

May 19, 2013

Exodus 20:12 / Colossians 3:20-21 / Ephesians 6:1-4

Mutual Submission as It Applies to Parents and Children

It's been a while since we were in Ephesians. In fact, the last time we were in Ephesians was 8 weeks ago, on March 17 -- the week before Palm Sunday.

And on that day we finished chapter 5 by considering the two primary keys Paul gives for relating in a healthy way in marriage: The need for the husband to sacrificially love his wife and the many ways that plays itself out in marriage, and the need for the wife to respect her husband and the many ways that plays itself out in the marriage relationship.

And we did it, of course, with one eye always looking back to the overarching theme of "mutual submission" that began in v. 21 and establishes the framework of everything that follows clear down to chapter 6, verse 9.

In fact, I've even included the interpretive diagram I used when we started this section to help those who may not have been here to see the flow of Paul's argument. That is, how mutual submission is played out between a husband and wife in marriage in vv. 22-33, how it plays itself out between a parent and child in the home in Chap. 6:1-4 (which we are looking at today), and how it plays itself out in the master/slave relationship (or in the workplace) in 6:5-9 -- which we'll take a look at next week.

And here, I also need to emphasize once again, that the "mutual submission" Paul speaks of in this passage is not a submission based on rank, power, or authority, but on servanthood and mutual need-meeting.

Among the pagans, the world was a world of superiors and inferiors, and the inferior always submitted to the superior, and it was never otherwise. Inferiors did what they were told to do, period.

That's why Jesus could say: ***"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. NOT SO WITH YOU. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."***

Christians, says Jesus, don't relate to each other the way the world does -- where people like to pull rank and boss people around. For the Christian way of relating (even for those of higher rank) is to serve one another. And in the case of this passage, serve others by means of a mutual submission that seeks to meet the needs of the other person.

So what I'd like to do for the rest of our time together, is look at how that works itself out in practical ways between parents and children in the home.

And in keeping with the passage, I need to begin **FIRST** with the children. And listen: By the word "children" the Bible doesn't limit it to, "young kids," or "those up to 18 or 21 years of age." For there is a sense in which children never cease being the children of their parents.

Therefore, the command to honor one's parents (as Jesus makes very clear in Mk. 7:9-13 and Matt. 15:4-6) never really ends. Even as an adult we still fall under the divine command to "honor our father and mother" so long as they are still alive (and in a sense, even after they pass away).

And we are to do it, Paul says, for our own good. So, we read: ***"Children" (which really includes all of us) "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. '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."***

Children, then, are to do two things in relation to their parents: Obey them (in the Lord) and Honor them. And then Paul lays down two of the reasons why children should: **1.)** Because it's right. (v. 1) **2.)** So that "it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." (v. 3)

That is, you do it not only for them, but for you! Obeying and honoring your parents benefits you. For this command, as points out, That what Paul means when he says this is the ***"first command with a promise."*** It's the first command that promises a blessing for obedience.

God actually motivates us to do what He commands, and do what we should, by telling us we'll be blessed if we do! And interestingly it's a fact backed up by almost every reputable psychological study that's ever been done.

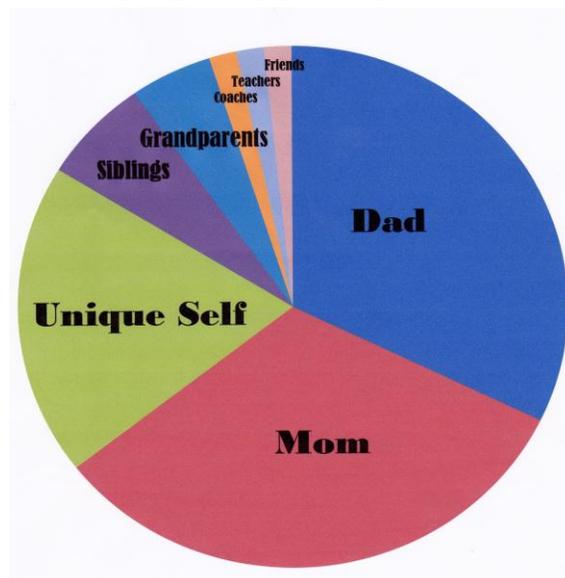


Diagram of the internal make-up of, "The Self." There is a sense in which to honor parents is to honor self, to hate parents is to hate self.

Then **SECOND**, let's look at each of the two things the Lord tells children to do in relation to their parents: Obey them in the Lord and Honor them. And although they obviously overlap (and some versions even use the words interchangeably) they do NOT have the same meaning. To "obey" comes from the Hebrew word "shama" which really means, "to hear, listen, internalize, understand, and thus respond to what is heard."

Even the English word "obey" comes from the Latin "obedio" which is derived from the two prefixes, "ob" and "audio," which together mean: "to hear, give ear to, comply with the commands of, carry out the orders of, or do what one is told." Obedience has to do with responding in compliance with what one hears.

So the first duty of children is pretty simple and straightforward: A child's role in regard to their parents is one of obedience. God would have children do what they "hear" their parents tell them to do. In fact, given the derivation of the word obey, the only excuse for a child not doing what they are told is that they didn't hear you!

That's why it's best for parents NOT to simply yell upstairs, when your child's door is closed, and assume that they "heard you" -- especially if they have ear plugs in or a radio on.

It's best to tell them directly and then wait for a response that **ASSURES YOU** that they did "hear you," since the word "obey" means, "to hear," and then, "do what one is told."

And although obedience would be included in the concept of honoring one's parents, that's **NOT** what the fifth command means.

To obey has to do with one's actions; to honor has to do with one's attitude. Therefore, to, "HONOR your father and your mother," is to go much further than mere obedience.

"[Honor] carries with it," as Brevard Childs points out, "a range of connotations far broader than the term 'obey.' To 'honor' means 'to prize highly,' 'to show respect' or 'to glorify and exalt.' Moreover, it has nuances of caring for and showing affection (Psalm 91:15)." So unlike the Hebrew word "shama" (which means "to hear and obey"), the word for "honor" ("kabad" in the Hebrew) means to "value," "esteem highly," and "treat with respect."

In fact, as Childs goes on to points out: ***"It's a term frequently used to describe the proper response to God and is akin to worship (Ps. 86:9). Moreover, the parallel command in Lev. 19:3 actually uses the term 'fear [revere] or give reverence to,' which is otherwise reserved for God." "This commandment," he says, "has been interpreted to mean that parents are the visible representatives of God for the exerting of His authority... [which] can lay claim to a certain biblical warrant."***

And LISTEN: In the O.T. this command was taken so seriously that the severest of penalties were levied against those children (usually in their teens or older) who broke this commandment. For in both Ex. 21:17 and Lev. 20:9 we read: ***"Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."*** It's essentially the same penalty as one would get for cursing God.

Likewise, Prov. 20:20 says: ***"If a man (in this case a "full grown" child) curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness."***

And **Prov. 30:17** speaks of an even more severe penalty when it says:
***"The eye that mocks a father and scorns obedience to a mother,
 will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, and eaten by
 vultures."***

You see, in Jewish society you simply didn't look at your parents with that "I hate you" or "I despise you" look in your eye! Even if you felt it inside, you didn't show it. And you especially didn't let anyone see you do it if you were in public.

As Barclay notes: ***"No one is left any doubts about the seriousness of breaking this commandment."*** Even in Greek and Roman cultures, he says, the same emphasis was laid on the need for children to honor their parents.

Both Aristotle and Plato wrote: ***"the honor paid to parents comes second only to the honor that must be paid to the gods."*** And Plato adds, ***"throughout all his life a man must above all things diligently observe reverence of speech toward his parents..."*** When you spoke of your parents in public, it was with respect or not at all.

In fact, both Greeks and Romans also said that children who honor their parents will be blessed by the gods.

In this way we can see that in both Jewish and pagan societies, among the believing and the non-believing, the Christians and non-Christians, there was nearly total agreement on this one thing: Children were to honor their parents.

They were to, "prize their parents highly," "show them much respect," care for them (especially in their old age), "show them affection," and even "praise and exalt them" (in private and in public).

THAT (according to God's Word) is the way children (even adult children) are to carry out the gospel admonition to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ when it comes to their parents.

Children are to submit to their parents by, "***obeying them in the Lord,***" and "***honoring their father and mother.***" And they are to do so remembering the whole time that the one who benefits most when you do is you!

Yet as Paul points out, parents (and in particular fathers), also have a need to submit to their children's need not to be "exasperated" or driven to despair (as Paul puts it in Colossians).

And they also have the need to "train their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (or as some versions put it, "the nurture and admonition of the Lord.") That is, dad's are to raise them in a Christian way (since there is so much in terms of information, cultural content and attitudes that are counter to Christianity).

That's the **THIRD** thing we see in this passage. As Barclay rightly points out, "***The New Testament ethic is always reciprocal. It never lays all the duty on one side. If there is a duty on one side, then there is an equal duty on the other. It is never one-sided, it is always a reciprocal obligation.***" That's true.

So, what is the father's duty as regards "mutual submission" in relation to his kids? He is to submit to his children's need not to be abused, mistreated, or harshly treated, which would lead to them being "exasperated," "embittered" or "discouraged."

And this (as many commentators point out) is most likely a reference to the "*Patria Potestas*" (the Law of the Father's Power). It was granted to all father's of Roman citizenship in the Empire.

I mentioned this when we went over marriage, but it needs to be restated here, for it was part of the reason many children raised in that culture were exasperated, embittered and discouraged.

Under this law Roman fathers had absolute unquestioned power over their children. Fathers were to their children in the home, what Caesar was to his subjects throughout the empire -- the absolute unchallenged dictator who stood above the law.

A father could imprison his son, scourge him [with a whip], put him in chains, make him work in the fields, and even put him to death [without any legal recourse against him for doing so].

That's how Herod the Great could kill two of his sons, drowning the youngest at 15 in the family swimming pool, and get away with it.

And that wasn't all. The father had the right of life or death over his children even as babies. When a child was born, it was placed at the father's feet, and if the father stooped down and picked the child up, that meant that he acknowledged the child as his own and wished to keep the child. But if he looked at it, and then turned and walked away the child was to be thrown out.

We actually see an example of this in a letter dating from 1 B.C. There a father who is visiting Alexandria, Egypt, has to stay longer than expected. So he writes to his wife who will soon give birth: ***"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."***

Deformed babies and most often girl babies were thrown into the river, brought into the wilderness and left there to die, or brought to the Roman forum where anyone who wanted could pick them up to raise them, or raise them until they were old enough to sell as slaves or sell as prostitutes.

As Barclay rightly notes: ***"These things are unthinkable nowadays, not because we are as yet a totally Christian civilization, but because Christian principles have gone so far to permeate western civilization that such things cannot be thought of... If ever it is asked what good Christianity has done to the world, we have but to point to the change in the status of women and children, and the answer is undeniable and complete."***

So, in a society that gave ***FATHERS*** the right and absolute power (along with immunity from the law) to do whatever they pleased with their sons and daughters, converts to Christianity (and especially the fathers) had to be told that "in Christ" things were to be different.

Under Roman law Christian dads would have had that same right, but Paul forbids them from exercising it the way pagan dad's did.

Why? Because as Christian fathers they were to understand that in Christ, abuse, and harsh treatment or cruel mistreatment, which would exasperate, embitter and discourage their children, was no longer permissible.

Now it is true, as I've said before, that, ***"Where the children rule, the father is a fool."*** Dad's are called to be dad's. Not always liked, and not always popular, since they are to place healthy boundaries around their children and limit certain behaviors and attitudes -- and enforce them with discipline when necessary.

Yet they are to exercise that responsibility in such a way that they guide and direct and empower their children's spirit and not crush or break it. The purpose of discipline is to teach self-discipline, not simply punish. And criticism is to be instructive and constructive, not destructive.

In fact, Paul gives us a glimpse into what he sees fatherhood to consist of when he writes in 1 Thess. 2:11-12: ***"For you know that we dealt with each of you like a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."***

In fact, that's how we raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We encourage, we comfort, and we urge them to live lives worthy of God.

We are to push our kids to be the best they can be: ***Always careful not to be too harsh, or too unrealistic, or too demanding, or so critical and discouraging and unaffirming that we break their spirit instead of equipping it with what it needs to face life with confidence and hope.***