

“The Discipline and Instruction of the Lord”

The Fourteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 6:1-9; Deuteronomy 6:20-25

According to the Apostle Paul, God has built a certain order of things into creation so as to illustrate the way in which Jesus saves us from our sins. Because of this, Christians are to submit to Jesus Christ who is both our creator and redeemer. This is why Christian wives are to submit to their husbands, because in doing so, they imitate the sacrificial humility of Christ, as well as model the church’s submission to its bridegroom. Husbands are to love their wives as they love their own bodies, so as to imitate Christ’s sacrificial love for his church, which is his body. Children are to submit to their parents as they would to the Lord, while slaves are to submit to their earthly masters just as they would to Jesus himself. Not only does this divinely-mandated submission to proper authority arise from the way in which God has ordered creation, but the submission of wives to husbands and the requirement that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church is intended to continually keep before our eyes the relationship that Jesus Christ has to his church, his bride. In all of this, we are reminded of Christ’s sacrificial love for his people.

As we continue our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we are making our way through the so-called “household code,” which runs from Ephesians 5:21 through Ephesians 6:9. Last time we took up Paul’s discussion of the duties of Christian husbands and wives, now we take up the two remaining aspects of a Christian’s submission to divinely-ordained authority in the household; children’s submission to their parents, and slaves’ submission to their earthly masters. While much attention is directed to Paul’s discussion about husbands and wives, we need to remember that this entire section is a one running discussion about the nature of proper submission. What Paul says in the second half of this section about children and parents and slaves and masters flows out of the groundwork laid down in the earlier verses of this section. Therefore, we’ll need to do a brief bit of review of Paul’s discussion of husbands and wives, before we take up our discussion of children and parents and slaves and masters.

As we saw last time, before Paul gets into any specifics about the order of authority and submission within the Christian household, he begins in Ephesians 5:21 by reminding us that all Christians must submit to Jesus, imitating his example of self-sacrifice in the Christian home. Just as Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death, so too Christians are to keep Jesus Christ’s self-sacrifice and humble obedience to his heavenly Father as the example of all conduct within the Christian home.

I also spent a fair bit of time on what I consider to be the primary error when handling a passage such as Ephesians 5:22-33—confusion between the indicative mood (which is a statement of fact) and the imperative mood (a command) which mirrors the distinction between the law (what God commands of us) and the gospel (what God freely gives us in the gospel). Failure to consider this distinction between indicative and imperative too often leads to this text being presented as some sort of a general ethical discourse on Christian marriage, without any regard for the fact that no one can truly obey Paul’s command to submit to Christ. Not one wife here has ever submitted to their husbands as Paul commands. Not one husband here ever loved his wife as Christ loved the church. Children do not submit to their parents as they should, nor do slaves truly submit to their earthly masters. So, on the one hand, the imperatives in this passage end up condemning all of us because not one of us has ever done that which God demands of us.

And yet even though the imperatives in the passage (the law) come before the indicatives (the declarations of what God has done for us in Christ), there are five gospel indicatives given by Paul in verses 25-27 which constitute the key to understanding the passage correctly. Jesus loved the church. Jesus gave himself up for the church. Jesus sanctifies the church. Jesus cleansed the church. Jesus presents the church as his bride. Through these five verbs, Paul makes it perfectly clear that even as Jesus calls us to faith, he is also preparing his people (his bride) for eternity in his presence.

This means that Jesus died for all those times we failed to submit to him as we ought. Jesus cleanses us from all those times husbands didn't love their wives as we should, as well as for all those times wives didn't submit to their husbands. But Jesus also died for all those times we as children didn't submit to our parents, and for all the times slaves failed to submit to their earthly masters. Despite our sinfulness, Jesus' death and righteousness washes away the guilt and corruption of our sins and provides us with a glorious wedding garment—his own perfect righteousness. But the story doesn't end there.

Because Jesus loves us, because Jesus gave himself up for us and sanctifies us, because he cleansed us, and because he presents us to the Father as his bride, we are therefore to follow Paul's household code as a matter of thanksgiving for all that Christ has done for us (or, to use the language of our catechism, we do all of this out of gratitude). We do not do these things because we can fulfill the law's demands, rather, we obey these commands because in Christ, God already sees us as obedient and righteous. Wives submit to their husbands, husbands love their wives, children obey their parents, slaves submit to their masters, *because* Jesus has already fulfilled God's commands perfectly. We obey these commands because we are grateful to God for all that Christ has done for us.

Keeping the distinction between the indicative and imperative in mind, we now turn to the last half of Paul's discussion of the household code (Ephesians 6:1-9).

Having addressed the proper relationship of husbands and wives, Paul's discussion quite naturally moves on to address the children of the Christian household. Again, it is vital that we keep the cultural context in mind, because Paul's placing the entire household under the example of Christ's humility and submission radically undercuts the first century Greco-Roman legal code which assigned absolute authority over wives and children to the father. If wives had it bad in the first century, children had it worse. One document from the period describes how "the law-giver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, whether he thought it proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains, and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death; and this even though the son were already engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, and though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth."¹ And you thought a midnight curfew was strict!

This means that dad had absolute authority over his children as long as he lived—although in Greek (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire, when the father reached sixty years of age, he often handed authority over to his eldest married son. The father actually had the authority to decide whether or not his new-born children lived. If a child was weak, ill or deformed, the child could be drowned or left out in the open to die from exposure. Infanticide was not common, but certainly not unknown. Unwanted daughters (who did not have the same prestige and value as sons) could be sold as slaves or killed. This

¹ Cited in A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, 398.

authority even extended to the father's grandchildren.² Mom had few legal rights and no legal power over any decisions made by her husband. If she wanted to keep a child which the father did not want, she had no say. To put it simply, the Greco-Roman home was an absolute dictatorship and the Roman legal scholar Gaius boasted that "the power which we have over our children is peculiar to Roman citizens and is found in no other nation."³ Gaius thought that a good thing. The Apostle Paul did not.

Then you had cases in which a husband remarried (he could divorce his wife for a number of reasons) or if he had concubines or mistresses. All of the father's children from the various mothers lived in his home, along with children of the household's slaves. Under Roman law, you could sell a slave only once, but a father could sell his own children (making them slaves of whoever bought them), and then they could be sold again. Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, spoke of parents (especially fathers) functioning as "gods" over their children. Thankfully, while this is what Roman law allowed, it was not always practiced. In fact, cruel fathers were looked down upon by many in the Greek-speaking world since excessive cruelty showed that the father was not a wise or good manager of his household.

While the mother took care of the children early in life (the first seven years), fathers were responsible for the education of the children—sons almost always received some sort of education directly from the father or from a teacher (known as a pedagogue), daughters rarely so. At age sixteen, the father turned the son over to some accomplished individual for two years who trained them in some specific vocation. Greco-Roman education consisted in reading the stories of the "gods" and in learning the moral philosophers. The lower the class (laborer or slave), the less likely a decent and thorough education.

Judaism was much different. Children (male and female) were regarded as gifts from God and were protected by Jewish law from a cruel father determining their fate. Infanticide and exposure were considered despicable cruelties. But Jewish law did prescribe the death penalty for those children who continually dishonored their parents through rebellion. In Leviticus 20:9, we read: "*For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother; his blood is upon him.*" Josephus (a Jewish historian and contemporary of Paul) indicates that the command to honor mother and father ranks second only to honoring God.⁴

Perhaps the greatest difference between Jewish and Greco-Roman family life is the stress in Judaism upon training the children in the Torah (law). Proverbs 22:6 was widely cited, "*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*" Deuteronomy 6:7 was widely practiced. "*You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*" This is also taught in Deuteronomy 6:20-25, our Old Testament lesson this morning. A Jewish father was to make sure their children knew and understood both the doctrine of the Torah and the history of the Jews.

No doubt, Paul's discussion in Ephesians 6 amounts to a complete renunciation of pagan abuse of children, and grows directly out of the Old Testament stress upon the value of all human life, the importance of children obeying their parents, and the parental responsibility that covenant children be

² A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, 399.

³ Cited in A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, 399.

⁴ Cited in A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, 400.

instructed in the things of the Lord—what we call catechism.

In verse 1 of chapter six, Paul writes, “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*” This saying is so matter of fact and such a well-established part of Jewish life that for the children of Christian converts from Judaism and their parents this command was nothing new—it was assumed. But to Paul’s Gentile readers this statement will require several qualifications—which he gives us in verse 4. To bolster his assertion, Paul cites the fifth commandment from the law in verse two, before adding the covenant promise in verse 3. “*Honor your father and mother*” (*this is the first commandment with a promise*), “*that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.*”

Many have debated the meaning of the conditional promise about things going well and long life—does Paul really mean that if you honor your parents, as a result you’ll have a long life? It is hard to be sure what, exactly, Paul means here. The promise of some sort of material blessing (i.e. “long life”) makes perfect sense in the context of the covenant promises given to Israel by YHWH at Mount Sinai which applied to the people of God while Israel was living in obedience in the land of Canaan. But in a largely Gentile context (such as in Western Asia Minor during the first century) things are not so clear-cut. If Paul is not promising material blessings (and it is hard for me to believe that he is saying if you honor your parents you are guaranteed a long life), then Paul must be promising some sort of spiritual blessing. Paul has already told us in Ephesians 1:3 that God “*has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*” Earthly promises might point to heavenly blessings.

That said, Paul does seem to be saying that there are earthly benefits to be found in honoring our parents. If we do so, it will go well with us (that is, it is a benefit to both children and parents), and that long life on earth may point to spiritual blessings within the family. It is hard to say given that the Jewish context of living in the land of promise doesn’t easily transfer to a Gentile context. But whatever the nature of the promised blessing, it comes to those who honor their parents, and such honoring of parents is surely required by the Ten Commandments (the moral law).⁵

But it is in verse 4, that Paul distinguishes the Christian approach to parenting from the Greco-Roman approach. “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*” There are four important points here well worth noting. First, Paul is clear that children are to submit to their parents because God has ordained that this is the right thing to do. Creation itself teaches us that parents have a certain authority over those they bring into the world and for whom they provide. Second, fathers are to ensure that their children obey the commandment to honor their parents because there are real blessings (for both parents and children) attached to that obedience. Third, fathers are not to use their authority in excessive ways. It is one thing for fathers to expect their children to obey their parents, and then to teach them to do so. But it is quite another thing for fathers to use their authority in such a way as to provoke in their children resentment and anger toward proper authority. This gets back to Paul’s original point that all Christians are to imitate Christ’s example of humility and sacrifice. Jesus has authority over his church and requires obedience from us. But how does he exercise that authority? Does he berate us? Does he threaten and beat us? Does he continually browbeat us and highlight our sins and shortcomings? Or is he patient, gentle, gracious, and forgiving, all the while remaining firm in his purpose to discipline us?

Paul’s fourth point is critical for us. Scripture everywhere assigns to fathers the responsibility of

⁵ See the discussions in: Bruce, *Ephesians*, 397-398, Stott, *God’s New Society*, 241.

bringing up the children in the discipline (i.e., training, such as an athlete undergoes), and instruction of the Lord. This is in keeping with the instruction throughout the Old Testament as noted above. Dads, Paul assigns to you the responsibility of ensuring that your children know the basics of the Christian faith and that they properly submit to their parents and honor them as commanded in the law.

It is worth noting that the other place in Paul's writings where he uses the word "training" is in 2 Timothy 3:16. "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*" We can safely assume that when Paul speaks of training in Ephesians 6, he is using the word the same way he does when writing to Timothy. This means that Paul is referring to the need for children to learn the Bible and understand what is in it. This is a father's duty. And dads, let me be perfectly clear here—if you are not catechizing your kids (or ensuring that they are being catechized) then our shallow, pagan, and celebrity-worshipping culture will catechize them instead. Someone will catechize your kids, and how much better it be you, than your pagan neighbor.

From this it is clear that Paul sees children as a gift from God and not subject to the whims of an earthly tyrant (their father). This is why some are taken aback by Paul's discussion of slaves and masters in the next section, wherein he commands that slaves obey their masters in all things.

Before we gone any further we need to make a very important distinction between slavery as understood in Greco-Roman culture, and the race-based slavery practiced in America before the Civil War. Raced-based slavery, (i.e, the slave trade of the New World), is based on a heresy. One version of this is the view that African Americans are not fully human—seen in the so-called three-fifths compromise of 1787 at the Constitutional Convention, which set forth the notion that slaves were to be counted as three-fifths of a person in the US Census. And then many Christians taught that black-skinned peoples were supposedly subject to the curse of Ham, and were not equal to other races because God had cursed them. Both of these notions reject the biblical teaching that all men and women (including those whose family trees can traced back to sub-Saharan Africa) are the biological descendants of Adam and Eve and are divine-image bearers who likewise fell in Adam. Any attempt to justify race-based slavery from Scripture is an out and out denial of the biblical teaching about the federal and biological unity of the human race in Adam. We need to be very clear about this, because a number of Southern Presbyterians (before the Civil War) argued that Paul never condemned race-based slavery (even if he didn't condone it). This passage is cited to prove that Paul taught slaves to be submissive to their masters.

But Paul is not talking about the race-based slavery in Ante-Bellum America. No question, Paul would have condemned race-based slavery as a heresy and a moral outrage. That kind of slavery did not exist in Paul's world. In Ephesians 6, Paul is talking about Greco-Roman slavery. The Romans, like the Greeks before them, conquered much of the ancient world. In most cases, first century slaves (who made up about one-third of the population in cities such as Ephesus), were the children and descendants of those on the losing end of battles with Rome. Captives in battle and the inhabitants of conquered regions were subject to the whims of their Roman captors. To the victor go the spoils. Countless people (including women and children) were brought back to Rome and cities throughout the Roman empire. These people were sold to households or served as laborers on Rome's massive and continual civil engineering projects. Such slaves formed a carefully defined social class and constituted the bulk of the labor force of the first-century near-Eastern world. The entire Roman economy depended upon them.

While Roman law made a sharp legal distinction between freemen and slaves, those slaves who served in individual households were in many cases treated as family members, or as domestic helpers and employees would be treated today. Many were educated along with the family's own children and

although bound to their master by law were often given their freedom if they served well. Those slaves who were laborers and who did much of the labor for Rome's public works projects had a rougher time.⁶

So, when Paul addresses the subject of slaves and masters he is speaking of the Greco-Roman practice, not American raced-based slavery. To be more specific, Paul is speaking to those slaves who are household and domestic servants within the households of members of the church as well as to their masters, which explains why the discussion of slaves and masters is found in Paul's discussion of household duties. This is why Paul can state in verse 5, "*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,*" connecting the submission to an earthly master directly to one's submission to Christ. In serving their earthly masters, a household servant or day laborer is serving Christ. It is Christ they are to fear (and therefore are to tremble) because it is Christ to whom slaves will ultimately give an account. Slaves are to serve sincerely, which means something like "undivided service."⁷ While it shocks us that Paul would warn slaves so sternly, remember the great temptation and resentment a servant would harbor toward their master. But a Christian slave—who has equal standing before God as does his earthly master (if he happens to be a Christian)—nevertheless is to regard their earthly master as though he were Christ himself. A slave might not be free to do things a freedman can do for Christ, so he is to serve his earthly master as though he were Christ.

Paul gets a bit more specific in what follows. The slave's service is "*not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.*" Slavery is a condition which breeds resentment and hostility. But the Christian slave can redeem their difficult and oppressive circumstances by considering that Christ sees their devoted service to their earthly master as though the slave were serving Christ himself. This becomes clear in what comes next—"*knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.*" The Christian slave needs to know that despite his low rank in Roman society, Christ sees his circumstance and rewards those who serve their masters sincerely.

Once again, Paul undercuts the Greco-Roman legal code by reminding those who own slaves that they too will give an account to Christ. In verse 9, Paul writes, "*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.*" While the slave is to submit to their earthly master, knowing that their efforts were as though they were serving Christ himself, the Christian master must also realize that he too will give an account to Christ for the way in which he treats those under his authority. Those who own slaves have a divinely-mandated responsibility to treat those in their household with dignity and respect. Christ doesn't threaten his servants (that's us). He has authority over us, but he also says to us "*my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11:30). The slave is to look to Christ to ease his burden, while the earthly master is to do whatever he can to ease the earthly burden of those entrusted to his care. In this, Paul is assigning a dignity and worth to servants and laborers which turns on its head the Roman notion that conquered people have few rights and little dignity.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

Although still found in the Islamic world, thankfully slavery in the Christian west is a thing of

⁶ See the discussion in: A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 415-420.

⁷ Bruce, *Ephesians*, 400.

the past—another wonderful legacy of the Christian doctrine that all men and women are divine image-bearers and all people have dignity and worth. But the issues Paul addresses regarding slaves and masters do apply to employee-employer relationships today. It is often said that you can tell a great deal about someone by how they treat the help. Christians must view those who perform so-called menial duties as people worthy of dignity, respect, a fair wage and safe working conditions. Those who are employees should do their duties as though they were doing them in the presence of Jesus himself, knowing that Christ will reward them for their sincere labor. There is a great deal of wisdom in the old Jesus people bumper sticker, “my boss is a Jewish carpenter.” All of us, whether we be employee or employer, must realize that we fulfill our calling and vocation in the presence of Christ. Whether we be employee or employer, we are first a servant of Jesus and we are called to imitate him in humility and self-sacrifice.

As for children and parents, Paul’s command is very simple. Children, obey your parents. They love you, and provide for you, they would die for you. Remember that your parents are sinners and that they will occasionally fail as parents. Yes, Christ has died for those failures, just as he dies for your failures to obey your parents as you should.

But there is one point of application Paul makes I’d like to emphasize as we conclude. Fathers (or moms, as the case may be), remember Paul’s command that it is your solemn responsibility to raise your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Teach your children that Jesus loved the church, that Jesus gave himself up for the church, that Jesus sanctifies the church, that Jesus cleansed the church, and that Jesus presents the church as his bride. Then teach them that because of this, they are to submit to you, just as you imitate Jesus’ humility and gentleness before them. Please, do this now while you can. There is no greater gift imaginable you can give them than to teach your children what it means to be a justified sinner, and to continually point them to that blessed Savior to whom we all submit.