

Ephesians: *Children, Obey Your Parents*
Ephesians 6:1-4

We are working our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and this morning we will wrap up our treatment of what has historically been referred to as Paul's *haustafeln*, which is a German word meaning "household codes." Our text falls into a larger section of Paul's letter that really began all the way back in chapter 4:1 when Paul writes, "I therefore...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..." As those saved by God's unmerited grace through the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ, we are to "walk... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Our 'walk' is to be set apart from the unbelievers as we walk 'in love' as 'children of light' and as those who are 'wise' as opposed to unwise. Paul commends the first century believers to be those who are to "be filled with the Holy Spirit, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." The *haustefeln*, then, is the application of mutual submission as that principle applies to husbands and wives, children and parents, as well as slaves and masters within the first-century church. We've already spent several weeks looking at the relationship between Christian husbands and wives as well as how Paul's teaching regarding Christian slaves and masters applies to our workplace relationships with people who hold authority and those under authority.

This morning we shall conclude this section of Paul's letter by looking at the relationship between Christian children and Christian parents. Please stand and let us read Ephesians 6:1-4: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

My message will fall under four subheadings this morning: 1) The Plight of Children in the First Century; 2) Three Grounds for Obedience in the Christian Home; 3) Radically New Direction for Fathers; and 4) The Powerful Witness of a Christian Family.

I. The Plight of Children in the First Century

In his commentary on Ephesians, William Barclay writes: If the Christian faith did much for women, it did even more for children. In Roman civilization contemporary with Paul there existed certain features which made life perilous for the child.¹

The greatest threat to children came from the Roman practice of *patria potestas* (paternal power). Barclay writes: Under the *patria potestas* a Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them (wife and children) as slaves, he could make them work in his fields even with chains, he could punish as he liked and could even inflict the death penalty...the power of the of the Roman father extended over the child's whole life, so long as the father lived. A Roman son never came of age.²

In the Oxford Classical Dictionary we read that "the autocratic character of the *patria potestas* manifested itself not only in the father's right to punish, but also in his *jus vitae necisque*"³ which translates as "the right of life or death."

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians*; p. 175.

² Ibid.

³ Quoted by John R. Stott, *The Message of the Ephesians*; p 245.

In first century Rome, when a child was born, it was placed before its father's feet, and, if the father stooped and lifted the child, that meant that he acknowledged it and wished it to be kept. If he turned and walked away, it meant that he refused to acknowledge it and the child could quite literally be thrown away.

In an ancient letter dated 1 BC, a man named Hilarion writes to his wife Alis who is clearly pregnant. Since Hilarion will not be home to honor the custom of the child being set before him, he gives these instructions to his wife in the closing sentences of his letter: "If—good luck to you!—you have a child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, throw it out. You told Aphrodisias to tell me: 'Do not forget me.' How can I forget you? I beg you therefore not to worry."⁴

Notice the "oh, by the way" nature of the father's instruction to literally throw away a baby girl. This practice was not uncommon in first century Rome for normal, healthy children. "Throw away children" would be abandoned in the Roman forum, left for anyone to pick up and do with as they pleased. If the abandoned infants were picked up and nourished at all, the child was almost certainly to be raised as a slave or to stock the brothels of Rome.

Even worse was the fate of any child born sickly, "blemished" or deformed. The Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca writes: We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge a knife into sickly cattle lest they taint the herd; children who are born weakly and deformed we drown.⁵

Another threat against children was the sexual promiscuity of first century Rome. Children were seen as a hindrance that impeded sex with multiple partners and an easy divorce, leading to a higher percentage of unwanted children.

As we've noted on many occasions, the devolution of American culture more and more resembles the context of first century Rome as sexual promiscuity increases, marriages decrease, birthrates plummet, and abortions skyrocket. OK, given the ancient context, let us now consider the teachings of the Apostle Paul.

II. Three Grounds for Obedience in the Christian Home

Paul begins by addressing children directly in vs. 1-3: Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. "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."

Church, please note the assumption that children are present and part of the gathering of the local church for worship, the reading of the Word, and the teaching of the Gospel. I do not wish to belabor this point, but it stands to reason that there is great value in families worshipping together. Christianity has not only survived but thrived for nearly 2000 years precisely because families worshipped together, learned together, and came under the conviction and power of the Holy Spirit...together, as the Church.⁶ I regularly console so many Christian parents who weep because their adult children walked away from the church and away from their faith. Yet quite often those young people did not habitually attend corporate worship with their parents. They may have attended youth group; they may have attended a campus ministry their freshman year in college; but upon graduating from college, they never again darkened the door of a church. The truth is that so many of our children never come to know themselves as part of the

⁴ Barclay, p 176.

⁵ Barclay, p 176.

⁶ Second to regular corporate worship is going on a mission trip together as a family...absolutely a game changer! All of our children have been on mission trips with me and Christy, and those are memories that far outshine any memory we have from any sporting event or concert we have ever attended...which are MANY.

CHURCH...instead they only experience being part of a ministry...and it's not the same thing. The Church is the collective assembly of believers--old and young, parents and children, married and single, people of all backgrounds and ethnicities, worshipping in Spirit and in Truth in the name of Jesus for the glory of the Father! AS ONE! That's the whole point of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which is why Paul ASSUMES the children are present with their parents and the whole assembly while his letter is read, and he writes: Children, obey your parents in the Lord *for this is right*. I want to show you now that Paul provides three grounds for children to be obedient to their parents: nature, God's law, and the Gospel.⁷

So, the first ground for children obeying their parents is based upon what we call *natural law*. In other words, we don't need the special revelation of God to know that children obeying parents is RIGHT. The whole world in every culture knows that it is RIGHT for children to obey their parents. Remind your atheist friend of this observation when she tries to convince you that there are no absolute moral truths. If she disagrees with you, wait until she has children and then try again!

I don't have time to go deep on this point, but please know that natural law is incredibly important. Natural law points to those things that we deem to be "self-evident." Natural law tells us not only that children should obey their parents, but also that children born as girls are actually girls, and boys born as boys are actually boys. For all of human history those observations have been self-evident. Natural law tells us that sexual reproduction is designed for males with females...not males with males or females with females. Natural law tells us all kinds of things, such as what goes up must come down. Listen: natural law is not "religious"; natural law is the basis of what the world has always known as "common sense." You should know that the Apostle Paul acknowledges natural law and refers to it as the law of God written upon the hearts of men...it is self-evident in nature...and thus no human being is without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Now, I suspect that some of our young people (or their friends) are feeling confused about their gender or sexuality. Such feelings of confusion are very real and somewhat common in the teenage years. Many variables can contribute to these kinds of intense feelings, and as Christians, we must always be ready to listen and extend care to those who are struggling. It is also true that those feeling this way might be offended by this notion of natural law because their feelings do not necessarily correspond with their natural state.

Those are hard situations, but we must remember that the feelings of confusion or even the feelings of rebellion that teenagers have about sexuality, gender, or the desire to be independent are quite *similar in nature* to the feelings of confusion and feelings of rebellion that we all experienced when we were four-year-olds. Think about it: every four-year-old strongly feels that he should be able to stay up as late as he wants; he should be able to eat all the candy that he wants; he should be able to do all the things his big brother can do; and he should be able to give orders and expect Mom and Dad to do as they are told! Due to the influence of the Fall, our feelings and desires are often directly opposed to natural law.

Now, I think we all know that if parents give in to the very strong feelings of a four-year-old, if they accommodate his feelings and desires, that kid is going to be a mess, right? Even though his feelings are quite real, natural law tells us that Mom and Dad should not yield to

⁷ An great insight from Stott, p 238.

the four-year-old's feelings; rather, it is universally agreed upon in every culture that the young boy should yield to the discipline and instruction of the parents who will lead him to get a good night's sleep, eat healthy food, take age-appropriate risks, and be polite to grown-ups. The parent's job is to develop character and teach right conduct to their son despite the boy's feelings and desires for the contrary...and the whole world knows that this is "good parenting." The same principle still applies to teenagers. Our feelings don't change what natural law reveals to be self-evident. That doesn't mean our feelings aren't real; it does mean that our feelings should not be given the authority to re-write reality as we find it in the natural world. Whenever we trump natural law with our "feelings," we have abandoned any notion of "common sense"; and we have committed ourselves to a lifetime of deconstructing reality for the sake of accommodating our temporary and often fickle feelings.⁸ My point is this simple encouragement: no matter how strong your feelings, give nature and natural law the benefit of the doubt. When we trust the way God made us and the way God made creation to work, our feelings will typically, over time, align with reality as we find it in the natural order of things. That can take some time, but so does convincing a four year old that he really does need to go to bed in order to function!

Now, in addition to the natural law, Paul quotes the revealed Law of God as the grounds for obedience of children to their parents. Paul combines Exodus 20:12 and Deut. 5:16 and writes, "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."

Paul is quoting the 5th commandment; but notice the fifth commandment uses the word "honor" as compared to "obey" as we find here in Ephesians 6. Obeying and honoring are similar but different. When Paul commands children to obey their parents in the Lord in Ephesians 6:1, he is addressing young children through the ages of 18-20. Why? Because when we are young, our obedience is the primary means of honoring our parents. However, as we get older and we become adults, we are no longer commanded to "obey our parents"; we are, however, commanded to 'honor' our fathers and our mothers. Honoring our parents as adults should be as self-evident as younger children obeying their parents, but sadly that is less and less the case in western societies. Whereas eastern cultures do a very respectable job of honoring their aging parents, many adult children in the West are content to place their elderly parents in "old folk homes" where they often live in loneliness and isolation. To be sure, there are instances when a nursing home of some kind may be the best if not the only option for our aging parents; but even then it's imperative for Christian adult children to care for, visit, and honor our parents. Whenever possible, I think it's best that Christian families bring in their aging parents and care for them with the honor that their parents deserve. I've seen many of you live very sacrificially for your aging parents, by the way, so I am not scolding you as the church. On the contrary, I suspect that within the next 25 years one of the behaviors that will set Christians apart will be the way we bring in and care for our aging parents and grandparents as opposed to our increasingly self-absorbed, youth-centric culture that tends to disdain "old people." I would simply remind all of us that, should we be lucky enough, we will all be "old people" someday!

Church, obeying our parents in our youth and honoring our aging mothers and fathers is not an optional behavior for God's people. On the contrary, failure to honor parents is regularly

⁸ I recommend Nancy Pearcey's *Love Thy Body* as a resource for anyone interested pursuing this line of thought as it applies to many of the issues that our teens (and adults) are dealing with in our current culture.

associated with anti-God, anti-Christian, even decadent behavior. In Romans 1 Paul is describing the corruption of those who turned away from God. In vss. 28-30 he writes: 28 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. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Notice that ‘disobedience to parents’ immediately proceeds the words, “foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.” If obedience to parents is self-evident in natural law and so important that it’s one of God’s Ten Commandments, it stands to reason that disobedience to our parents is both ‘unnatural’ and a sin against God. If you are familiar with the Old Testament, you might recall that God called the ancient family to bring their rebellious, disobedient son...who was often a drunkard and a brawler...out to the outskirts of the camp where he would be stoned to death (Deut. 21:18-21). Now, we have no evidence to suggest that parents actually had their disobedient children stoned to death, but God makes it clear: “the penalty of sin is death.” Such is why we are all in such dire need of the Gospel, right? Our sin is not a small matter, and that includes disobedience against our parents.

Now, God also motivates obedience and honor towards parents with a promise of prosperity and long life on the earth. We know there are exceptions to this rule, but generally God’s prediction and promise is validated in the lives of people we know who truly do obey and honor their parents, right? So many of the finest people in the world are those who deeply love, cherish, and honor their parents. My Mom and Dad modeled that kind of love and faithfulness to their parents, as did Christy’s parents. Christy and I are modeling that love and honor for our parents in front of our children, and I’m confident our children will continue to honor us as their parents and model that behavior to their own children.

On the contrary, those who blatantly disobey and dishonor their parents are predictably those who find it very difficult to flourish upon the earth. This is particularly true for adult children who cannot forgive their parents. The curse of unforgiveness towards a parent cripples and corrupts the soul of many adult children. Many of you probably saw the movie *I Can Only Imagine* that documented the story of Bart Millard, the lead singer of the band **Mercy Me (show slide of Bart Millard)**. Bart had a terribly abusive father as a child, and his unforgiveness towards his dad was literally destroying Bart’s life. It was only when Bart finally forgave his father that his soul was set free. That story has been told over and over again, and I suspect there are many here today who continue to withhold honor from your parents due to your unforgiveness. Friends, honoring our parents does not mean we approve of everything they ever said or did. But listen: if you are a Christian, honoring your parents is not optional. God gave us this commandment for our good as well as the good of our parents. We must trust God; we must forgive; and we are to honor our parents.

That leads to the third ground for obedience to our parents, and that is the Gospel itself. Note that Paul writes, “Children, be obedient *in the Lord*...” Although obedience to parents is grounded both in the natural law and the law of God, the most beautiful expression of obedience and honor in relationship to our parents is expressed in our relationship to Jesus. In other words, we obey our parents...and we honor our parents...because it pleases Jesus for us to do so. We can honor our parents as imperfect people who are saved by grace because of the Gospel. We can forgive our parents because of the Gospel. We can ask forgiveness from our parents because

Jesus reconciled us to the Father when He suffered our punishment on the cross. The Gospel should deeply inform our relationship with our Christian parents.

Now, I know there are lots of “but what about...?” situations that are coming to your minds. What about the young person who becomes a Christian when the parents are not yet Christians and/or abusive in some way? Look, Paul is describing the Christian ideal in this section of Ephesians, but there are obviously times when children need to NOT obey their parents if the parents are instructing their children to sin against the Lord. For example: if you are a Christian young person and your parent forbids you to get baptized, you would probably do well to wait until you are an adult to get baptized so as to honor your parents and not blatantly disobey them. However, if your unbelieving parents forbid you to worship Jesus and to follow Him as Lord, you would be obliged to disobey them because you are called in scripture to obey your parents *in the Lord*. The Lord trumps our parents; but remember that in most instances, we honor our Lord when we obey our parents, right? O.K., let’s look now to...

III. Radically New Direction for Fathers

Just as Paul did with husbands and masters, Paul now addresses fathers with the implications of the Gospel as they apply to the presumed “authority” within the Christian household⁹. Paul writes in vs. 4: Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Given the role of the *pater familias* in the Roman world who had absolute authority over his home and family, children in the first century might have expected Paul to write: “Children, do not provoke your fathers to anger...” So imagine the irony and the surprise when Paul writes, “Fathers, do not provoke your *children* to anger...” Church, Paul’s direction to fathers is radical and counter-cultural at a level that most of us cannot possibly appreciate. No one in the ancient world would have ever thought to give fathers direction regarding how they must restrain their authority for the flourishing of their children, and yet this is what the principle of mutual submission looks like in the Christian family. Just as the Christian husband sets aside power and authority over his wife in order to serve and sacrifice for her flourishing, so the Christian father is commanded to restrain his ‘power’ for the sake of nourishing his children. This is yet another example of loving like Jesus first loved us, right? Jesus was obedient to His Father in all circumstances...always honoring His Father. And at the same time, Jesus restrained His authority in order to sacrificially love and “bring up” His disciples.

Now, what does it mean for us fathers to restrain our authority for the sake of our children’s flourishing? It means a balanced, Holy Spirit filled approach to discipline that neither dominates and disheartens our children while at the same time resisting the opposite error of abdicating our role as leaders, teachers, and disciplinarians which predictably leads to disobedient and disrespectful children. NT scholar John Stott writes:

Parents can easily misuse their authority either by making irritating or unreasonable demands which make no allowances for the inexperience and immaturity of children, or by harshness and cruelty at one extreme or by favoritism and over-indulgence at the other, or by humiliating or suppressing them, or by those vindictive weapons of sarcasm and ridicule. These are some of the parental attitudes which provoke resentment and anger in children.

⁹ Paul’s instruction here would certainly apply to moms as well, particularly Christian moms who are the head of their household due to the absence of a husband/father in the home.

I will be the first to admit that finding and maintaining a balance of authority and restraint was a challenge for me when we began parenting. My father was a very strict disciplinarian when I was a young child, and we typically parent in the same way we were parented. Christy's parents were quite different in their approach, so you can imagine how challenging it was for Christy and me to strike a balance that we felt honored God and effectively parented our four children.

At the minimum, the Christian father must first discipline himself before he disciplines his child. Dr. Lloyd Jones writes: When you are disciplining a child, you should have first controlled yourself...What right have you to say to your child that he needs discipline when you obviously need it yourself? Self-control, the control of temper, is an essential prerequisite in the control of others.

That means that we do not dole out punishments when we are angry or when our pride has been offended. That means that we only discipline out of our love and concern for our children's flourishing, not as a means of retaliation or "showing our kids who's boss." For me, it meant working hard to use my words to encourage positive behavior rather than constantly critiquing my kids when they failed to meet my expectations. I've heard it said that it takes ten positive comments of encouragement to overcome every one negative criticism we dole out to our children. I think that is true, but we all know it's easier to critique than to affirm what we consider to be substandard behavior.

That said, the opposite of bad discipline is not NO discipline. We as parents do our kids no favors when we try to be their "buddies" and we fail to discipline. The scriptures are clear that loving, Christian parents are to discipline their children just as God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6). To parent well means that we embrace being unpopular for the sake of our children's flourishing and leverage the authority we have been given to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

The Greek word used for "bring them up" is a term that means 'nourish' or 'feed'. It was a term often associated with a nursing mother, so the picture here is one of gentleness, with an awareness of the fragile nature of children that requires tenderness and security of love.

I don't know if you have ever attempted to grow something that was tender and fragile, but it takes a lot of forethought, planning, attention and discipline to do so. I have successfully killed a wide variety of trees and plants because I just threw them in the ground and walked away. Sadly, many parents think their little ones will figure out how to live life on their own with very little guidance or attention. Dr. Lloyd Jones observes, "if parents but gave as much thought to the rearing of their children as they do to the rearing of animals and flowers, the situation would be very different."

Fathers...parents...give careful attention to how your discipline (or lack thereof) affects your children. If your children are discouraged, disheartened, and embittered, it's time to try a new approach to discipline. If your children are haughty, cocky, and unmoved by your discipline, it's time to try a new approach as well. If you have more than one child, you should know that your discipline will likely need to be adjusted for each child's unique personality and disposition. If you have had only boys but now you have a girl, absolutely assume that you will need to take a different course with the girl! As always, pray first. Your discipline is to be "in the Lord," which means we need to invoke His name and His presence into our parenting decisions.

Now, in addition to discipline, the Christian father is to gently bring up his children in the “instruction of the Lord.” Paul is charging parents to teach/instruct their children regarding the scriptures and the central truths of the Gospel. But to be good “instructors” also requires a thoughtful and often tailored approach when it comes to effectively teaching our children. John Stott comments: False education is indoctrination, in which parents and teachers impose their mind and will on a child. True education, on the other hand, is stimulation, in which parents and teachers act as a catalyst, and encourage the child to make his own responses. This they cannot do if they leave the child to flounder; they have to teach Christian values of truth and goodness, defend them, and recommend their acceptance, but at the same time abstain from any pressure, still more coercion.

I deeply resonate with what Stott just said. My children will tell you that I regularly engage them with the “reasonableness” of a biblical worldview and make my defense against opposing views in front of them! I’m not requiring them to agree with me...they are free to come to their own conclusions and they know that I will love them unconditionally even if we disagree. However, my goal is to equip them and prepare them to defend their faith should they choose to follow Jesus...which is a choice I cannot make for them. I do not want them to be Christians because their dad is a pastor. It is my intent for them to come to know Jesus personally as their Savior and Lord...to know Jesus as the chief teacher and administrator of discipline...not me. I am more concerned about them submitting to the authority of Jesus than submitting to me. But while they are in my home, I want to do my best to model the discipline and instruction of the Lord in the way that I serve as their father. We must always remember that how our children fear, respect, honor and obey us as parents is a very strong indicator of how they will fear, respect, honor and obey our Lord and Savior. Such is why it is imperative that we as Christian parents are filled with the Holy Spirit and seek to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And children, as vital members of the Church, you are to obey your mother and father *in the Lord*. That’s how a Christian family is designed to operate according to Paul in Ephesians 6.

Now, one final thought as we close.

IV. The Powerful Witness of a Christian Family

We talk a lot about “Being the Light of Christ in a hurting culture” as the very mission of this church called Colonial. When we use that language, I suspect many of us are thinking about getting out there on mission, sharing the Gospel with unbelievers, feeding the poor, housing the homeless, bringing in the orphans, and so on. All of these images are appropriate, but I want to make sure you don’t miss the first and most obvious application of this mission...and that is your Christian marriage and your Christian family.

One of the purest, incarnate expressions of the light of Christ is the Christian family. The profundity of this observation has become more and more obvious to me over the years whenever our children invited their unbelieving friends into our home. So many of their friends come from broken homes or at least very conflicted homes where there is yelling, screaming, foul language, alcoholism, and even abuse. When they come into our home, they witness a husband and wife who adore each other. They sit at our table and discover siblings who thoroughly love and enjoy each other. Perhaps for the first time they experience a family that prays together. And without exception, they experience a sincere and unconditional welcome in the name of Jesus, because that’s who are family IS...we are a Jesus family. You will not be

with us long before that becomes very clear, and we're not even trying to make it clear. It's who we are.

Your family does not need to look like my family to be a shining light for Jesus. Perhaps you have been through a painful divorce, and you are a hard-working, single mom with a few kids. You are exhausted and constantly wondering how you will make it from one day to the next...but you're here! And guess what? You are not alone! You are among the Jesus people, and we are a family that can help you and your children thrive. Your testimony to the world is powerful as you make time for worship and church activities; as you read the Bible with your children and share the light of Jesus with those you encounter every day.

Church, I can spot a Jesus family from a mile away, and I suspect many of you can as well. So can the unbelievers...and that's significant in a way that you underestimate every day. One of your most effective evangelistic tools is to invite unbelievers into your home or take your family OUT of your house and into the world! Go out to dinner and chat with the waitress. Go to a Chief's game and strike up a conversation with the people around you. Go to the local park and watch your Christian children engage with other children or even other adults, and you'll see it. You'll see the light of Christ shining out through your own children, and that is a power that Hell itself cannot resist!

I was taking my walk the other day and came upon this chalk drawing on the walking trail. (show pic 1). I don't know the children who made these drawings, but I know something about their home...they are a Jesus family (show pic 2). I couldn't help but tear up when I saw those words, "Be The Light!" Church, be the light! Be a *Christian family* in this dark world (pic 3 of family), and you will be a powerful light!

Let us pray.



Pic 1:



Pic 2:

Pic 3:

