

Beauty in God's Order: fathers and children

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[0 : 00] Well, there are a variety of situations in life where it takes two to tango. You've heard that phrase. It comes from, of course, dancing, where the word tango comes from.

! That's sort of not mosh pit rave kind of dancing, but ballroom dancing. You know, where the two dance partners have to move together, not with identical steps, but complementary and matching ones.

Another example might be tennis. I know in singles tennis is competitive, but when you're having a hit out with a friend, it's really only enjoyable if the two of you are evenly matched players, right? That you're able to return the ball at a certain speed and placement, so that you're not ending up all the time just going to the back to pick up the balls. Then, of course, there's the seesaw, which some of you might remember from your younger days, where both kids at each end take turns to push each other up and down.

And they have to be similar in size, right? Or else, like this picture, the big guy, you know, if you want to push up and then come back down, he'll probably send the other one flying, isn't it? And there'll be the end of it.

[1 : 15] Now, last week we saw how in marriage, both the husband and the wife also have to complement each other to bring out the beauty of marriage as God intended.

And I would say that today, the same applies for godly parenting. Both parents and children actually have to be part of this tango in order for parenting to be successful.

Like marriage, the relationship of a Christian parent and child is described by Paul as an expression of their spirit-filled lives. Now, here, Paul actually addresses the children first, not the parents.

So, if you consider a child yourself today, listen up. Here's what Paul says, Now, I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you because you've probably heard mum and dad say it all the time.

But here, Paul adds the phrase, In the Lord. It's consistent then with chapter 5 and verse 21, where we heard Paul urging all of us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

[2 : 37] And remember that when I said submitting to one another, that is not mutual submission, as though we all have to submit to each other, but rather submitting based on God's assigned authority in the relationship.

So, when children obey their parents in the Lord, what they're doing is part of their submission to Christ. Parents have been delegated this authority by Jesus, and when children obey, they fulfill Christ's call to submit to Him.

However, obey is actually a stronger word than submit. There's less wriggle room for you to answer back, to argue, to defy the instruction.

The safeguard, of course, for children we'll find in verse 4, where there's a corresponding command to parents not to misuse that authority. Paul, however, is working on the premise that what parents are asking their children to do is in accordance with God's will and word.

The child who hears these instructions from Paul, reading this letter or whatever, is most likely able to do so because their parents are also in church as believers.

[3 : 53] They've brought them to church. So, the call to obey needs to be put in the right context. It doesn't mean, for example, that if a child is being asked by their parents to steal, then, as a church, we would tell them, oh, you need to obey their parents because the Bible says so, so go ahead and steal.

Right? But in general, aside from these kind of rather rare occurrences, hopefully, to obey means just that. Parents are given authority over the children, but they will in turn be answerable to God for that authority.

Have they used it for the good of those under their authority? That is, their children. Because that's the reason why God has given them this authority.

But for children, Paul now gives two reasons for this instruction. The first, as it already says in verse 1, is because it is right. And the second is now in verses 2 and 3, honour your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.

Now, both these reasons are related, but slightly distinct. So firstly, do it because it's right. Paul is almost saying, look, it's self-evident. You know, just do it.

[5 : 09] It's right. But it's also right biblically and theologically because in God's ordered creation, a family which is formed out of marriage is God's intended setting for raising children.

This is for their good. And parents are really God's gift to children in order for them to be brought up to know Him and His ways. Thus, it's in the home that a child should be learning what's right from wrong.

A child's upbringing falls primarily on the parents' shoulders. Not the state. Not the education system. Not the church. And even with spiritual matters, not the church.

Yes, Michelle, as the kids' pastor and Alex and other leaders are there to support parents. But first and foremost, the responsibility lies with the parent. Parents can, of course, delegate this responsibly as they do to the church, in part, onto the school.

But they need to overall be still in charge to supervise what is being taught. Now, I know sometimes couples have children because, you know, they think, Oh, children so cute, you know.

[6 : 24] Ask them two months after they've had the baby and see what happens. Or it satisfies their emotional need to be parents. Or they like parading their children as trophies and fashion accessories.

But, you know, there's a weighty responsibility, isn't it, as Paul says, that falls on parents to bring their children up. And this is not just about just housing them, feeding them, helping them find a good job after which we set them loose.

Parents are responsible for their moral upbringing. And as Christians, their spiritual welfare and maturity. When a child comes into this world, an eternal soul is born.

And the destiny of this soul, like each of us, all of us, is either everlasting darkness without Christ or glory with Christ in eternity.

So, the stakes are high, aren't they? So, this is a weighty responsibility for parents, even though the instruction is to children. And I know not all of you are parents, but we need to all feel this weight of it.

[7 : 37] And we must also realize later that despite this weight, which I'll come later to, God does give grace to people to be parents so that they can do it well.

So, we need to feel the weight, but also know God's grace to enable us to do it. But second, Paul also instructs children to obey because there's a promise of blessing that comes with it.

There's a reward. It's not just right, but it will be good for you, children. And here Paul refers or goes back to one of the Ten Commandments. And he says that honoring our parents is the first with a promise.

Those who obey will enjoy life in the land. Now, we need to follow Paul's reasoning here carefully to apply this promise correctly. But the first thing to realize is that the Ten Commandments were given as part of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

And the blessing of the promised land was part of that covenant. Thus, long life in the land is tied to this covenant relationship and Israel's faithfulness to this covenant.

[8 : 50] And the key way in which Israel would continue to be faithful, not just in the generation that entered the land, but beyond, is for parents to pass on to their children their faith from one generation to another.

Thus, as we read earlier, Brendan read for us in Deuteronomy 6, the law given included specific instructions for parents. Thus, verse 7 on the slide, impress them, that is the commandments on your children.

Talk about them when they sit at home, when you walk around the house or walk along the road, walk around the house too if you want, when you lie down and when you get up. I mean, he's saying, do it all the time.

Do it as part of your life. Tie them on your hands, bind them on your foreheads, ride them on the door frame so that you won't forget, right? And then God's blessing, as it says back in 6 verse 1, Verse 1 will then be for you, your children and their children after them.

In other words, this is meant to be a multi-generational blessing. Not just blessing once, but blessing from generation to generation to generation, provided parents instruct their children and children obey their parents.

[10:07] But if parents fail to pass on the faith, children then will end up disobeying God. And God also warned that what will happen then is that they will be sent into exile.

And hence, the blessing of enjoying life in the land will therefore not be theirs. And so, like this dance, both parents and children have to do their part.

Instruct, obey, pass it on. And this promise therefore, when we look at it in Ephesians, is not to say that as long as children obey whatever the instruction of parents might be, then God will bless them. No, because it is part of that overall covenant between God and Israel. What parents have to instruct their children in is the commandments of God in the faith.

And then children have to obey those. Now, of course, when we come to Ephesians, Paul actually changes slightly the wording of the promise because the promise has changed in one sense.

[11:14] I don't know whether you noticed the change. So, back in Deuteronomy 5, verse 16, what the commandment says is that they will live long and it may go well with them in the land.

But if you look here in Ephesians, it's sort of a bit swapped around. Paul says it will go well with you and you will enjoy life on the earth. So, the change there is now from the land, which is the land of Canaan, to the earth more generally.

And that's because Paul is no longer just talking to Jews. He's talking to Christians who are both Jews and Gentiles in light of Christ. And for Christians, the blessing is no longer about the land, is it?

But rather, there is a principle of blessing in this life on earth, wherever we may be. And the blessing is not just a reference to material wealth, but to a life of spiritual blessing in Christ.

All the things that we saw in chapter one, where Paul praised God for, every spiritual blessing in Christ is ours. That is what it truly means for life to go well for us on earth.

[12:23] So, this is not a promise then that if children obey, they will never suffer, they will never be poor or die young. Rather, it's a promise that the children who obey godly parents, who teach them to obey God, will live spirit-filled lives and be blessed by it, as they practice the deeds of light rather than darkness.

So, in my mind, and I'm not just saying this because I'm a parent, I think children have the easier part of the deal. There's a promise of blessing that goes with this obedience, and it's not the case if you look at the parents.

Conversely, in verse four, it says, Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. There's no explicit blessing, but I think if you look at my outline, it's inferred.

Because for parents, just seeing their children living under the blessing of God is reward in itself.

And trust me, it is. Now, I know that many of you here today, when you look at verse four, you don't feel like this is directly relevant to your lives.

Not yet anyway. For some of you, the last thing on your mind is to be a parent. But here's why I think you ought to listen in anyway.

[13:41] Because you may not know, but many of you will become parents much sooner than you think. Just ask some of our newly minted fathers and mothers over there.

They went very quickly from happy single to joyful father. But secondly, I think understanding what parents are asked to do will give you an insight, really, as to your relationship, your own relationship with your parents.

And probably give you something to reflect on. Particularly where you have, you know, difficulty or challenges in your upbringing or with your parents.

So firstly, notice that Paul addresses fathers specifically, not parents. This is not a mistake by Paul. Because just before, he's actually explicitly instructed children to obey not just their fathers, but their parents, father and mother.

And also the commandment from the Old Testament is to honour your father and mother. So this is not a mistake, but rather, Paul is trying to make clear that just as in marriage, fathers have an

overall responsibility for parenting.

[14:57] Now, mothers are responsible too. But as a helper, as we see in Genesis 2, to her husband. Responsibilities can be shared. They can be divided.

But the buck stops with the father. Hence, the title of my sermon is deliberate, as is the wording of this second bullet point here. So men, fathers or fathers to be, we need to take note of this because we will be called to account for it.

But apart from that, I think then that this general principle here in verse 4 is applicable for either parent, whether you're a father or mother. But let's take the second half first.

Because it says, bringing them up in the training of the, an instruction of the Lord. That's something we've actually already touched on earlier when we looked at Deuteronomy. And as I said, it involves passing on the faith, which means teaching them God's word.

Not just for head knowledge, but so that they too will obey and trust in the Lord. And for example, in chapter 6 of Deuteronomy in verse 20, when children ask questions of us, In our case, it's not why we left Egypt or what the Old Testament laws are.

[16:14] But they might ask questions like, why are we coming to church every week? Why are we Christians? Why are we following Jesus? The answer should not just be, because the Bible says so. Even though there's a Sunday school song that goes with it.

Instead, like the Israelites in the Old Testament, we need to tell our salvation story. That is, we need to share with them the good news of Jesus, the gospel.

For Israel, they were slaves in Egypt and God rescued them by a mighty hand and saved them and brought them out into the promised land. For us, we are to tell children that they too, we too, were once slaves to sin.

But that God, through His Son on the cross, rescued us, delivered us from death. And therefore, we have our sins forgiven and we have eternal life with God.

We are in God's spiritual land of blessing. Because our aim as Christian parents is not just to get our children to behave well or obey the rules.

[17:18] Because the gospel is not about being saved by good works, but by faith in Jesus. So Christian parents need to share the good news to their children.

Not just teach them manners or morals, but the gospel. And secondly, going back to the first part of the commandment, parents are to do this without exasperating them.

Which is to provoke them by what we do or fail to do to the point of frustration, bitterness and anger. And I know if you're a child, I was a child once, you will know what it means to be exasperated by your parents.

And there's a sense in which here is a child trying to do the right thing and obey their parents, but they're not able to because they are being provoked by their parents.

You see, the power of a parent's authority is great. God's given that to us for a reason. But so then is the danger to misuse that power and authority.

[18:26] By, for example, making unreasonable demands on them that is not appropriate for their age. Or punishing them harshly. So yes, sometimes we do wrong and we deserve punishment, but it is harsher than what it ought to be.

Or giving instructions that actually only suit us. Makes it convenient for us rather than what is really good for them. And by contrast, you have to then look at our heavenly father.

Yes, he's holy. In fact, he's more holy than any of us. He desires our holiness. And yet, Paul says in Corinthians, he does not test us beyond what we can bear.

Right? He forgives us when we do wrong. And likewise, his son, as we saw last week, and the verse from Matthew about the son's yoke taking upon the yoke upon us, he is gentle and kind in how he treats us.

And so, that is the sort of thing that we ought to do in order not to exasperate our children. And, you know, you may think this is all easy if you're a child, but it is actually very difficult as a parent to do this.

[19:43] It takes patience. It takes godly wisdom. Because even though parents love their children, we all have a tendency, don't we, as children to want to rebel against our parents.

So, parents will need to exercise discipline, but in such a way as not to crush children's spirit. That takes skill. That takes judgement.

And that takes patience. And particularly when parents themselves are not perfect. It's just like being a gardener. I'm not sure how many of you are into training a tree branch. But, you know, have you heard of things like topiary and expelliating? I love that. It's so French. A tree. That's an expelliate tree, pear tree.

And the way you do it is that you hang weights, right, at points in the branch, so that the restraints and the weights bend the branch accordingly. You know, then they grow up facing into the sun.

[20 : 45] But when you do that, you have to be careful, isn't it? Because if you put too large a weight on the branch, what you do is you end up breaking or snapping the branch rather than bending it.

So, that takes a lot of skill. I mean, I'm not talking about, don't have to worry about training trees, but that takes a lot of patience and wisdom and judgement and skill when you are a parent.

And so, it's with that that I want to move on to some practical comments. Because part of the challenge of not exasperating our children is to realise that the relationship of a parent with a child actually changes and evolves over time.

So, when you were young, all you were capable of was just being told what to do, right? But as you grow older, you don't just want to be told what to do, you want to be told why.

And then you begin to become exasperated if you're not given a reason that satisfies you, right?

Likewise, you may begin to see that actually your parents are not perfect.

[21 : 51] They don't always practice what they preach. And yet, even though they are not perfect, you get exasperated because they refuse to say sorry, even though they want you to say sorry when you've done the wrong thing.

And so, for parents to parent well actually requires an understanding of grace, isn't it? Of God's grace which they experience in their own lives.

It requires wisdom and judgement. And they need to know that when you start maturing, you yourself will need wisdom.

That actually you don't need all your life to just be taught what to do. But what you need is wisdom to be able to judge for yourself and make decisions in your own right.

And all that is easier said than done. And parents don't always get it right. For example, as a parent, it's hard working out how fast to want to let go of you as you make that process.

[23 : 00] Because they're afraid. It's a risky process, isn't it? If they do it too quickly, they're afraid that they will put you in harm's way. And yet, they do have to allow you to make mistakes.

Otherwise, you will never mature.

But then of course, when you make mistakes, they will also have to come up and clean your mess after you, right? If for example, you put money on the stock market and you lost \$1,000, you know, and you borrowed money to do that, you know, who are you going to turn to?

It's likely your parents to try and bail you out. I'm not saying anything, but it's hypothetical. I hope. I'm not saying anything. So, it's not too different, isn't it? I remember trying to teach my two girls how to ride a bike.

Now, initially, parents would hold on to the bike, right? I know you start with the four wheels, right?

Then you get rid of the wheels. And then you hold on to the bike. And then you try and run along with them. And you need to work out when is the right time to let go, right?

And for a while there, I would let go and then quickly hold back, let go and, you know, one, two seconds, four seconds, five seconds, and then longer and longer until, ah, they are able to ride without falling off.

[24 : 09] But that is a judgment call, isn't it? Because if you let go too early and particularly, you know, one time it was going downhill, so it sort of ran off, you know, they will fall off, won't they?

If I chose the wrong moment to let go. And so that's the same with parenting, isn't it? And in particular, with your faith. Because parents need to allow children, even though they grow up in the church, to grow up to own their faith for themselves.

And that is a tricky process. But thankfully, you know, when there's a church like ours that hopefully, you know, you benefit and you realize has the benefit of a great kids and youth ministry, where they are allowed to study the Bible for themselves.

And then, of course, going off to uni as well, to those campus groups. And this is the place where you, yourself, can tackle the big questions in life and take ownership of your faith.

And so it's great that as parents, we have such a thing at church to support us in this work. And the leaders, of course, are the people that have done the same things themselves not too long ago. [25 : 20] So they are great people to be helping some of you to be working that out and owning the faith. And so on behalf of the parents here and who are not here, for those of you who are serving in kids and youth leadership, can I say thank you?

Because you're actually supporting parents in bringing up children in the Lord. Now, of course, finally, as children reach adulthood, I think the Old Testament command to honor your parents still stands.

That's got no expiry date, okay? Because even when you're past obeying them in a strict sense, we still have to honor them, not least for what they've done to get us to where we are today.

And I say that even for myself, who my parents now are in their 80s or nearly there. So if you're a mature adult who thinks your parents cannot let go, perhaps, let me ask, and maybe that's even fair enough, but let me ask you to show them some understanding.

It doesn't mean you have to obey them, but it does mean you do have to find a way, perhaps, to respectfully tell them that you are old enough now to make your choices, thank them for what they've done to teach you wisdom, and gently, perhaps, advise them to let go.

[26 : 44] But I have to say too, in defence of parents, if you are still dependent on them in some way, notwithstanding that you're an adult, but if you're still living at home, financially dependent, then I think it's still fair that even though you might be an adult, that actually they still have some say over your lives, I think, that is commensurate with that independence.

Not to say that they can order you around or do all those things, but you need to respect the fact that actually you are still dependent on them, and so not fully an adult in that respect.

Now, let me finish off then, in the final point, by offering some words of pastoral comfort. Because I know that there may be some here today who hear what's being said, and read what Paul says, and you are filled, I guess, with guilt and regret.

For the few here who are parents, you may think you've failed as a parent, or others, you may feel like your parents have failed you. If only you had better parents, you think. You know, I would be so much better off today.

Now, there may be a lot of truth in that, and I don't want to brush aside any disappointment and grief, but here Paul's instruction is primarily to encourage us as we go forward and look forward.

[28 : 07] It's not being said to us to be a burden of guilt for what we have not done, which Christ has forgiven anyway, and we've been free for. Now, for some of us, there may still be a chance to make changes, so perhaps pray for wisdom if that's the case.

Ask how the Lord may help you to repair your relationship with children or parents. And indeed, pray for them, whether you're a parent or a child.

But even if this is no longer possible, just remember that actually, the Gospel tells us that all of us need God's grace all the time.

And no parent, no matter how good, can claim credit for the faith of their children. We are all saved by God's grace, not by the good works of our parents and not by our own good works.

He is the only one that can bring repentance and faith into our lives. And so, if you are a parent or thinking about parenting in the future, don't think that you have to do it in your own strength.

[29 : 19] Or be afraid that if you have children, because your parents were not good parents, that you will be not a good parent and you'll stuff up or whatever. Because the reality is that we will all make mistakes.

We will. And here's the amazing thing though. That despite our weaknesses, God still decides that this is the way.

That parents will be given this responsibility to train and discipline their children in the Lord for Him. He does not withhold that duty and privilege from us just because He knows our weakness.

And He knows our weakness, true and true. And yet He still says, No, you do it. You be my agent of blessing to your children. Now, of course, God remains sovereign.

There is no guarantee that all children of Christian parents will believe. God still has that final say. But more often than not, God will use us. Parents, grandparents, godparents, even as I said, kids leaders, youth leaders, to bring up the children in the church to love His son Jesus.

[30 : 35] In fact, I'm pretty sure that none of you think your parents are perfect, right? But just take a look at where you are now. Many of you believe in Jesus, don't you?

A lot of it probably is due to your parents. Some of it despite your parents. But that's down to God's grace. So, let's not be discouraged.

Let's not feel defeated. But whether we have children of our own or not, let's support everyone, one another, so that every child that is entrusted to us within the church will, by God's grace, through their parents, but through us supporting their parents, find salvation in the kingdom of His Son.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for the gift of children. Help us to love them and raise them in the Lord without exasperating them. Forgive us when we have done so.

Use what we say and do so that they will learn about your love through your son Jesus, and put their faith in Him, so that it may go well with them. And they will enjoy life, not just on earth, but through all eternity.

[31 : 47] In Jesus' name we pray.