

THE STUDY OF EPHESIANS
LESSON 21
EPHESIANS 6:1-4
NOTES
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Ephesians 5 and 6 sums up what Scripture says about God's plan for the family. We have already studied what God designed for the wife who is called to humbly subject herself in love to her own husband. We have also studied the divine pattern for the husband who is called to loving headship in which he cares for, provides for, sacrifices for, protects, and loves his wife, as Christ also loves His church. Paul now continues to emphasize the importance of Spirit filled believers as His control is evidenced by a submissive spirit in believing children.

THE SUBMISSION OF CHILDREN

The Greek word for children-*Tekna* does not refer particularly to young children but to all offspring. Sons and daughters still under their parents roof are to obey and honor them. Obey has to do with action, and honor has to do with attitude. Although, as Paul has just mentioned, men and women are no longer under the authority of their parents once they themselves marry (5:31), special respect and concern for their parents should continue as long as they live. The child who is brought up to obey and honor his parents will always be sensitive to their wisdom, counsel, and welfare.

Paul does not use *hupotasso* which describes submission between equals (husband and wife). That word refers to an equal submitting to an equal. Paul changes the word here and uses the word that we said did not apply to wives. He changes it to *hupakouo*, which speaks of one who is not the other's equal (this same usage being applied to master/slave relationships). In God's eyes, we are all equal, but in the family a child is an inferior and is to submit to a superior, the Mother and Father.

Obey literally means "to hear under," that is, to listen with attentiveness and to respond positively to what is heard. Children are to put themselves under the words and authority of their parents. ***In the Lord*** refers to the sphere of pleasing the Lord, to obeying parents for the Lord's sake. Children obey their parents as reflective of their obedience to the Lord. The context makes it clear that ***in the Lord*** applies to honor as well as to obey. Parents are to be obeyed and honored because to do so is to obey and honor the Lord.

Parents stand in the gap, so to speak, between children and God while the children are too young to have a full and mature relationship with Him themselves. Parents are God's stewards, His proxy authority, for their children, who are simply loaned to them in trust by their own heavenly Father. That is why children are commanded, "*Be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord*" (Col. 3:20). The only exception to that obedience is

in the matter of doing what is wrong. Every believer should refuse to do anything that is clearly against God's will as taught in Scripture. He should say with Peter and John, "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:19-20).

The basic reason for children to obey and honor their parents is simply that ***it is right***. The rightness is not based on psychological case studies or other human evidence or theory, but on God's standard of right. God's declaration makes it right.

This is reminiscent of Luke's description of Jesus. As a youngster he is engaged with God's Word in his discussions with the teachers in the Temple. They were amazed at both his understanding of the Scriptures and his answers to their questions of him, (Luke 2:46-46). Jesus gently, but firmly, reminded his parents of his relationship to the Father (Luke 2:49). He "was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51). At the age of twelve he already had more understanding than his elders (Ps. 119:100); but he did not therefore despise their role or that of his parents in his life. He had more wisdom than Mary and Joseph, yet he was submissive to them.

Children are to honor both their father and mother, to hold them in the highest possible respect. When God first introduced His written law in the form of the Ten Commandments, the first law relating to human relationships was, "*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you*" (Ex. 20:12)—and that is the law Paul reiterates in this text. It is the only commandment of the ten that relates to the family, because that one principle alone, when obeyed, is enough to secure the right relationship of children to their parents. Not only that, but it is the key principle behind all right human relationships in society. A person who grows up with a sense of respect for and obedience to his parents will have the foundation for respecting the authority of other leaders and the rights of other people in general.

Honor of parents encompasses providing for them when they can no longer provide for themselves. Just as parents spend twenty or so years taking care of and providing for their children, their children are to spend whatever time and money is necessary to care and provide for their parents should the parents be no longer able to do so for themselves.

The command honor your father and mother is two-fold. ***That it may be well with you*** relates to the quality of life, and ***that you may live long on the earth*** relates to the quantity of life promised. The original promise was to Israel and involved many tangible, physical, earthly blessings. But Paul's reference to it here shows that it also extends to believers today. Though its blessings may not always be tangible, a family where children and parents live in mutual love and submission will have rich, God-given harmony and satisfaction that other families can never know. As for the promise of ***living long on the earth***, the believer who honors his parents can know that his lifetime will be the full measure God intends, rather than cut short like those of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5-10) and certain members of the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:30).

THE SUBMISSION OF PARENTS

Paul's first command to parents is negative: ***fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.*** That was a totally new concept for Paul's day, especially in such pagan strongholds as Ephesus. Most families were in shambles, and mutual love among family members was almost unheard of. A father's love for his children would have been hard even to imagine. By the Roman law of "*patria potestas*" (literally meaning "father's power") a father had virtual life and death power not only over his slaves but over his entire household. He could cast any of them out of the house, sell them as slaves, or even kill them—and be accountable to no one. A newborn child was placed at its father's feet to determine its fate. If the father picked it up, the child was allowed to stay in the home; if the father walked away, it was simply disposed of—much as aborted babies are in our own day. Discarded infants who were healthy and vigorous were collected and taken each night to the town forum, where they would be picked up and raised to be slaves or prostitutes. . A Roman baby always ran the risk of being rejected and exposed (deliberately abandoned outside). In the time of Paul that risk was even greater.

The power of the Roman father extended over the child's whole life, so long as the father lived. A Roman son never came of age. Even when he was a grown man, even if he were a magistrate of the city, even if the state had crowned him with well-deserved honors, he remained within his father's absolute power.

A letter written in 1 B.C. by a man named Hilarion to his wife, Alis:

"Heartiest greetings. Note that we are still even now in Alexandria. Do not worry if when all others return I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech you to take care of the little child, and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If—good luck to you—you have another child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it" (Papyri Oxyrhynchus 4.744).

Seneca, the well-known Roman orator once said, "*We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge the knife into the sickliest cattle. Children who are born weak and deformed we drown.*"

Though "*patēres*" (fathers) usually referred to male parents, it was sometimes used of parents in general. Paul has been speaking about both parents in the preceding three verses, and it seems likely that he still has both in mind in this term in verse 4. The same word is used in Hebrews 11:23 to refer to Moses' parents. Because a father was by far the dominant figure in the households of that day, he was the parent who would most often provoke his children to anger. But a mother is obviously capable of doing the same thing, and she is no more justified in doing it than is a father.

To ***provoke***—to anger, suggests a repeated, ongoing pattern of treatment that gradually builds up a deep-seated anger and resentment that boils over in outward hostility. It does not suggest that every time a child becomes angry with a parent, it is because the parents have been guilty of unjust provocation.

The positive command to parents is for them to bring up their children ***in the discipline and instruction of the Lord***. “*Paideia*” (**discipline**) comes from the word “*pais*” (child) and refers to the systematic training of children. It includes the idea of correction for wrongdoing, as seen in the well-known proverb, “*He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently*” (Prov. 13:24). Paul’s meaning here is expressed even more fully, however, in the proverb “*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it*” (22:6). **Discipline** has to do with the overall training of children, including punishment.

“*Nouthesia*” (**instruction**) is literally a “putting in mind” and also includes the connotation of correction. It refers to the type of instruction found in the book of Proverbs, where the primary focus is on the training and teaching of children. It does not have as much to do with factual information as with right attitudes and principles of behavior. One Greek dictionary defines the word like this: “to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct.”

The key to right ***discipline and instruction*** of children is its being ***of the Lord***. Everything parents do for their children is to be of Him—according to the teaching of His Word, by the guidance and power of His Holy Spirit, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to His own glory and honor.

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