



I remember the day so well. It was the Fall of 1980. I was a 24-year-old intern at a church. Lynn and I had been married for two years. We had plans to finish training, get a real job, a real house, and then maybe start having children. But God had a different plan for us. That fall we bought a crib and a carseat instead of new furniture. But that wasn't the biggest problem. The biggest problem for us was we felt totally ill-equipped to be parents. Simply put, we didn't know what to do. When we left the hospital, we gingerly put our daughter in the carseat in the back of our little Honda Civic, drove her home, brought her into our apartment, looked at each other and said, "What do we do now?" What's even more scary is as the months and years went by our daughter had to endure all the mistakes of our inexperience!

One of the things I remember is being desperate to find help. We prayed a lot. We read books by James Dobson. We commiserated with other couples in our situation. We found mentors. We got a lot of support from our own parents. Behind this hunger for help was a basic confession: We don't know what to do. But we discovered there **is** a lot of advice out there on what **to** do. Some of it is very good; some of it totally useless. Unfortunately, sometimes the last place we turn for help is from God's word. But God has a lot to say to both parents and children.

Children, 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 go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1–4).

This text is remarkable in its simplicity. It may seem superficial, like slapping a coat of paint over a surface with much deeper problems. But if we look closely, not only is it profoundly simple, it's simply profound. It describes not just obedient children, but also submissive parents.

Before we look at what this passage says to both children and parents, notice some assumptions Paul makes.

Paul's Assumptions

First, remember Paul is addressing a church much like ours. We often think of the church as a family, and rightly so. We're brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the same Heavenly Father. But Paul's assumption here is the church family will also include

nuclear families consisting of both children and parents. The church **is** a family, but the fact that the church is a family doesn't negate the importance of the nuclear family. The church family and the nuclear family have a relationship of interdependence. They don't replace each other; they need each other.

Second, Paul's assumption is both children and parents within the church family have a relationship with God the Father. This is very important. Some of us didn't have very good models. Some of you came from homes where there was neglect or abuse. As much as we swear we'll be different with our own kids, statistics prove many of us grow up to make the same mistakes our parents made. But, in a way, as believers we have the opportunity to be re-parented.

Think back to 1:3–5. *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will..."* We have a Father who knew us before the foundation of the world and loved us enough to adopt us as his children. Look also at 5:1–2. *"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* You see, it's only as we understand ourselves to be *"dearly loved children"* that we'll be able to love our children dearly. Paul was speaking to parents who understood the Father's love.

This is important also for children. You've surely discovered you have parents who are less than perfect. You might even have parents who are hurtful or cruel or just checked out. Donald Miller is a writer who wrote a well-known book called *Blue Like Jazz*. He also wrote a lesser-known book called *To Own a Dragon*, where he tells about his childhood, growing up without a dad. One of the main points he makes is how he struggled to find value in himself because he thought, "I wasn't important enough for my father to stick around. I got thrown away early. I must be worthless." It was only as he discovered he had a heavenly Father who chose him and loves him that he saw himself as someone worthwhile. So whether you're a child or a parent, the fact that you have a heavenly Father makes all the difference in the world.

Third, Paul's assumption is children are best raised in the context of a father and a mother who submit to one another in love and respect. Obviously, this isn't true of everyone. But, remember,

right before Paul addressed children and parents he addressed wives and husbands. He called wives and husbands to submit to one another. A wife does this by respecting her husband's leadership. A husband does this by loving his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. In a home, the marriage relationship is foundational. When children see parents who love each other fiercely and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, they'll be much more secure and able to submit to the authority God places in their own lives. Married couples should **never** put their own relationship on hold for the sake of the kids.

One final assumption Paul makes: every family is a work in progress. Every family is made up of fallen, broken people. Right here in Ephesians, as Paul has addressed the church family, he's addressed issues like unresolved anger, lying, stealing, drunkenness, immorality and a lack of forgiveness. All these things happen in families, even Christian families. And let's not forget what's coming later in chapter 6—spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who is a liar and a murderer and wants to destroy our families. Because of all that, there are no instant formulas to success. Parenting is hard, messy work, and so is growing up.

A couple of years ago we took our family on vacation to South Carolina. Our daughter and her family lived in that part of the country so we decided to go there. We'd planned this thing for two years. We had a nice place on the beach. Our granddaughter was there. But within 24 hours something happened and it was like someone lit a match and threw it in a can of gas. We had a massive family blowout on the first day of our vacation. I recall wondering what the people in the place next to us thought. All three of our kids vowed they were done forever with family vacations! It took several days just to sort through the hurt. Now that may surprise you, but it wouldn't have surprised Paul. He understood: there's a degree of brokenness in every family; we're all a work in progress.

Obedient Children

With all that in mind, let's look at what Paul says. He starts with children. I love how he specifically addresses the children in the church. This would have been unusual in his time because children had no rights at all. We might think of these children as 10-18 years of age, old enough to understand and respond to what's being taught, but still within their parent's household and in the process of growing up. In writing this letter, Paul expects them to be present and to listen. He has a word for them that doesn't come via their parents. He doesn't say, "Parents, make sure your kids obey you." He speaks to children. This is God's word spoken directly to them.

Paul's addressing children would have been remarkable for his time, but it's unusual for the opposite reason in our time: we sometimes wonder if children will be willing to let adults address them at all. It's the Bart Simpson syndrome. Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, responded to complaints from parents that

Bart Simpson is a bad role model. He said, "I now have a 7-year-old boy and a 9-year-old boy, so all I can say is, I apologize. Now I know what you guys were talking about."

But in any case, we should note these children are being taken seriously. They can know God and respond to him. Their life choices are important. Paul tells them what to do: "***Children obey your parents in the Lord.***" The word "obey" is an interesting little word in Greek. It means literally "to listen under." Obviously, listening and obeying go together. It's like the 3-year-old who was playing with her toys. Her mom, folding laundry across the room, noticed her shirt was dirty and needed changing. She called two times with no response, and then she gave her the full three-name call: "Beverly Elizabeth Provost, did you hear me?" Beverly answered, "Yes, Mama. My ears did, but my legs didn't." But the idea here isn't just to hear, but to really listen and to respond with action. And notice this is something you do towards both parents—mom and dad.

You might wonder, does this go for anything? What if my parents tell me to do something wrong? Notice Paul adds three little words: "***in the Lord.***" So you obey them as a way of obeying the Lord. It's part of being a Christ-follower, but that also means if your parents ask you to do something that's sinful or against the Bible, don't do it. Jesus said there'd be times he divided families; that includes parents and children. There was a time in my life when for me to follow Christ meant going against my parents wishes. That was hard for them and for me, but it was necessary.

So much of this is a matter of attitude. Maybe that's why in v. 2 Paul backs this up with a quote from the Ten Commandments, "***Honor your father and mother...***" This is something we do through our entire lives. When you become an adult, you're not obligated to obey your parents, but you are obligated to honor your parents. Honoring is about an attitude of respect. It goes beyond mere obedience. It's about value. We live in a society where the older you get, the more marginalized you become. This has been the biggest difference I've noticed between African culture and American culture: they honor and value older people; we tolerate, patronize or even shelve them. But do you know what I think? I think when we honor and value our parents, we're more likely to see ourselves as valuable. If you come from an honorable place, you're more likely to see yourself as an honorable person. Not only that, when we honor and value our parents, especially in their old age, our kids will be more likely to honor and value us in our old age!

You know Jesus did this, right? Remember when he was 12 and his parents lost him and searched for him for three days? They finally found him in the temple sitting with the teachers, listening and asking questions. They were upset, "We've been looking all over for you!" And he said, "Why? Didn't you know I'd be in my Father's house." It sounds like he wasn't honoring them. But the very next verse says, "***Then he went down to Nazareth with them***

and was obedient to them" (Lk 2:52). God's Son was obedient to his earthly parents. And when he was on the cross, he honored his mother by making sure she'd be taken care of by John when he was gone.

Now Paul was no dummy. He knows this isn't easy for kids. It gets harder when the older you get. When you're 16 it's hard to obey and honor your parents. Why? Well, first of all, you're old enough to know your parents aren't always right and they aren't always good. Not only that but it's safe to assume they've basically forgotten what it's like to be 16, and even if they did it wouldn't matter because what it was like for them at 16 (the dark ages) is different from what it's like for you. Paul gets this so he goes on and reasons with you, giving you two reasons to obey and honor.

First, he says you're to obey and honor your parents *"for this is right."* He's appealing to what we call "natural law." That means this is something God has written on every human heart. This isn't just what Christians believe; it's the standard thing to do in every culture. All societies see the recognition of parental authority over children as necessary for a stable society. So when a society is decaying from the inside out, this is one of the first things that happens. That's scary when you think about American culture. In 2002, only 9% of adults were able to say the children they saw in public were respectful toward adults. In 2004, more than one out of three teachers considered leaving their profession or were acquainted with another teacher who quit. The reason? Students' "intolerable behavior." In 2005, 70% of those living in America declared, "people are ruder than they were 20 or 30 years ago," some of the rudest being kids. So you do this because it's right.

The second reason he gives to obey and honor your parents is because it's best for you. He says this is the first of the Ten Commandments with a promise. Then he quotes the promise that says to do this *"so that it may go well with you and you may enjoy a long life on the earth."* This isn't a guarantee obedient children won't die young or have struggles in life, but generally speaking, obedient children will be kept from harm's way. They'll be spared bad habits and bad friends. A child who doesn't obey is a danger to himself. I love Proverbs 30:17, *"The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures."*

Submissive Parents

So that's what Paul says to children. But then he goes on and addresses fathers. You may be wondering why does he only address fathers? Well, there are few things to keep in mind. First, his assumption is fathers are leaders in their homes and that includes the arena in child rearing. What he says to fathers applies to mothers as well, but I believe Paul wanted to accentuate the leadership role fathers need to play in the home. This is a huge

problem today because we live in a society where one in three births are to unmarried women. Where are the dads?

But where there **is** a mom and dad, let me say it's absolutely critical that mom and dad be on the same page when it comes to how to raise the kids. This isn't always easy. It's not unusual for one to be more strict and the other to be more loose. And kids pick up on that and they love to manipulate one against the other. But don't let them. Work out your strategy for parenting, the standards you'll expect your kids to keep and the consequences of what will happen when they're disobedient. Don't do that in the heat of an argument with your kids. Hammer that out as a couple apart first.

But there may be another reason he addresses fathers—we're the ones most likely to fall into the trap of what he's about to warn against. What does he say? *"Fathers, do not to exasperate your children."* What does that mean? Other translations can be helpful here: The NASB says don't "provoke them to anger." The New Jerusalem Bible says don't "drive them to resentment." The Message says, do not "exasperate them by coming down hard on them." You get the idea.

It's very interesting to me that Paul focuses as much on the restraint of a father's authority than the exercise of it. Part of that was because in that day a father had complete control over his family. He could sell them as slaves, make them work in the fields in chains, take the law into his own hands and punish them even with the death penalty. All those things happened. Paul is saying is that's not how Christ-followers use authority. A father and a mother who is submitted to God won't do this. They'll exercise authority at home in way consistent with how God the Father exercises his authority.

But there are other ways a father or a mother can provoke to anger that are much more relevant to the world we live in. We can do this by excessively severe discipline. We can do this by being unfair, arbitrary or inconsistent in our discipline. We can do this by favoritism. We can do this by failing to make allowances for the fact that they're kids; by unrealistic expectations. We can do this by excessive criticism, ridicule or sarcasm. We can do this simply by neglecting them. We can do this by refusing to listen or reason with them. We can do this by failing to grant appropriate freedom as they get older. There are some parents who become more restrictive in the teenage years when in fact it's a time to give more freedom. You can even provoke a child to anger by being overly permissive.

Earlier I mentioned some of the alarming stats about the disrespect of children towards older people in our society. In that same study, many of the experts said the problem was really with the parents, and specifically the expectations they place on their kids. One of them said, "The pressure to do well is up. The demand to do good is down, way down..." Harvard University child psychologist Dan Kindlon believes most parents want considerate,

polite, well-behaved children but present-day parenting focuses more on training boys and girls to compete, in school or on the soccer field, and competition doesn't necessarily teach civility.

Now let me say here that this doesn't mean every time your child gets angry at you that you've done something wrong. There will be lots of times your kids will be angry at you and you're just being a parent. You're just doing what parents are supposed to do. Look at it this way, God the Father doesn't provoke us to anger, but there are times we get angry at him. He's just being God, and in those cases I'm just being my own sinful self!

But Paul doesn't end with a negative. He doesn't tell parents just what **not** to do, he also tells us what **to** do. He says, *"instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."* There are really two elements that describe what submissive parents do.

First, there's nurture. Those words *"bring them up"* mean to "nourish and care." In 5:29 Paul talked about how a man "feeds and cares" for his own body. This is the same word. The overall idea here is one of gentleness, tender care and affection. Men are never more real men than when they're tender with their children, whether holding a baby in their arms, reading a bedtime story to their 1st grader, or hugging their teenage son as he goes off to college. By the way, isn't this how the Father cares for us? Listen to what the psalmist wrote about our Father God:

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:8-14)*

What a tender and nurturing Father we have! But this isn't a spineless kind of love. The second thing in these words is training and instruction. These two things go together. "Training" is a strong word that means discipline, even by punishment. Hebrews 12:10 says, *"God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness."* Discipline is painful. There are times a father wisely and purposefully inflicts pain on his

son or daughter. "Instruction" has to do with our words and it has the idea of warning, rebuking or confronting our children. I was reading recently about King David at the end of his life. He was old and infirmed and 1 Kings 1:5-6 says this about one of his adult sons, *"Now Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, put himself forward and said, 'I will be king.' So he got chariots and horses ready, with fifty men to run ahead of him."* And then writer adds this: *"His father had never rebuked him by asking, 'Why do you behave as you do?'"* I wonder why David never said anything? Was he afraid to rock the boat? Had he lost his moral authority through the mess with Bathsheba? We don't know.

So these two things, training and instruction, are really two sides of the same coin; they have to do with tough love. You don't let your kids get away with anything. You warn them. You discipline them. But notice what he says, it's the training and instruction *"of the Lord."* This refers to the kind of training and instruction you give—it's Christ-centered. It's based on what the Lord wants for your kids, not what you want. We want our kids to get straight A's, be the best violin player in the school, and get a scholarship to Stanford, but is that what God wants? A submissive parents wants what God wants. They want their kids to submit not just to their authority, but to the Lord's authority in their lives.

That's what this all comes down to, right? Because sooner or later, children grow up and become parents and the real issue is whether or not they know the Father's love and have learned to submit to him. It's been 32 years since Lynn and I learned we would have our first child and we raised two more kids and now we have a little granddaughter. We laugh because she's so much like her mother that it's like our daughter is raising herself, and there's some sweet revenge in that! And you know what the great thing is? They still want to go on vacation with us!

But the time goes by fast. You won't be a child forever. And you won't be a parent of young children forever. The time will come when you say, "Where did the time go?" So, as Paul said earlier in this letter, *"...be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil"* (5:15-16). That means if you're still growing up, submit to the Lord by obeying and honoring your parents. And if you're a parent, submit to the Lord by refusing to provoke your child to anger, but nurture him in the Lord's training and instruction.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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