

Ephesians 6:1-4 (1984 NIV)

The Parent-Child Relationship that Glorifies God

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—3 "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." 4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Introduction

I remember the day I reported for National Service (NS) when I was 18+. I felt excited because I was then having a difficult time with my parents, and was wanting very much to be away from them.

So that morning when I was about to leave home to report to the Central Manpower Base (CMPB) for NS, I told my parents, "No need for you both to accompany me to CMPB and see me off. Also, no need to come to my camp on weekend visiting days during these three months of basic military training. I will be OK."

I was excited to be even in military camp because I was eager to leave home and be away from my parents. This was the period when I often protested within myself, "My parents just don't understand me!"

So I happily said to myself that morning, "Now, I can be away from home; away from mum and dad for a time. I can do what I want; I can have FREEDOM!"

But it didn't take long for me to realise that this dream of freedom was just an illusion. During the three months of basic military training, I had to get used to being ordered to do this and that, and being yelled at for the slightest mistake I made every day. Even the cook in the cookhouse (only a private in rank) had his little fun of shouting at me just because I was a newly enlisted recruit.

On one visitation Sunday when family members and friends were allowed to come to camp to spend time with new NS recruits, no one came to see me ... because I had not bothered to inform my parents and others where I was.

I remember a fellow recruit noticed that I was alone in my barrack room that Sunday. So he invited me to join him at the camp canteen and meet his family folks. He then introduced me to his mother, "This is John. We are in the same platoon. No one is here to visit him today."

The lady took a compassionate look at me and said, "Here, have some ginseng soup (a health tonic drink). It is good for you. Army training is very tough." As I was drinking the soup, I felt myself choked not by the ginseng, but with a sad and lonely feeling.

It was no wonder that I was looking forward to go home after the first month of camp confinement. On that weekend when I finally knocked on the door of my home, my mother opened it and greeted me with a big smile, I heard myself shouting in my heart, “Forget about freedom! There is no place like home!”

I wonder if any of you have such a similar experience with your parents during your growing-up years—a time when you would often protest, “My parents just don’t understand me! I want my freedom! I want to get away!”

The Apostle Paul was aware of the reality of strained relationships as he wrote to the believers in Ephesus. In Eph. 5:21-6:9, Paul mentions mutual submission in different contexts, including:

- Husband-wife relationships (Eph. 5:22-33)—Paul encourages wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives, emphasising mutual submission and respect.
- Parent-child relationships (Eph. 6:1-4)—Paul instructs children to obey and honour their parents and parents not to provoke (exasperate) their children, highlighting again the importance of mutual respect and submission.
- Master-slave relationships (Eph. 6:5-9)—Paul encourages slaves to obey their masters and masters to treat their slaves with respect and fairness, emphasising yet again the need for mutual submission and kindness.

In this way, Paul emphasises the interconnectedness of believers who are all in Christ. By highlighting mutual submission in various relationships, he underscores the importance of unity, respect, and interdependence in the Body of Christ.

In Eph. 6:1-4, he addresses the parent-child relationship, and highlights two emphases to cultivate the mutual submission in this relationship. The first emphasis related to this mutual submission has to do with ...

I. Children obeying and honouring their parents (vv. 1-3).

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—3 "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

To be more specific, the children mentioned here refer to those who are still dependent on their parents both for guidance and provision in life. Thus, Paul declares at the outset that a properly functioning family is the birthplace of proper respect for authority. Young children learn early in the family that certain lines must be drawn, certain expectations must be met, and certain people must be respected and obeyed.

The word “obey” in the original Greek is an interesting one.

- It is made up of two words—“under” and “to listen”.
- Thus, “to obey” is to literally “to listen under”.

- You cannot obey if you are not willing to listen.
- In other words, “to obey” carries the intention to understand what you have listened and then do what you have listened.

Paul also makes an important qualification—i.e. children are to obey their parents “in the Lord”.

- This implies not blind obedience; not to be obedient even if it is against Scripture or the Christian conscience.
- Rather, it is to obey in those things that are consistent and in line with the Lord and His Word.

One common problem that 1st generation Christian children face as they relate with their non-Christian parents has to do with baptism.

- Many non-Christian parents have objected to their children getting baptised.
- They perceive this as an initiation rite that will cut off their world from that of their children—akin to the Buddhist rite of entering monkhood by shaving the head bald.

In such a situation, how should these 1st generation Christian children respond to the objection of their non-Christian parents? Some may insist on getting baptised; after all, Jesus has commanded us to be baptised, and Scripture exhorts us to obey God rather than men.

The late John Stott, a British Anglican priest and theologian who was noted as a leader of the worldwide evangelical movement, once said something like this in his book “Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today”.

If a non-Christian parent forbids a Christian child to be baptised, this is a matter in which the child can justly obey the parent. For although Jesus commanded baptism, he did not specify precisely when it was to be done, and it is possible to postpone baptism to a later time. On the other hand, if the parent should command the child not to worship and follow the Lord Jesus Christ in his or her heart, this the child could not obey.

Stott’s reasoning is based on several factors:

1. Family harmony—Stott emphasises the importance of maintaining family harmony and avoiding unnecessary conflict.
2. Parental authority—Stott recognises that parents have a God-given authority over their young and dependent children, and it’s essential to respect that authority.
3. Child’s spiritual development—Stott suggests that postponing baptism can actually help a child’s spiritual development by allowing him/her to grow in his/her faith and make a more informed decision about baptism when he/she is older.

I believe John Stott's view is worth noting—i.e. though we encourage even young believers, who are still dependent on their non-believing parents, to be baptised, it is sometimes better to delay it if their parents object. This is primarily not only for the sake of family harmony, but also for the spiritual growth of the children and their Christian witness before their parents.

Paul not only speaks of children obeying their parents in the Lord, but also stresses that obeying them in the Lord “is right”.

- Obedient to parents in the Lord is right because it is a reflection of one's relationship with the Lord.
- This obedience should not only flow from love, gratitude, and esteem for the parents, but more importantly, from one's reverence for the Lord.

In vv. 2-3, Paul goes on to say:

“Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

To honour here means to regard highly; to show appropriate respect and consideration.

- Even as grown-up people, we will not outgrow the call to honour our parents, even though we may no longer need to obey them in the way we did when we were still young and dependent.
- Put in another way, even as grown-up people, we are called not to forget and neglect our parents.

Now, not all are in agreement as to what is meant when Paul says that honouring parents is “the first commandment”.

- The way I understand it is not so much in terms of chronology—i.e. it is not the first commandment being mentioned.
- Rather, I understand it to mean first in the sense that it has a foremost importance because dishonouring parents may well indicate a rebellious lifestyle that can lead to vice and dissipation, and this in turn can bring harm and danger to one's life.

Now, the reality is that there are people who find it hard to obey this “first commandment”. I mean not all children (both young and grown-up) can say that they are excited about their parents because of one reason or another.

- One way to deal with this dilemma is to remind ourselves that even parents are imperfect people.
- So, instead of focussing on their weaknesses, we can choose to look at areas in our parents where we can specifically appreciate them.

I recall that my late father was a happy-go-lucky person. He could enjoy life today and face a crisis tomorrow with an easy mind. His tendency had once gotten our family into a time of financial difficulty. But one thing I admired him for was his ability to “laugh” at some very difficult circumstances in life. He truly epitomised the Chinese idiom that says (when roughly translated into English)—“Even if the heavens fall on doomsday, he would use it as a blanket for his comfort.”

Now, my late mother was very different—she was a great “worrier” because of her strong sense of responsibility. Even the slightest setback would keep her worrying for long spell. I recall that during that time when our family was in financial hardship, it was my mother who took up all kinds of work to hold things together with her resilient and responsible spirit.

Your parents are very likely not perfect too. But what are some traits and qualities in them or about them that you can specifically appreciate them for?

Indeed, Paul in Scripture exhorts us to honour our parents, imperfect they might be. And we can do so even with little gestures from time to time when they are still alive.

- Support their basic needs as and when necessary and appropriate. In Matt. 15:4-6, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees when they proudly declared that they could not help their parents because they had already devoted what they had to God.
- Give them a gift or treat them to a meal on special days.
- Make and take time to talk with them or to do things together.
- Hear their views on some major life decisions with an open mind (e.g. work, marriage).

Indeed, Paul in Scripture exhorts us to honour our parents, imperfect they might be. And we can do so even with little gestures from time to time when they are still alive. Failing this, any big show of extravagance and loud wailing will somehow look hollow and even hypocritical when they are dead and gone.

Yes, Scripture lays an obligation on children to obey and honour their parents. At the same time, Scripture also lays a responsibility on parents to train their children to accord them with rightful obedience and honour.

Thus in Eph. 6:4, Paul goes on to highlight another emphasis related to mutual submission in the parent-child relationship. It has to do with ...

II. Parents not exasperating their children (v. 4).

4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Notice that Paul specifically addresses fathers and not mothers in this verse. There are several possible reasons why Paul addresses fathers only:

1. Cultural context—in ancient Greco-Roman society, fathers were typically considered the primary authority figures in the household. Paul may be addressing the person who held the most authority and responsibility in the family.
2. Patriarchal society—the ancient world was a patriarchal society, where men held more power and influence than women. Paul may be reflecting this cultural reality by addressing fathers specifically.
3. Representative authority—fathers may be seen as representative of the parental authority, with mothers also being included under this umbrella. So, Paul's instruction to fathers likely is intended to apply to both parents.
4. Focus on paternal responsibility—Paul may be emphasising the importance of fathers taking an active role in parenting their children. Like in modern times, fathers in ancient times often had a more distant relationship with their children, leaving childcare to mothers and servants.

I believe Paul's instruction is not intended to exclude mothers or diminish their role in parenting. In other parts of the New Testament, mothers are acknowledged as equal partners in parenting and are encouraged to play an active role in their children's spiritual development (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:15, 2 Tim. 1:5). Thus, it's essential today to recognise the equal importance of both fathers and mothers in parenting, and to interpret Paul's instruction as applicable to both parents.

Paul instructs Christian parents not to exasperate their children. Such exasperation can be done in a number of ways.

1. Finding fault—asking beyond the child's capability. E.g.:
 - Load the child with so many demands that frustration begins to set in.
 - Discourage the child with careless or hurting words.
 - Force the child to be an exact copy of the father/mother—i.e. forcing the child into the parent's own mould; criticising anything that is not done as the parent would have done it.
2. Being inconsistent—sending confusing signals to the child. E.g.:
 - Allow something as OK for one child but not for the other—practise of double standard; play favourites.
 - Make a promise to the child but do not follow through—fail to take the child and his/her expectation seriously.
3. Being negligent—failing to give time and thought to the child. E.g.:
 - Stay away from the child when he/she needs the parent for support and encouragement.
 - Try to compensate for parental absence with things rather than with presence.

Illustration: At a school event, a group of boys were carrying out a conversation.

A: “My dad is in shipping and makes lots of money. We have a swimming pool in our home.”

B: “My dad is a top executive and he flies often to talk with very important people, including presidents of some countries.”

C: “My dad owns a big company and we have our own leisure boat. “

D: “My dad does not build a swimming pool in our home, he hardly flies to other countries, and he also does not buy our family a leisure boat. BUT my dad is here today!”

Parental presence is an important and visible symbol that the child is not being neglected, but enjoying the kind of care and connectedness that he/she needs so much; indeed, parental presence is often much more important and needed than any support that material things can provide.

Paul calls on parents not to harm their children by exasperating them, but to help them grow into godliness by encouraging them to do things pleasing to God—like being rightfully obedient and honouring towards their parents, and not rebelliously delinquent and humiliating towards them.

For parents to be such role models to their children, they need first to grow themselves into people of godliness—that’s their responsibility to themselves and their children. Thus, Paul hints that Christian parents are to stand as God’s representatives as they relate with their children in v. 4.

- They are to teach their children to obey God by obeying what they as parents are teaching and exemplifying before their young ones.
- As such, the most important and impactful spiritual teachers for the child’s spiritual growth are often not found in the church, but in the home ... where the parents are themselves modelling faith and faithfulness before their child.
- Young children can learn the best lessons in Sunday School, or hear the best sermons at the pulpit, BUT all that they have learnt and heard can be quickly nullified if they don’t see their parents reinforcing the values that they have learnt and heard in church.
- The way to bring up obedient yet responsible children is not for parents to command them, “Do this because I say so! Don’t argue, just do it!”
- Also, it is not good for the development of the child if the parent does anything and everything for him/her.
- Children will grow in rightful obedience and responsibility slowly but surely when parents guide them stage by stage in their growing-up—asking them relevant questions, encouraging them to look at different options, and empowering them to think and arrive at answers and solutions on their own.
- Thus, parents are cautioned here that they do not produce rightfully obedient and responsible children by giving them anything and everything they want, or doing anything and everything for them.

The police department of Houston in Texas once made a study of juvenile delinquency. At the end of the study, the department issued a leaflet containing 12 rules on “How to Raise a Juvenile Delinquent”:

1. Begin with infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will grow up to believe the world owes him a living.
2. When he picks up bad words, laugh at him. This will make him think he’s cute.
3. Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is 21 and then let him decide for himself.
4. Avoid the use of the word “wrong”. It may develop in the child a “guilt complex”. This will prepare him to believe that when he is punished later for stealing cars or assaulting women, society is “against him” and that he is being persecuted.
5. Pick up everything after him—his shoes, his books, his clothes. Do everything for him so that he will be experienced in throwing his responsibilities on others.
6. Let him read anything he wants. Have no concern whatever for what goes into his mind. Be careful that the silver and drinking glasses are sterilised, but let his mind feast on garbage.
7. Quarrel frequently in the presence of your child. Then he will not be shocked if the home is broken up later.
8. Give a child all the spending money he wants; never let him earn his own. Why should he have things as tough as you had them?
9. Satisfy his every craving for food, drink and comfort. See that every sensual desire is gratified. Denial may lead to harmful frustration.
10. Take his part against policemen, teachers, and neighbours. They are all prejudiced against your child.
11. When he gets into real trouble, apologise for yourself by saying, “I never could do anything with him.”
12. Prepare for a life of grief. You will likely have it.

(<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/12-rules-for-raising-delinquent-children>)

Conclusion

Paul in Scripture teaches us that a parent-child relationship that glorifies the Lord needs to work on the following emphases.

- Children are to obey and honour their parents in the Lord.
- Parents are not to exasperate their children by being contradictory in their faith life—i.e. not matching what they believe with how they live.

Let us all seek God to help us build, strengthen, heal, and restore our parent-child relationship so that we can be that family that truly glorifies the Lord; let us build strong families in our homes—the building blocks of a strong spiritual family in our church—

God help us. Amen!

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