

Obeying Parents

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[0 : 01] Our Father God, we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

The first word of this last chapter of Ephesians is rather striking. Paul says, children, children. Most of us probably think the Bible's for adults, but it's actually for children as well. And this chapter begins by addressing children. Paul assumes that when his letter arrives in Ephesus and the church gathers to hear it read, children will be there to hear it read.

Paul assumes that children are part and parcel of church life. It's not that they're to be seen but not heard, but that they're an integral part of the church of Ephesus and of the ancient world, and presumably whole families would attend and be part of the church.

And that's all the more striking, given the culture of the times of St. Paul in the first century. For the ancient Roman Greco world was certainly an adult world, even more so than our world today.

[1 : 15] Children came under the absolute power of their father. Any child or baby that was deformed or weak, sometimes just because they were female, they may be exposed on the hill and left to die or may be drowned by their father, who didn't want them.

Now, of course, that wouldn't happen to every child, but to some, certainly. Fathers had the right to dispose of their children, to be slaves, or even to force them into chain gangs to work for themselves.

Fathers had the right of exercising capital punishment on any disobedient children that they had.

Fairly severe and strict. So when Paul addresses children, it's somewhat surprising.

He considers children to be as important as the adults in the life of the Christian church. And he says to them, Obey your parents.

He then goes on to quote the fifth of the Ten Commandments. Honour your parents. Paul's changed it a bit by saying, Obey. The command to honour parents in the Old Testament applied not just to children, but to grown-up children as well.

[2 : 31] That is, it would apply to all of us who have a parent or parents alive. To honour parents is slightly different. To obey them. Indeed, in the Old Testament, any child who disobeys or rather dishonours their parents would also be subject to the death penalty, as it was part of the first group of the Ten Commandments.

But Paul changes that and says, Obey. And he's addressing those, presumably, who are still at home, not yet married, under adult age.

Now to say to children, Obey your parents, would be something that would be taken for granted in the world of St. Paul. All children had to obey their parents. But what Paul is commanding is something a little bit more significant.

It's significant because he says parents, not fathers. So he extends to mothers the demand for children to obey their mothers as well as their fathers.

But also he qualifies it by saying, Obey your parents in the Lord. Firstly, that means an element of motivation.

[3 : 46] The children are to obey their parents, not because the empire forced it, not because their parents demanded it, not because it was the cultural thing to do, not because they had no choice about obedience, but because they were to be motivated by their relationship with God.

Because they were Christian children who loved God and belonged to him, that was their motivation for obeying their parents. Remember the context in which these words are written.

They're written to Christian families. They're written to a church, not a city. They're written to Christian children of Christian parents who belonged to the church. They're written in the context of obedience being a demonstration of the filling of the Holy Spirit, as we saw two weeks ago.

It's written in the context of mutual submission within the church, where each and every member of the church is submitting to each other. And as a special example of that, children are to obey their parents.

And Paul says, in the Lord. Firstly, because it was motivation, but secondly, to restrict and restrain the authority that the father exercised.

[5 : 01] For as I've said in the ancient world, the father had an absolute authority over his family, even to the point of death of children. But Paul says, obey your parents in the Lord, restraining the authority of the parents, and the father in particular.

For Paul recognises that there is a supreme authority, and that is God, or the Lord, Jesus Christ. Not parents, but God.

And obedience to parents is restrained by obedience to God. For example, for a child whose parents forbid them worshipping God, they are, presumably, not to obey.

Because to worship God is fundamental for Christians. And so if for some reason their parents were forcing them, or obliging them, or demanding them not to worship God, then the child is free to disobey.

There are various grey areas, I'm sure, where parents may prevent children from going to church. What would be the advice then to the child? Maybe we would recommend that they submitted to their parents, even if that was such a wrong decision, because they could still be Christians, and still worship God, and still pray, and still read the Bible, even if they were prevented from going to church.

[6 : 36] Paul's point here is that parents don't have the supreme authority. God does. And children need to know that, and parents need to know it.

There's no doubt that family life is crucial for Christian people. There's no doubt that in our society there is an obligation on Christians to model good family life, both in husband-wife relationship, and in parenting, and in child living.

There is no doubt that Christians should place a great priority on their family life. But family is not God. Family relationships come under our relationship to God.

Family does not come first. God does. family life must never be to the detriment of our relationship with God.

And I say all that because in our society family is the God of so many people. For so many, many people in our society family comes first.

[7 : 50] family will be in their right position.

But for many people what the family wants they do. So, so many parents are actually controlled by their adult children and so many children are controlled by their adult parents and what they want to do they follow and do it.

and yet often at the detriment of Christian faith. Coming to church each week for example. Praying and reading the Bible. Spending time in Christian fellowship.

Being free to be part of a Bible study group or fellowship group within the church and so on. Family is important but God comes first.

and that's made clear in Paul's instructions to the fathers as well in verse 4. He says and fathers probably just the fathers although there's some argument that maybe he means parents generally just like the word brethren means brothers and sisters but probably here just means fathers do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

[9 : 09] To the father who had this absolute authority in Paul's time there is great restraint now placed on him. They are not to provoke their children to anger.

They are thus to exercise their own self-control in the way they father their children. To bring up the children has the verb got a sense of nourish or feed or be tender with your children gentle and kind. That's what the father is to do. Things that we might think apply to the mother applying to the father. We are told that they are to bring them up in the discipline or education the sense of training or coaching and then the word instruction at the end of verse 4 has got the sense perhaps of warning or admonition.

Paul of course is not saying anything new here the Proverbs have said it all before. Train children in the right way and when old they will not stray. Those who spare the rod hate their children those who love them are diligent to discipline them.

But what really restrains the father is the very end of the verse bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. That is not what the father wants not the education that the father wants to give or the instruction or the discipline the father wants to give but rather Christian education and discipline and instruction.

[10:40] You see above anything else the father's job in the family is to bring up their children as Christian people. More important than providing the bread and the food more important than providing the shelter more important than providing good education for their children is bringing up children as Christian people.

Fathers are not to pass the buck to the mothers as most of us do. It's not the mother's job fundamentally as the father's job as the head of the Christian family to bring up children as Christians.

It's not the Sunday school teacher's job but the father's job. It's not my job but the father's job. It's not the church's job the father's job.

It's not the godparent's job. It's the father's job. It doesn't mean teaching your children good and evil or right and wrong.

It means teaching them about God and Jesus Christ. It's not ethical instruction but ethical instruction which flows from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

[11:55] Nor does it mean bring up your children so that when they're of age they'll choose for themselves what they want to believe about God. That's a real cop out because God is real and God is true and we spend all our energy and resources teaching children to write and to spell and to know that I before E except after C and that 2 plus 2 equals 4 but God is truer than all of that.

It's God who made 2 plus 2 to equal 4. God is true and true. Why don't we teach God as we teach reading, writing and arithmetic? Because we tend to cop out of teaching about Jesus Christ and God.

Yes of course children and when they grow up will make decisions about what they believe but the thing is that God is real. It's not a smorgasbord of take it or leave it. God is true.

Truer than 2 plus 2 equals 4 and the father's job as the head of a Christian family is to teach their children that. Now recognize that for some of you the father in your household is not a Christian. It seems to me that it's the mother's job fundamentally. But where the father is a Christian it's not that the mother cops out either but it's the father as the head of the house has that responsibility which will be exercised by him and under him by his wife the mother of the Christian family.

[13:15] Let us take Christian instruction seriously in our families. Let's take seriously family devotions, reading the Bible, praying with children.

Not just something for mum but also for dad as well. Let's take seriously the worship of God as a family, coming to church as a family, worshipping God as a family, at home as a family, praying together about things that are of concern.

When children have got exams or worries, we pray with them together as a family, teaching them to rely on God and to trust God. Share with them our own Christian experiences, the way in which God has answered our prayer, the things that we've been learning through sermons and through reading the Bible by ourselves.

Share with your children what they learn in Sunday school but reciprocate and share with them what you've learned through the sermon as they've been in Sunday school week by week. Let's take seriously our modelling of Christian families.

children and fathers is the second of three examples in this letter of specific submission to God.

[14:37] The first we saw last week of wives and husbands and now children and fathers and the third in verses five to nine deals with slaves and masters. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world was not really like Uncle Tom's cabin where the African slaves in America were treated so harshly and abominably.

There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, a third of the population, almost the entire workforce were slaves. there was quite a deal of ease of movement between being a slave and a free man.

There was never a hint in the ancient world of any abolition of slavery as there has been in recent centuries. In the first century when Paul was writing a succession of Roman emperors improved the conditions for slaves in the empire.

generally slaves were treated well. Generally slaves were really like employees and masters like employers. Admittedly the system was open to abuse and no doubt there were many. And no doubt the slaves had less freedom than employees today. But we shouldn't have in mind the picture of Uncle Tom's cabin of those American African slaves being so harshly and cruelly treated.

[16:03] Probably there were some like that, but the general picture was much more benevolent. Some of us may have a bit of difficulty with the fact that the Bible tolerates slavery.

It doesn't demand slavery but nor does it condemn it per se. It certainly restricts it and restricts it quite severely. The Old Testament admits the possibility of slavery even amongst the people of God.

And yet the conditions imposed on masters and slaves were so strict that slaves should be very well treated for as if they were members of the household of their master in the Old Testament. And there were steps taken and laws given in the Old Testament to prevent the increase of slavery and indeed to reverse slavery at periods of time. Nonetheless Paul addresses the status quo of his day.

And in his society there were slaves and there were masters. And Paul is not out to abolish slavery here but rather to restrict it and transform it. Just as striking as it was for him to address children he addresses slaves.

[17:11] He addresses them as full members of the Christian church. The church in Ephesus was not a sort of hierarchical church where the full members were the masters and the slaves sort of stood at the back or were locked out of pews that were owned by the rich or anything like that.

It seems that slaves and masters were fully each members of the church of Ephesus and indeed in the ancient world. For the Christian church of the ancient times seemed to transcend social barriers. There was no distinction within the church between rich and poor. Indeed when that happened in Corinth Paul castigates them in the later chapters of 1 Corinthians. We should also remember the context of addressing slaves is the same as that of addressing children and wives beforehand in the previous chapters.

Paul is addressing Christian slaves and Christian masters for he's addressing a Christian church. He's addressing people who are to be filled with the Holy Spirit and that is to be demonstrated by their mutual submission and slaves and masters is just one example of that mutual submission within the Christian church.

He recognizes that slaves may not be free to change their situation but what they are free to do is to change their attitude and motivation within the situation of slavery.

[18:32] Paul recognizes that whatever our situation in life we have freedom to respond to it however we may. We always have that freedom and that freedom must be exercised responsibly for how we respond to a situation is of great importance as Christian people.

Our motivations and attitudes are as important as our actions. So Paul addresses the motivations and attitudes of slaves. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling in singleness of heart as you obey Christ.

That is, they are to work for their masters as if their masters were Christ. They were to treat their masters as they would treat Christ. They were to fear their masters as they would fear Christ. For Paul goes on to say that really though you may be earthly slaves in fact your real slavery is slavery to Jesus Christ. He goes on in verse 6, not only while being watched and in order to please them but as slaves of Christ.

Doing the will of God from the heart. Paul is not wanting workers who are merely working for pleasing their masters sake or merely working when their masters notice.

[19:57] But he wants workers who work for Christ. For that is, as he says in the end of verse 6, doing the will of God from the heart. Our work is doing the will of God if we work from the heart.

And then he goes on, render service with enthusiasm as to the Lord and not to men and women. That is, work as if you are working for Christ.

Notice also that, well you don't notice really in this translation but let me point out that in verse 5 Paul says you are to work in singleness of heart. And at the end of verse 6 he says doing the will of God literally from the soul.

So Paul is combining heart and soul. He's saying with all your heart and with all your soul you are to work for your masters as if they were Christ. Picking up the injunction so often in the Old Testament

and in the New to love God with all our heart and soul.

So are slaves to work for their masters. The principle behind all this is that Christ is the Lord of our work. Not just of our Sunday mornings but our Mondays to Fridays as well.

[21 : 09] In each of those four verses addressed to slaves there is a reference to Christ. for he is the foundation and the one who motivates all work done by Christian people.

Paul says you may be slaves but think of yourselves as slaves of Christ and that will motivate how you work. Yes you may have earthly masters but consider that Christ is your master and that will motivate and influence the way you work.

It's a fairly radical view of work. I guess most of us when we get up on Monday morning don't think like this. Most of us when we get up on Monday morning don't think as we're heading off to the office oh well my boss is really like Jesus Christ and therefore I'll serve him as if I was serving Jesus Christ.

But that should be how we actually think of our work when we go to the bank or when we go around to care for somebody else's children or when we turn up at whatever job we're doing in a hospital as a nurse or whatever.

We're to work as if Jesus Christ were we're our boss or our master. What motivates you in your work? Filling up the wallet at the end of the week?

[22 : 18] Accumulating possessions and goods as much as you can? Maybe what motivates you in work is enjoyment. That I want to enjoy this as much as possible and have fun.

Maybe what motivates you in your work is the relationships you build with those with whom you work. But more than any of those things our motivation in our work must be service of Jesus Christ. So whether we're in the bank, whether we're in the insurance company, whether we're retired and caring for our grandchildren, whether we're studying, whether we're a secretary, whatever we do we are to do it for Christ.

Christ willingly, enthusiastically, from the heart, working hard for Christ's sake. Paul finishes this section by addressing those who are masters.

We can perhaps extrapolate and call them employers. Do the same to your employees or to your slaves, if indeed any of us have slaves. Do the same, that is, work as if for Christ.

[23 : 28] Status does not mean a privilege in the eyes of God. So the fact that somebody is a master doesn't mean they're treated more favourably by God at all. In fact, as Paul says, they are also slaves of Christ.

For you know that both of you, that is slave and master, have the same master in heaven, that is Christ. So if you're an earthly boss or an earthly master, then in fact you're a slave of Christ who is in heaven.

And therefore you're on a par. Therefore your conduct is to be of the same standard as those slaves as well. Well let me conclude. Over these last two weeks we've looked at three examples of submission within Christian fellowship.

Wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. The key verse was the first of that section, chapter 5 verse 21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

For Paul is addressing the church when he addresses these groups of people. And he's saying that you as a church must exhibit the quality of submission in all your relationships within the church.

[24 : 41] Submission transcends sex so that women and men submit to each other. It transcends age so that those who are old and those who are experienced and those who have been around for a long time submit to those who are new and those who are young as much as the new and the young submit to the old.

Age and length of time in church is not a reason for lording it over other people. So also does submission transcend socio-economic status. So those who are rich do not lord it over the poor and those who are poor submit to the rich as the rich submit to the poor.

Remember also that there is no condition placed on submission within the church. We're not to submit when somebody else submits back to us.

We're not to stop submitting when somebody else stops submitting to us. We are to keep on in submission to each other in the Christian church regardless of the response that we get.

And as Paul has made very clear in this chapter and a half, Jesus is the model and motivation. For he of course was the perfect one who submitted to an unjust trial and an unjust death with humility for the sake of us.

[25 : 57] So too, we are not to count our sex, our age, our socio-economic status or anything else at all as something to be proud about but rather are to exercise humble submission to each other.

Let us make sure that mutual submission is a mark of the character of our relationships at Holy Trinity today and every day as we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Let us pray. Our Father, we thank you for each other. We thank you that you have called us into a fellowship of your people, rich and poor, old and young, male and female, children and adults, Jew and Gentile.

We thank you that Jesus' death has broken down all the walls of hostility and brought us into unity with each other. So we pray, Father, that you will fill us by your spirit every day and that that may be demonstrated at least in part by our mutual submission to each other out of reverence for you.

Amen.