

# Foster The Children

Ephesians 6:1-4 December 13, 2023

**Ephesians 6:1-4 - Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right. <sup>2</sup>Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, <sup>3</sup>so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land.” <sup>4</sup>Fathers, don’t stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.**

In 1990, when thousands of American parents were asked to select five valuable characteristics that “children can be encouraged to learn at home,” only 39% put “obedience” on the list. If you think that’s bad, by 2017 that number fell to 21%.<sup>1</sup>

Among 24 countries, from us to China, Australia, Iran, Brazil, and all sorts of places in-between, the United States ranks *dead last* in valuing “good manners” in children. Just 28% of Americans say “not being selfish” is an important quality in kids and only 32% said religious faith matters.

That’s the latest finding from *The World Values Society*, an organization that has surveyed perspectives across 120 countries for the last 40 years.<sup>2</sup> These data points were from a report titled, *Parenting Priorities: International Attitudes Towards Raising Children*.

7 out of 10 parents don’t think it matters if their kid is unselfish. 6 out 10 don’t think obedience matters. 7 out of 10 don’t think religious faith matters.

But what is on God’s priority list for children and parents? He definitely has an opinion. Much more, He has a *path* for us. That’s what Paul will teach us about tonight as we begin the final chapter of Ephesians.

Remember: Paul has been explaining how we put salvation into practice - how we walk worthy of the calling we have received as Christians. How the Church can function in power and vitality. He’s already talked about how we should think about things, how we should interact with unbelievers, how we should look at life, and how we should live with our spouses. Now he looks to that second most important life relationship: Parents and children. And, once again, Paul’s instructions would be counter-cultural, but rooted in the eternal truth and world-changing grace.

**Ephesians 6:1 - Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right.**

Paul does a few interesting linguistic things in these verses. The first is how he *directly* addresses the children. He doesn’t talk to mom and dad *about them* first, he goes right to the kids. This would’ve been an unusual thing to do in that time.<sup>3</sup> But, once again, we see that God values every individual equally. We saw last time that women and men are totally equal in worth to God. Here,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/parenting-priorities.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCcontents.jsp>

<sup>3</sup> Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

Paul assumes that children would be listening *and* that they were capable of taking steps of their own in their walk with the Lord.

Of course, children don't usually have the strength or the wisdom that an adult believer should have, but God *wants* to speak to kids. He wants to interact with them. He wants to receive worship from them and reveal Himself to them. He wants to have a relationship with them from the earliest age possible.

We shouldn't allow ourselves to slip into a mindset that kids can't handle spiritual things, or that spirituality is for later in life - a mentality that says, "Church doesn't matter to kids, so just give them a coloring book in church and hope that one day, when they're older, they'll be excited about the Lord." Instead, consider Samuel. Consider David. Consider Naaman's servant girl. Consider Mary. Consider Miriam. Consider Josiah. Consider the boy with his simple lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. God *loves* to interact with young people, to reveal Himself to them, to use them in all sorts of meaningful ways. They have a place in His unfolding work.

Paul speaks directly to the children in the Ephesian church and says, "Obey your parents in the Lord." That doesn't mean they were to only obey their parents *if they were Christian*.<sup>4</sup> Like husbands and wives are to obey the Lord whether or not their spouse is a believer, kids are to obey their parents *regardless* of whether or not they are Christians.

Obey is an active word<sup>5</sup> that includes conscious listening.<sup>6</sup> In another verse it refers to answering a knock on the door.<sup>7</sup> This is a call to willful action. Like their parents, kids are free moral agents. The Lord desires that they come under His proper design for the family. It's not just about doing what they're told, it starts with the tilt of the heart: Does the child believe God can be trusted? Do kids believe that the Lord has a plan that we can participate in?

Paul says kids obeying their parents is "right." The term means "righteous," or, "Being in accordance with God's compelling standards."<sup>8</sup> So, children can *do righteousness* as they obey their parents.

Of course, this doesn't mean kids have to obey a command to sin or do something wrong. But, generally speaking, they are to listen to their parents, do what they are told to do, and acknowledge that God has placed parents in a position of authority in their lives, *for their own good and the good of society at large*.

You see, disobedience is a contributor to the breakdown of society. In Romans 1, Paul lists "disobedient to parents" alongside the other sinful activities that lead to the destruction of nations. Meanwhile, righteousness *exalts* a nation, and young people can contribute meaningfully to the benefit of human society by walking with the Lord.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*

<sup>5</sup> Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

<sup>7</sup> *The Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

Sometimes people today will say, "I don't want to bring kids into this world, because it's so bad." The fact of the matter is, *Godly* families make the world better. Godly kids advance civilization.

**Ephesians 6:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, <sup>3</sup>so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land."**

Frank Thielman points out that Ephesians was written in a time when 40% to 50% of kids did not live to see their 10th birthday.<sup>9</sup> Even today, many Christian children have their lives cut short by sickness or accident or violence. So, how can Paul make this promise of long life?

It's not an individual promise to every believer. It is a general principal that going God's way leads to lifely outcomes. There are some very practical advantages to obedience. In many cases, a child's life is *literally* saved when they obey the commands of their parents. And, we know that when we go God's way, ultimately we are rewarded with everlasting life in the Kingdom. So we understand this promise in a generalized sense.

But there are a couple of important principles for us to consider here. The first is that God's desire for your life is that "it might go well with you." Interestingly, Bible dictionaries will tell you that the phrase used here means, "to come into being."<sup>10</sup> *What* will come into being? Well, God has all sorts of good plans for you - promises He's made to you. The Lord *really does* have our best interests in mind. We might not *agree* with some of what He allows, but His care for us is unwavering. And the work He began He is going to accomplish.

Why did God ask the Israelites to obey His commands? What was His purpose in bringing them out from slavery in Egypt to become a new nation? Then and now, the Lord's desire is to accomplish *good things* for us. And if we are willing to trust Him and walk His line, then life more abundantly *will* be the result.

A second important principle here is how Paul directed our attention back to the Old Testament. An attentive listener in Ephesus might have raised their hand and said, "Wait, a few paragraphs ago Paul said, 'Jesus made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations,' so why would the Ten Commandments matter?"

It's true: Jesus fulfilled the Law, but that doesn't mean everything in the Law is nullified or that we have nothing to learn from the Old Testament and its dispensation. The Law of Moses was man's guardian until Christ came and fulfilled it. *Now* we are under what Paul calls "The Law of Christ." That term is found in Galatians 6:2. The Law of Christ contains many of the same principles and commands that were found in the Law of Moses, though not *all* of them. The ceremonial laws are done. The rituals are gone. The divisions and barriers between God and man are gone because Jesus cleared them out on the cross when He paid what the Law demanded.

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<sup>9</sup> Thielman

<sup>10</sup> *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic And Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition*

So now we can turn to the Word of God in the Old Testament and learn things about Him and about ourselves and about our relationships to others and see how He did things in that time and find all sorts of application, even though we are no longer bound captive under the Levitical Law.

Have you heard someone use the term, "Red-letter Christians?" There's a heretical group that officially uses that name, but I've also heard it used more widely as people who just want to focus on what Jesus said in the Gospels - "the red letters" - and ultimately deemphasize the *black* letters.

But that's not how it works. For one thing, Jesus said not even the smallest letter of God's Word in the Old Testament will pass away until *all things* are accomplished. And Christ was constantly quoting the Old Testament as authoritative. Here also, we see Paul the Apostle directing our attention back to the Old Testament, and he was encouraging young people - children - to study and apprehend all the Word of God and to apply it to their lives.

Now, in verse 4, Paul turns to dads.

**Ephesians 6:4 - *Fathers, don't stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.***

There's another interesting language thing happening here. Paul spoke of *both* parents up in verses 1 through 3. Now, he *specifically* talks to fathers.<sup>11</sup> Again, in a Christian family, the husband and father has the *greatest* responsibility of all the members. It is *his* duty to lead his family as the greatest servant and to focus his attention on their spiritual provision and development.

Paul says, "Bring them up." It's not just that dad needs to shout orders at people, like a field commander. "Bring them" indicates togetherness. *Together*, dad and mom and kids are walking toward Jesus, growing in strength, bearing fruit, making progress as a unified group.

As I pointed out last time, we recognize that Paul is speaking about the *ideal* arrangement. Even in Ephesus, not everyone had a Christian dad. Not everyone had a Christian mom. Not everyone had kids. But the Lord is placing goals before us and bearings to navigate by as far as is possible for us.

The phrase "bring them up" also reveals the *how* for dads. The term means to *nourish* someone.<sup>12</sup> He's telling dads they need to be kind to their kids. And *that* would have been a *revolutionary* idea to the Roman mind.<sup>13</sup> You see, in the Roman Empire, the father was the center of the family universe. Everyone existed for him and *beneath* him. He had *absolute* authority over his children. One source writes, "*If they angered him, he had the legal right to disown his children, sell them into slavery or even kill them.*"<sup>14</sup> But now, a *Christian* father is being told that his life should be spent in

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<sup>11</sup> Fowl

<sup>12</sup> *DBL*

<sup>13</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/family.html>

*servant*-leadership of his family, defined by kindness and grace, and dedicated to *their* development and benefit, not his own.

So Paul says, "Nourish your kids." And he gives a don't command alongside it. He says, "Don't stir up anger in your children. Don't provoke them." There's a lot we could say about that, but I like the list Bible commentator R. Kent Hughes provides. He says, "[Provocation] can be done in a number of ways:" Unreasonableness. Fault-finding. Neglect. Inconsistency.<sup>15</sup> These and other abuses of the parental position like "excessively severe discipline, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation,"<sup>16</sup> are totally outside of what's acceptable for a Christian parent, particularly fathers.

Instead, we're called to gentleness toward our children. Not *weakness* - not just allowing kids to do whatever they want, but gentleness like Jesus is gentle. Patiences like Jesus is patient. Gracious like Jesus is gracious.

But not only was the *how* a challenge to the Roman culture, the *what* was, too.

For one thing, Roman girls weren't formally educated. But, notice, Paul doesn't say "bring up your sons in the Lord," he says, "Bring up your *children*." And so, again, God reveals that He values every person, equally. The Lord challenged these parents to value what *He* valued and to orient their family-life according to heaven's standard, not Rome's. Christian culture does not align with the secular culture around us.

Paul changes the *goal* of parenting. A Roman boy was taught reading and writing, Roman ethics, philosophy, rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> He was groomed to become a great *Roman*. But Christians must have a *different* perspective. The goal of Christian parenting is *not* that their kids get the finest education or the highest paying job or the best stats on the sports field. Those *might* be a part of your kid's life, but your goal is to bring your child to spiritual maturity. Your goal is to introduce your children to the Lord Jesus, teaching them His ways and His Word, and then show them how to walk worthy on their own - teaching them to know God and love God and how to hear from God and how to follow Him.

Paul says we accomplish this goal with "training and instruction." Training is a term that includes discipline or punishment.<sup>18</sup> It also carries images of form and execution and practice and development of skill. Kids aren't going to perfectly execute all the time. Adults don't either, but sometimes we parents expect our kids to be able to accomplish something they haven't been trained to do. It's our job to help get them there. Show them the form. Help them practice the mechanics of faith. Guide them as they develop the skills of spirituality.

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<sup>15</sup> Hughes

<sup>16</sup> Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Hughes

The second part is "instruction." The term means, "to place before the mind" or "confront."<sup>19</sup> Fathers (and mothers by extension) are to engage with our kids, intellectually - to present the truths of God before their minds and to confront the false teachings of the enemy and help our children navigate through, learning how to apprehend God's truth in a world full of lies. And of course, if we want to teach our kids God's truths, we're going to have to know them ourselves and *prioritize* them. One commentary says, "*Fathers are not to teach personal preferences, but spiritual truths. The goal is not parental authority, but passing on **God's** authority to children.*"<sup>20</sup>

Christian parenting demands a lot of attention and effort. It demands that we align our perspective with the Lord *in contradiction with* the secular world. But, when a family walks this road together, God's grace flows out in power. And a Christian family is one of the best tools we have for saving society. It is a special vehicle of God's grace and power and, as we've seen, each of us as husbands or wives or fathers or mothers or children, each of us has a part to play. It starts in the heart, believing God and being humble enough to go His way, trusting that it's the only way to get where we want to go, and then walking in the steps that have been laid out before us.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Bob Utley *Paul Bound, The Gospel Unbound: Letters From Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philippians)*