Ephesians 6:1-4

Submission in Parenting

[5:21 …be subject to one another in the fear of Christ…]

The children are to obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

*Cross Reference Passage: Colossians 3:20-21.*

Carrying on in the line of subjection where we are to be subject to one another in the body, in marriage, and now in the household, Paul is focused on older children (not teenagers – who would likely have been married or at least expected to be more adultlike) and not toddlers. They’re old enough to have understood and believed the gospel, and they’re to be part of the body’s call to love (3:17-19), to grow (4:15-16), to imitate (5:1-2), and to submit (5:21).

## A Note on Parenting

A lot of ink has been spilled (and in the age of the internet, a lot of pixels have been lit up), on the topic of parenting and how to do it. The point of this lesson is not to tell you how to get obedient children based on a specific plan or method. Parenting is personal and should be done in an abiding way. We’ll be talking about fatherhood a bit and parenting as a whole in this passage, but the larger topic of parenting has been covered elsewhere[[1]](#endnote-1).

# Obedience

## The Children

*Why does Paul mention children in the context of the submission within the body?*

The children are to be an integral part of the body. This is going to impact their specific sanctification, their family’s sanctification, the local body’s sanctification, and the worldwide church’s sanctification. Errors in teaching around children include not being able to be saved until a specific age (rather than a comprehension level), that children are lesser being until adulthood, or that children should be clones of adults.

Jewish children – if they had done any growing up under the Law – would have known they were to be well behaved under the Law (c.f. Deuteronomy 31:12-13). Gentile children would have had the fear of their parents being able to get rid of them on a whim sitting over their heads [unless they were adopted]. Roman culture was focused on training children on moral character over intellectual development, and the morals were concerned with pagan idolatry and humanism, not what we would associate with Christian morals.

This passage sets clear expectations for children and for fathers (which applies to mothers as well).

## Are to Obey Your Parents in the Lord

*What is obedience?*

The Greek word translated to obedience here comes from the compound word literally translated to “listen under,” but the translation ‘obey’ is good. The idea is that you hear a command and then do it because you have listened under someone. Obedience is not necessarily about control, but about relationship, roles and understanding. As Christ illustrated in Matthew 7:7-11, the heavenly Father has the authority to do whatever He pleases, but His character is one of care and provision. Similarly, the obedience of the children is not given in light of mere compliance, but rooted in care (more on this in verse 4).

### Obedience in the Lord

*Why would Paul specify this with a condition of believing parents?*

Paul knows that not all of his readers are in 100% Christian households. This is a big deal when we consider the idea of what Paul is advocating: obedience. What sort of things would a pagan parent be supporting or instructing their children to? The answer could obviously not line up with biblical instructions for the believer. Paul adds this qualifier to his instruction so that believers would not see obedience as a higher priority than their faith.

This is contextual as we see in other relationships like husband and wife from 1 Peter 3:1-7 where the godliness of the wife draws the husband to want to know more about the Lord and respond to the gospel. While not explicitly stated here the larger manifestation of the life of Christ to the World should at least draw attention to the impact of the gospel on our own lives and potentially reach the lost as they seek to understand the source of our life.

### Parents Not in the Lord

*How should the children respond when they’re being asked to do ungodly things?*

While obedience is right for children in a godly home, the disobedience towards unbiblical things is worth consideration. Paul quotes the 5th commandment in this passage which says we need to be honoring our parents. A child asked to do something such as sacrifice an animal to a pagan god would need to object to the thing they’re being asked to do. Referring back to Ephesians 4:28 we see that stealing was common, but part of pagan practices.

We are not told by Paul specifically what they should do instead, but it would be consistent with other New Testament principles that their obedience would be limited by compliance to the directions of the Holy Spirit. The behavior in contrast will still be upright, and not be subject to questioning (c.f. Philippians 2:15, 1 Timothy 3:2, 1 Timothy 5:7, Titus 1:6-7).

### For This is Right

The idea of something being right carries with it a sense of virtue. In the case of the New Testament believer we see that righteousness is directly linked to our position, but that our condition should align with our position as we abide. Abiding is a doctrine that should be taught to children! Can you imagine a church filled with abiding young children being examples of obedience through abiding? What a powerful concept.

## The Fifth Commandment

### *Why is Paul quoting the Law?*

Paul quotes the Law here. Not to be a legalist, but to highlight that even in the past this was a requirement. If they had grown up Jewish the readers would have heard about their forefather, Jacob deceiving his father (with the help of his mother), and taking the birth right his father had intended for Esau. Later, when the Law came that sort of deception would have been punishable by death, something Esau had intended to bring to Jacob anyway. Within the Law we find God’s righteousness in codified form. Paul credits God’s Law as righteous, and good and citing it does not make it part of the canon of New Testament doctrines for the believer (c.f. Romans 3:31; Romans 7:1-6; 1 Corinthians 9:20; 15:56; Galatians 2:19). Paul cites the Law as God’s revelation of righteousness in multiple places like this (c.f. 1 Corinthians 9:9; 14:21; 14:34; Romans 13:8). Paul emphasizes even more firmly that salvation was never by the Law, and has always been by faith (Romans 4:13-16; Galatians 2:16; 2:21; 3:10-13;3:21-24; 6:13; Ephesians 2:15).

### Honor Your Father and Mother

Paul cites the Law’s use of ‘honor,’ which is not the same as obedience, but the honor implies the obedience. The specifics of this Law were outlined elsewhere:

* Deuteronomy 11:6-7 - They will be taught the Law
  + They will also recite the Law
* Deuteronomy 31:12 – they will participate in the general assembly each 7th year
* Deuteronomy 31:19 – they will have the Torah (the Law) for memorization and teaching
* Exodus 34:23 – Three times a year male children will be presented at the feasts
* Genesis 17:10 – All males will be circumcised
* Exodus 20:5 – If a father hates God, God will punish his descendants for 4 generations
* Deuteronomy 24:16 – the children cannot be punished with capital punishment for their father’s crimes
* Leviticus 19:18 – do not bear grudges against the children of those who sinned [instead, love your neighbor]
* And the rest of the 613 laws, because you can’t break them up into a subset you obey

Reminder: the purpose of the Law was to separate the nation of Israel unto the Lord. If their children were unruly, or walking away from the Lord, it should have been addressed through normal disciplinary measures as prescribed in the Torah.

### Promises

*Does the New Testament believer expect to be inheriting any land on this earth?*

If we’re going to try to apply the Old Testament here then we need to obey as children so we can walk in the promised land. Which is difficult to do. Paul’s citation is not for us to see application, but for us to understand God’s consistency in expectation of proper behavior in children.

# Fathers

## Provoking Children to Anger

While permissible in Ephesus [and Roman law] for parents to treat their children poorly, Paul specifically wants parents to not be parenting in a way that will cause their children to be angry.

## Bring Them Up in the Discipline and Instruction of the Lord

### Discipline

The word translated ‘discipline’ here is actually a word used to describe the whole training and education of children with the intend to cultivate thinking, morality, and training to curb immaturity and emotional behavior. When we see Hebrews 12:3-11’s description of our Heavenly Father we find that His discipline is for a purpose of growth and maturity. It yields fruit and the purpose is, in part, to let us show off His holiness as we represent Him on this earth. Discipline rooted in love is not something that leads to revolting, anger or animocity, but instead it leads to maturity.

### Instruction

While not specifically quoting the Old Testament the same principles applied for New Testament fathers: teach your children about what God has revealed and teach them about biblical truth. We might use the term discipleship here. This looks like what was directed in chapter 4 within the body for growth, but inside the household. The complement of this is seen in Paul’s instruction to Timothy (c.f. 1 Timothy 3:1-7, specifically 4-5) about elders: their children and household should reflect this sort of practice.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:11 he compares the actions of himself and his co-teachers as being like fathers who encourage and implore. As people, in our conditional context, our earthly fathers often color our perspective of our Heavenly Father. Paul is reminding us that God is not unstable, unreliable, inconsistent, a drunkard, a control freak, a workaholic, or absentee; God is instead intentionally communicating, growing us, nurturing us, and has established the Word so that Paul can say in Romans 11:33-36:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

### Principles to Consider for Earthly Fathers (and Mothers)

* Model your fatherhood on the Heavenly Father, not your earthly father (c.f. Ephesians 5:1)
* When you learn something, make sure your children have a chance to see you learning and hopefully help them learn it, too, when possible (c.f. Titus 2:1-8)
* Humility in mistakes in parenting may change your children’s lives. Let your children know that you know something wasn’t right. It will help them understand justice, righteousness, and grace.
* Know your children. If you don’t know them you won’t know where to implore, urge, and lead them (1 Thessalonians 2:11).

1. See: “Extreme Marriage”

   <http://www.hollyhillsbiblechurch.org/messages/?series_id=106&series_page=20> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)