

Ephesians 6:1-3

Introduction

The city of Ephesus was located (and still is located) on the east coast of the Aegean Sea (the western shores of modern day Turkey). We might imagine a scene in this city, in the year AD 60, something like the following. It's Sunday, the Lord's Day. The day-laborers and slaves have been released from their duties at the end of the day, and so now the Christians in Ephesus are all gathering in a large upper room belonging to one of the wealthier families. On this night, there's a unique sense of anticipation. The Apostle Paul spent almost three years in this city, founding this church. Many of these Christians had known Paul personally and were saved through his preaching and teaching. But there were also many who had never met Paul. It had been five years now since Paul was last in Ephesus, but on one of his return journeys to Jerusalem, Paul's ship had stopped in the port city of Miletus, almost 50 miles to the south. He had called for the Ephesian elders to come and see him, and when they returned, they brought news from Paul that he would never see their faces again and that the Lord had shown him that in every city imprisonment and afflictions awaited him (cf. Acts 20:13-38). It wasn't long after this that Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea and then transported to Rome where he was now in prison awaiting his appeal before the Emperor. And now a Christian brother named Tychacus has arrived from Rome, bringing with him a letter from the Apostle Paul.

Gathered in the meeting room to hear Paul's letter were husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. There were many things in this letter that were deep and challenging to understand. But Paul said that he prayed their eyes would be opened not just to understand in an academic sense but to understand in the sense of *grasping* and *believing* by faith (Eph. 1:15-20; 3:14-19). After about the first half of the letter, Paul shifted his focus to emphasize more concretely how they should all be living every day in the light of God's love and mercy, and he began addressing specific members of their group. First, he spoke directly to the wives in the room. Then he addressed the husbands who were in attendance. And then, as there were children there, too, he spoke directly to them. Then to the fathers. Then the slaves. And finally, the masters.

This morning we're going to listen to Paul's instructions to the children. When Paul speaks to "children," he's speaking to all children living under the authority of their parents, irrespective of age. (Perhaps it would be helpful for us to use the language of "sons" and "daughters.") The dynamics of this obedience will look different at different ages, but the principle of this obedience—of being subject to one's parents—will be the same (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1, 5-6). Just like there were sons and daughters in that room in Ephesus some 2000 years ago, so now there are sons and daughters gathered here. But this message isn't just for children. Paul's words to the children have a certain kind of application to all of us. In fact, children who listen to these words and live them out are powerful examples to all of us of the godly and holy lives that all of us are called to be living. Paul begins in the first verse of chapter six:

I. Ephesians 6:1a — Children [sons and daughters], obey your parents...

What happens when we hear those words (Perhaps we can all remember)? Do they irritate? Do they grate on us at all? “Yes, I already *know* that!” Even if we usually don’t mind obeying our parents, to hear those words or to be given this instruction can be somehow irritating. All of us can still feel the same way, just in different contexts. But just because this feeling is universal doesn’t mean it’s excusable, or that there isn’t another way. So how can we hear these words—“Children, obey your parents”—and respond with a willingness and even a gladness in our hearts – even when our parents are flawed and sinful? How is that really possible? Paul answers:

II. Ephesians 6:1b — Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*...

Those are wonderful words. The first thing this tells us is that Paul is speaking specifically to you children who have been born again (or, born from above) as God’s own sons and daughters (cf. 2:20-21; 4:1, 17; 5:8). In other words, even though all children everywhere are to obey their parents, Paul isn’t talking here to all children everywhere. He’s speaking to you children who have heard the word of truth—the Gospel of your salvation—and have believed (1:13). And because you’ve truly believed, now you are “in Christ” – you are “in the Lord.” Paul is writing to the same children for whom he prayed in chapter one “that the eyes of your heart [may be] enlightened [and that you may] know what is the hope of [God’s] calling [and] what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints...” (1:18). Paul is writing to the same children for whom he prayed in chapter three “that [God] would give you... to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you... may be able to comprehend with all the saints... the love of Christ...” (3:16-19). That’s the only reason Paul can have confidence in writing what he writes now: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord.”

Paul knows that we’re all born into this world with a craving for what we might call “freedom” – the right to do as we see fit without being in subjection to someone else — fundamentally, without being in subjection to God. Paul knows this, and so he knows that “disobedience to parents” (even sinful and flawed parents) is really just the inevitable expression of this craving that we have from birth. He writes in other places:

- Romans 1:28–30 — And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents...
- 2 Timothy 3:1–2 — But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy...

Disobedience to parents isn’t really the ultimate problem. It’s not the real battle. It’s the craving for independence, to be my own boss and to do as I see fit – that’s really the deeper problem. Can we *all* identify with that? And the reason this problem is so serious is because it sits at the very heart of our sin nature. Children, know this about yourselves: You were born into this world with an innate resistance to the very idea of “obedience.” So were we all. Paul knows this, and

that's why he says to you children who have placed your faith in Christ, "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*." Here's the Gospel in three words. This isn't just some outward duty that you have to buckle down and force yourself to fulfill. Children, obey your parents as the way of living out and working out this amazing reality that *you* are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Parents, are we listening? Are we amazed at this high and holy calling that God has given to our children? Are we instructed and edified and even convicted by the example of our believing children?

Children, what you need to remember is that the Apostle Paul didn't just now start talking to you. He's been talking to you as "a fellow heir of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7) throughout this whole letter. When we go back and read chapter five, verses 15-17, we see that Paul understands your relationship with your parents to be one of the main contexts for living wisely as a child of God, understanding what the will of the Lord is, and being filled with the Spirit. To obey your parents "in the Lord" means that your obedience to your parents is given ultimately to Jesus Christ Himself. When you obey your parents not just because you feel like you have no other choice, but willingly as a sign of your devotion to Jesus, Jesus receives your obedience to your sinful and imperfect parents as obedience given to Him—who is sinless and perfect.

So what we see is that your obedience to your parents is a sign of your exalted status as a son or a daughter of God. We were all born into this world with a sinful craving for independence – to be our own boss and to do as we see fit (especially when those in authority over us either are, or appear to be, wrong or misguided). But now your obedience to your parents is one of the powerful and even supernatural evidences that you are a fellow heir with your parents of the grace of life – that you have equal access with your parents to the throne of grace.

III. Ephesians 6:1c — Children, obey your parents in the Lord, *for this is right*.

All of us like to ask "Why?" We want to know the *reason*, and we really hope it will be a good one. So to the question, "Why should I obey my parents?" Paul answers: "For this is right." There are many children—and a whole lot of human beings, period—who will never be satisfied with that answer. But for all those children who are "in the Lord," it's what's "right" that can actually matter more to you than anything else in the world. It's what's "right" that holds now a special attraction for you. Remember that Paul was speaking equally to the children—to all the sons and daughters in the room—when he wrote these words in chapter five:

- Ephesians 5:8-10 — For you were once darkness, but now — light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth), *carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord*.

This is no less the job of believing children than it is of believing parents. And so Paul is calling children to carefully work to discern experientially and by faith the "rightness" of this command: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." Paul says in Colossians:

- Colossians 3:20 — Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord*.

It's this simple knowledge that can give to you who are "in the Lord" strength and courage to obey even when it's difficult.

When Paul says, "for this is right," he assumes that this is one of those laws that everyone is aware of deep inside (cf. Rom. 2:14-16). Everyone knows—even without having the Bible or someone else to tell them—everyone knows, deep inside, that it's "right" for children to obey their parents. And it's "right" *because* this is the will of God – *because* this is what pleases the Lord. We know this because it's one of the Ten Commandments that God wrote with His own finger on the tablets of stone. So now Paul quotes that commandment in verse two (cf. Exod. 20:12).

IV. Ephesians 6:2a — Honor your father and mother...

To truly obey is to honor, and to truly honor is to obey. True obedience isn't just outward conformity or compliance. It's not just "doing what my parents say" (whatever this looks like at different ages) while inwardly I'm resisting and maybe full of anger. How can this be when I'm obeying my parents "in the Lord," and as a sign of devotion to Christ? As a fellow heir of eternal life with my parents, God calls me to something greater and more wonderful than this. He calls me to something supernatural. True obedience "in the Lord" means honoring my parents from the heart – in thought, in word, and in deed. Your high and holy calling is to an obedience and honor that characterizes every aspect of your relationship with your parents (Paul says, "in everything"; Col. 3:20).

We read in Leviticus:

- Leviticus 19:3 — Every one of you shall *revere [fear]* his mother and his father... I am Yahweh your God.

Notice how the fear of one's parents is rooted in the fear of God. Back in verse 21 when Paul introduced the theme of submission, he said, "submitting to one another *in the fear of Christ.*" So, just as wives are to fear/reverence their husbands "in the fear/reverence of Christ" (Eph. 5:33), so also children, your holy calling is to obey and honor your mother and your father "in the fear of Christ" — as an expression of your reverence for Christ, who is the coming Judge, and also your Savior. In the end, this is the only way to live out true biblical submission to your parents. You will only be enabled to obey and honor your parents in the true fear of Christ. Or to put it another way, you can only truly obey your parents "*in the Lord.*" Isn't this even more obvious when we remember that all parents are also sinners? Parents will at times abuse their authority even in small and subtle ways. But even then, your holy calling as children remains the same, because you, too, have been filled with the Holy Spirit. This calling is to honor your parents not because of *their* worthiness, but rather because of the worthiness of Christ. Children, obey your parents *in the Lord.*

Parents, are we listening? Are we amazed at this high and holy calling that God has given to our children? Are we instructed and edified and even convicted by the example of our believing children? Calvin writes: "The human mind recoils from the idea of subjection, and with difficulty allows itself to be placed under the control of another. Experience shows how rare this

virtue is; for do we find one among a thousand that is obedient to his parents?” When we remember that obedience includes *honor*, then we might even say “one among *ten* thousand.” So then, who is the child that truly obeys and honors his parents? He (or she) is nothing less than God’s new creation – born again as God’s own son or daughter through faith in Christ. And so we see that the only place true freedom is found is in a free and glad submission to Christ.

“Honor your father and mother...” And then Paul interrupts his quotation so he can introduce the next part of the quotation:

V. Ephesians 6:2b-3 — ... (this is the first commandment with a promise) in order that it may be well with you and you may live long upon the earth.

That this is the first commandment with a promise shows us again how important it really is. Jesus reminded His listeners in Matthew fifteen:

- Matthew 15:4 — God commanded, “Honor your father and your mother,” and, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.”

In Israel, the punishment appointed by God for a child who belligerently dishonored and rebelled against his parents was death. But even when the law failed to carry out that punishment, God saw, and the only thing that child could expect from God was His judgment and displeasure — which is also to say, the absence of His blessing. This is still true today. So we read in Proverbs:

- Proverbs 20:20 — If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.
- Proverbs 30:17 (cf. Deut. 28:26) — The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.

Paul says that along with many other people, and as with many other kinds of sins, those who practice disobedience to parents are “worthy of death” (Rom. 1:28-32). But for all those children who are “in the Lord,” and who therefore seek to obey their parents “in the Lord,” the curse is replaced with blessing. The warning is replaced with promise.

“Honor your father and mother... *in order that it may be well with you and you may live long upon the earth.* In the original context of the Old Testament, this well-being and long life was experienced in the land of Canaan (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). But now that Christian children can be found everywhere in the world, the promise applies everywhere in the world. The point isn’t that you’ll never experience suffering or that there will never be any chance of an “early” death – but you will never, ever experience these things as the expression of God’s judgment. Instead, His blessing will always rest upon you. And even in trials (even supposing the exception of an early death), it will be well with you not only in this life, but in the life to come. This is true for all Christian children, but there’s a unique application and blessing here for those Christian children who have Christian parents. The ultimate *goal* of this command to honor and obey your parents is that you might “learn Christ” (cf. 4:20).

Parents, are we listening? What does this say about our own calling and responsibility before God? How should this reality impact every single aspect of what it means to be parents? The father speaks to his son in Proverbs chapter six:

- Proverbs 6:20–22 — My son, keep your father’s commandment, and forsake not your mother’s teaching. Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.

Paul goes on to say in the very next verse here in Ephesians 6: “Fathers, bring [your children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” The goal of obeying and honoring my parents “in everything” (Col. 3:20) is that I might heed their instruction, and learn Christ, and grow up in true godliness. And as Paul says in another place:

- 1 Timothy 4:8 — Godliness is of value in every way, *as it holds promise for the present life* and also for the life to come.

So to all of you children who are “in the Lord,” be encouraged—be full of joy!—that as you obey and honor your father and mother, it *will* be well with you, and you will know the blessing of God upon your life.

Conclusion

Every human being has broken the fifth commandment – everyone except Jesus. Our failure to obey and honor our parents is proof that we are born into this world in sin – by nature children of wrath. In the eyes of a holy God, every child who is disobedient to his parents deserves death, because this disobedience is ultimately just the expression of a deeper craving for independence even from God Himself.

But... God (Eph. 2:4) is full of mercy and steadfast love. And so the very law that condemns us—that very law is meant to bring us to Christ where there is forgiveness and cleansing and pardon. The law brings condemnation in order that it might point us to Jesus in whom, as Paul says, there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

So to all those in this room who are still under the authority of your parents: Have you repented of your sin and believed and trusted in Christ? If so, then the Bible says that you’re now a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). *You* are God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works [among them, obeying and honoring your parents], [good works] which God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). And so now the law that was once a burden and that once condemned you can be your delight. Now one of the surest signs that you are truly one of God’s children, being remade into His image, is that you are a child who obeys and honors your father and mother from the heart. Now, though you’ll never be without sin this side of heaven (1 Jn. 1:10-2:1), the Apostle Paul can write to you: “Children [sons and daughters], obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise) in order that it may be well with you and you may live

long upon the earth.” And in this holy calling that you have, you can always have set before you the pattern and example of Jesus Himself in whose footsteps you are walking. Luke writes:

- Luke 2:51–52 — Jesus went down [from Jerusalem] with [his father and mother] and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them... And [he] increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

To those in this room who are still under the authority of your parents: May you be a powerful example to all of us of the godly and holy lives that we’re *all* called to be living.