

December 17, 2023

COMMANDS TO CHILDREN AND FATHERS

Ephesians 6:1-4

(14 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

Children were largely ignored in ancient societies. They were seen as those who don't contribute. I mean, it makes sense, right? And yet our God makes clear in Scripture that he values children. He loves them, and he tells us to value them and see them as a blessing. But he does even more. Perhaps surprisingly, he addresses them directly. In our text this morning, God speaks directly to the children.

You can see it in Ephesians 6:1 as begins with an address to children. He doesn't address merely adults, telling us what our children should do. He addresses our children. He assumes children would be present as the saints gathered to worship the Lord corporately, and he speaks directly to them. And although it's fair to say he's speaking directly to children old enough to understand the instruction he's giving, he makes clear by the time we get to verse 4 that he's speaking to those children who are still being brought up in their parents' home. In other words, he's not speaking simply to adults who recognize we have parents. He's speaking to children still living and being brought up in their parents' home.

At the same time, though, he gives instructions that aren't only for children still living at home. We'll find in these verses that Paul addresses all of us who still have living parents with a command in verse 2, and he addresses fathers specifically in verse 4. But, amazingly, he starts off addressing children.

So, if you're a child—a young child or perhaps a child who is in his teenage years, still living at home—this is a sermon that you'll want to pay close attention to. The Lord sees you and knows you and wants to instruct you in what is best for you. In other words, the Lord expects you to listen to what he says and obey it. Therefore, what I want to do this morning is address a word to children. Then, within it, note something key for all of us. And then I want to say something to parents and especially fathers. So here we go. Children, this is what you need to hear: the Lord commands you to obey your parents.

Children, obey and honor your parents

Paul begins in verse 1, writing, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Now, when Paul says, "In the Lord," he's telling you, children, that your obedience to your parents is to be done as obedience to Jesus. In other words, if you ask as a child, "What does God want me to do?" the key answer for you is that he wants you to obey your parents.

When my kids were little this was the first verse we taught them to memorize. If you'd come into the Tankersley home as the kids were little, you would have heard us ask them more than once, "What does Ephesians 6:1 say?" and they would answer, "Children obey your parents in

the Lord for this is right.” One of my favorite stories regarding that came when we moved to Louisville. Michael would have been five at the time, and we soon planted ourselves in Immanuel Baptist Church and took our kids to Sunday school. Well, one day we picked up Michael from his children’s Sunday school class on our way to the sanctuary for corporate worship, and the teacher said, “I’ve got to tell you a story. I was teaching the kids today saying, ‘Remember what Ephesians 6:10 teaches us. Children should obey your parents.’ And Michael raised his hand and said, ‘In Jackson that is Ephesians 6:1.’” He knew what he was taught didn’t line up with what she was saying, and so he gave her the benefit of the doubt, assuming that verse numbers must differ region to region.

But actually I think it’s something of the universality of this truth (whether one lives in Jackson, Louisville, or the remotest place on the planet) that Paul is getting at in the statement, “for this is right.” He’s telling children to obey their parents because the Lord shows us this is his will in his Word and he’s written this on the hearts of all people everywhere. In other words, it would be difficult to find parents throughout the world and across the ages who would push back on the truth that children need to obey their parents. They all know that children should obey their parents.

And yet, let’s acknowledge the odd reality of our own day. We have teachers, doctors, and legislators all pushing back on this reality. And, children, they might even tell you that you shouldn’t obey your parents. But God’s Word is clear. So go ahead and memorize Ephesians 6:1 so you will be ready to speak it to yourself and others.

This means, children, that if your parents tell you to make your bed, or shut off the television, or be home by 10:00, or whatever, that if you’re going to obey God, you must obey them in that instance in whatever they tell you. Don’t convince yourselves that God is pleased with what you’re doing when you fail to obey your parents. He’s telling you otherwise right here.

But there’s more. Paul also mentions in verse 2 that children are to honor your father and mother. In fact, he mentions that when the Lord first gave this commandment to Israel in Exodus 20:12, it came with a promise, and it was the first commandment to come with the promise. An Israelite child was told that if he honored his parents—which required obeying them—then when they came into the promised land, they’d live long and live a better life than they otherwise would. Here, Paul quotes that promise, but he leaves off the phrase “that the Lord your God is giving you.” In other words, it seems that Paul is saying, “This promise doesn’t just pertain to living in the promised land under the old covenant.” He’s universalizing this promise. He’s telling all children that life will go better for you if you obey your parents. Now, this may not be a particular guarantee to each and every child. But generally speaking, it goes better for children who obey their parents, and children who obey have a better way of it. That’s what Paul is proclaiming.

But what this means for children is that you need to obey your parents and give weight to their words. You should obey with a happy heart, as parents oftentimes (rightly) tell their young

children. You must not obey, while stomping around as you do so. This fails to communicate respect that this command to honor them demands.

But even as adults, we honor our parents. We allow their words to carry weight. As adults, we are not required to obey them, but we should always honor them. This will be shown, again, in allowing their words to carry weight in our lives and in caring for them as they enter old age and need their children to help them.

Now, perhaps this will raise the question, "If children are to honor and obey their parents, and even adults honor their parents but are not required to obey them, then at what point is one no longer considered a child, under the obligation of Ephesians 6:1?" This question is not easily answered, but I'll note a few things. First, the command for children to obey their parents seems to envision one still under his father's roof, if you will. Here's why I say that. Before we get to this command concerning children, Paul has given commands about marriage, and within those, he mentioned from Genesis 2:24 that a man is to leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. So, a child steps into manhood as he leaves his father's house. Similarly, Paul is going to mention in verse 4 about fathers bringing up their children, which seems to indicate that the child is still being raised in the father's home and has not yet left that home.

If we're looking for a particular age, this text doesn't provide one. In our own country the state recognizes one as an adult at age eighteen, as each society must develop laws whereby it recognizes its citizens passing from childhood to adulthood. Interestingly, in the Old Covenant, it seemed that the Lord instructed Israel to recognize that as occurring at age twenty. If you read through the OT law, you'll see the phrase "twenty years old and upward" occur again and again. Those required to give an offering were those "twenty years old and upward" (Ex 30:14). Those able to go to war were those "twenty years old and upward" (e.g. Num 1:3, 24, 26, 30, 32, etc.). Those considered morally culpable for rebellion in the wilderness and not permitted to enter the promised land were those "from twenty years old and upward" (Num 14:29; 32:11). And those from the tribe of Levi who were able to serve at the temple were those "from twenty years old and upward" (1 Chron 23:24). Again, it occurs so frequently you can't miss it.

So, it seems quite clear in Israelite culture that one was considered as having passed from childhood to adulthood at least by age twenty. But, again, the idea seems to be that the child is one who is in the home, being brought up by his father. And, yet, all of us who have living parents need to ensure that we honor them, even if we're adults and our obedience to their commands isn't required.

So, children, the sermon isn't always directed at you chiefly. But today, at least part of it is. So here is what you need to hear. God commands you to obey your parents and do so with a happy heart, realizing that they're wise gifts given to you for your good. And as you obey them, it will go better for you and your life will be easier than it would be otherwise.

But Paul also gives a word to parents, especially to fathers, who would have been seen as ultimately responsible for the raising of their children. In verse 4 he gives instruction to them

which I'll summarize straightforwardly as: Fathers, don't provoke your children to anger but instruct and discipline them in the Lord.

Fathers, don't provoke your children to anger but instruct and discipline them in the Lord

Now, let me first make clear that both parents are responsible for bringing up their children. In verse 1 Paul told children to obey not just their fathers but their parents—father and mother. So fathers aren't the only ones responsible for raising their children. And to be honest, I don't say that because I think there are a multitude of fathers here who have been bending over backwards to raise their children by themselves. Soon after we had children I remember being on the phone with a friend and said, "I can't do anything that night because I'll be babysitting the kids while Lili is out with some friends." And when I got off the phone Lili said to me, "You know what would be a better term than babysitting? Raising. You should say you're raising your kids." So I don't think there are a bunch of dads, especially with young children, here today going, "Thank goodness he said we were both responsible to raise the children. Here I've been doing everything I can do this all on my own." Both parents are responsible to raise their children according to verse 1.

And yet Paul addresses fathers specifically in verse 4. Why? I think it's because fathers are ultimately responsible for their home. Just as the husband is the head of the wife, the father is the head of his home. He is responsible ultimately for the raising of the children. The qualification for a pastor in the Scripture is that he must manage his household well. This assumes his ultimate responsibility for the home.

So, fathers, we are tasked with the bringing up, alongside of our wives, of our children. And that image of bringing up is a helpful one. Our kids are on their way to adulthood, literally growing up, and we're to do all we can to ensure that they're equipped to walk as godly men and women in this world. Fathers, that responsibility ultimately falls on us.

Therefore, Paul gives instructions to fathers, but interestingly the first word he gives is a negative one. He tells us what *not* to do. He writes, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger" (v. 4a). Why does he say that, and what does he mean? Let's try to answer the latter question first. I think every commentary I read on this quoted from the same commentator as giving the best answer on this, and I thought it was so good that I simply want to read what he says. He writes about the notion of provoking a child to anger: "This involves avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs and sensibilities."¹

¹ Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 406.

Brothers, when you hear that, my guess is that you know exactly what he's talking about. You know it perhaps because you experienced it with your father who never seemed to be pleased or blew up over matters in an arbitrary way or severely disciplined you or humiliated you, or you know it because you've been that way toward your own children, or both. Brothers, when we act this way toward our children, we can create angry children who become angry adults in this world. Our Lord tells us that we must not do that.

And perhaps it need not be said, but the reason Paul says that is because fathers can be prone to it. Mothers are typically more nurturing. When my kids were little and got hurt, they'd run right past me into Lili's arms. Fathers are the ones who push their children—at best—in good ways. We teach them how to jump off the side of the pool into the deep water. We push them past their fears and laziness. We press on them when they're working in order to help them develop a good work ethic. But with that right impulse to push can come these actions we've just described. We can provoke our children to anger, and we must not do that.

Now, men, I'm not saying you stop pressing your children. Children need fathers to press and shape them and strongly challenge them, but there's a reason our Lord provides this warning. As an example of fathers and mothers working together here, there have been times when my children have needed a strong and challenging word, and so I've addressed them in discipline. And while I'm speaking to them, Lili will sometimes reach over and put her hand on my arm. It could be interpreted as a sign of support, but what she's really saying is, "Make sure you manage what you're saying and how you're saying it."

And I appreciate it because if she were to say that out loud in front of my children that would be disrespectful and undermine the authority and role the Lord has given me toward them. And there are sometimes that I think, "Yes, I need to calm myself down. I don't want to provoke them to anger and resentment." And there are other times when I think, "This is the difference between fathering and mothering, and it's okay that she wouldn't speak to the children in the exact same challenging way I am now." And there have been times when I've thanked her afterward for her calming, respectful help and times when she has thanked me for saying what I said, even when she would have been uncomfortable saying it herself. But, men, we need that reminder, and we may well need our wives to help us with this in respectful ways. We must heed God's warning here.

However, that's not the only word he gives us. Positively, he tells us, "But bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (v. 4b). Instead of provoking them to anger, bring them up with controlled, godly, loving discipline and instruction in the Lord. The two words here seem to communicate both physical and verbal discipline and instruction. In other words, we discipline when our children when they're young by spanking them in a controlled way. We might impose other punishments as they age. And we're constantly instructing them in what they should and shouldn't do. We're doing with them everything our Heavenly Father does with us to shape and form us into godly sons and daughters. In fact, Hebrews 12 compares the discipline of our earthly fathers to the discipline of our Heavenly Father, noting that every father who loves his son disciplines him, and we respect our fathers for it. And the text also notes that it seems

painful rather than pleasant but yields the fruit of righteousness. That's what we're after, fathers, in our children.

So, the warning of the first half of verse 4 doesn't mean that we avoid discipline. Of course, we discipline our children, even spanking them when they're younger and they disobey. But we do it consistently and not arbitrarily. We do it reminding them of our love and not in anger. And we always make sure they feel reconciled to us and not driven and distanced from us after. Fathers, do not issue corrective discipline to your children and then communicate that you want to be distanced from them. Rather, you want to picture our Heavenly Father who disciplines us but is always wanting to draw us in closer to him.

And we instruct them in what is good, right, and proper and what is bad, sinful, and dangerous. You tell them not to crawl toward the fireplace or touch the stove, and you instruct them about listening in church and what to look for in a spouse. You ensure that they hear and know God's Word and his commands. Again, you do everything to ensure that they're equipped to walk as a wise man or woman of God in this world.

And let me say a word here as well. I know that it can feel overwhelming to think of all that God's Word commands and thinking that you as a father are ultimately responsible doing all you can to equip your children to walk as godly adults. So let me say one thing very clearly. Prioritize the church. Gather with the saints on Sundays, bringing your children with you. And don't just come at 10:15, but when we have Sunday school, come at 9:00 as well. We have age-appropriate Sunday school classes for children under age twelve, and then at age twelve, we have parents bring their children into Sunday school classes with them because we want to help you. We teach theology in Sunday school, for example, because we want you to be able to take what you and your children are hearing and then sit with them through the week and ensure that they understand. And I'm confident that any Sunday school teacher would meet with you, if you need further instruction to help you in making sure you're understanding enough to pass these things on to your children. I know I would do that with any sermon. I am so thankful that my children know more about the Lord and his Word than I've directly taught them because of so many of you pouring into them. Fathers, take advantage of the church, and model before your children what it looks like to love the church.

And, second, try to learn your children. The Scripture commands us to consider how to stir one another up to love and good works. Some of my children can work with me all day and end the day feeling as close to me and loved by me as a child can. Another feels that way after time and conversation. Another after hugging and sitting together. Sit with them, talk to them, ask them questions, and try to learn their hearts. And then point out where you see their growth in maturity and godliness. Consider, learn and recognize, how you can stir them up to love and good works.

And let me say one final word to parents and children. Repent if you've sinned. Parents, repent to your children, and children, repent to your parents. It may feel like if you repent to your children, parents, that they'll see your imperfections and not want to honor or obey you as they

should. But they also know you're imperfect. And your repentance will show them you're genuinely a follower of Christ, who strives to obey and repents when we fail. And then delight in forgiving one another and seeking to obey Christ's commands in this text. After all, is there anything more glorious than seeking to honor and obey the one who lived, died, and was raised for us while extending the grace to others that he's lavished on us? Surely not. So let's give him thanks for those things now as we come to the table. Amen.