. It is also measured by **quality of experience**. God enriches the life of the obedient child no matter how long he or she may live on the earth. Disobedience always robs us; obedience always enriches us.

What happens when children receive no instruction or correction from their parents, or refuse to obey the instruction and correction received? The answer is what we are grappling with in our country at the present time: utter chaos, social anarchy and a state that is becoming impossible to govern. The break-up of families in Jamaica has been accompanied by a void in the exercise of parental authority and, as a result, it is **not** well with us and we are **not** living long on the earth.

It is interesting and saddening to note that one of the reasons God gave for the Jews being sent into Babylonian exile was a failure to honour

their parents. In **Ezekiel 22:7** we read, *“They have treated father and mother with contempt....”*

Ray Steadman, commenting on **Ephesians 6:1-3**, made the following remarks:

“We do not move beyond the need to render obedience to authority. It follows us all our life. Adults are as much under authority as children are. If obedience has not been learned as children it is very likely that it will not be learned as adults. This is another reason for the outbreak of violence, disobedience and rebellion against all forms of authority sweeping across our land today. This is, therefore, one of the most important sections of Scripture.

This issue is dealt with frequently and widely throughout the whole of Scripture because it is so vital. It strikes right to the very heart of one of the most important relationships of life, which touches every aspect of human thinking. It is extremely important, then, that children, especially Christian children, understand how necessary it is that they willingly and gladly obey their parents.”