

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (20-10-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 6:1-4
Additional reading: Mark 7:1-13

Parents and Children

Introduction

Having dealt with the respective responsibilities of husbands and wives, the next subject follows logically on – parents and children. Once again this Christian teaching was totally revolutionary in the first century when it was written. And it is very relevant today.

Paul was writing at the time of the Roman Empire, when a father had absolute power over his family. When a child was born, it was placed at the father's feet. If he stooped and lifted the baby, the father was acknowledging it and therefore it was kept in the family. If he turned and walked away, this meant the child was rejected and to be thrown out. Even if it was accepted, it might be rejected later on with the break down of stable marriage. Unwanted babies and children were often left in the forum, and collected by anyone who wished, to be brought up as slaves if they were boys or as prostitutes if they were girls. Others were left out in the fields to be devoured by wild animals, or left on rubbish dump to die. The ancient world was merciless to sickly and deformed children – they were simply drowned.

As for children who were kept, the Roman father has complete authority over them. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his own fields in chains, he could punish them as he likes, including the death penalty. Such practices went unchallenged. His authority over his child never ended, even when grown up and in high office, he was still within his father's power.

The fact that this is unthinkable nowadays is because of the influence of Christian principles and teaching such as here in Ephesians. The world owes more than it realizes to the teaching of the Gospel, especially about wives and children.

If it was revolutionary then, this Christian teaching is highly relevant now. Society breaking up, increasing lawlessness. People rightly trace it to condition of home life. So family values and home life are a common theme in political speeches and party conferences. But so often the diagnosis is superficial and the remedy is inadequate. The state of the human heart and the place of God, His Word and His claims are ignored. The modern situation is due to decline in Christian influence, leading to disrespect for women, neglect of children, and unborn infants in the hospital incinerator.

God has spoken so clearly about family and its place in his purposes in both Old and New Testaments. Not only in straightforward teaching, but also with examples of good parents and bad parents. And above all, in His Son. Caring and God-fearing Mary and Joseph, and the One who in infancy and youth, even though He was the eternal Son, was subject to them (Luke 2:51).

So Paul, through this letter, addresses children. Obviously they would have been present with their parents for public worship to praise God and hear His Word – through the exposition of the Old Testament scriptures and the apostle’s letters. Remember we need to know of these things, even if we are not parents, because they are part of Scripture, and we should want to know it and use it to help others and when we are asked to explain our faith.

Responsibility of children

Obey your parents (Ephesians 6:1). **Honour your father and mother** (Ephesians 6:2). Treat them with regard. Do as they bid you and hold them in honour and reverence. Never be rude or discourteous. Never give pain or be hurtful. Why? Not because of fear or because it pays or because other people are watching or because it’s the done thing. Three clear reasons are given.

- (i) **For this is right** (Ephesians 6:1). Parents brought children into the world, so children owe everything to them. They have experience of life. Far more wisdom and knowledge of the world than children. Therefore many other religions and civilizations insist on this obedience and see it as essential for stable society. Paul sees disobedience to parents as a mark of decadent society (Romans 1:30), and of the last days (2 Timothy 3:2). It is right also because it is essential for the harmony of the home and for the child’s good – not to get his own way all the time.
- (ii) Then God has also revealed to men that this is His will in the giving of the fifth commandment, quoted in v.2, which Paul describes as the first commandment with a promise. The promise is **that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth** (Ephesians 6:3). Under the old covenant, the severest penalty was meted out for those who cursed their parents – death itself. Also death for stubborn and rebellious son who defied his parents. Paul prefers to underline God’s commandment with a promise – which is also from the Old Testament (Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Exodus 20:12). The Nation of Israel was a theocracy, given divine blessings of safety, health, good harvest, protection from enemies. But for God’s people, the Christian church, His blessings in Christ are largely spiritual, so the promise is not so much long life to each obedient child, but stability and peace to the country where parents are honoured by their children.
- (iii) Obedience is to be done **in the Lord**. Because we belong to Christ, this pleases Him, delights His heart. He requires this. It is part of our Christian duty. The Lord, when on earth, gave loving submission to Mary and Joseph, and we show we love Him by similar obedience. This applies however old we are, and however long we have fled the nest. All ages are challenged as to how we treat parents and speak to them and respect them and care for them. Also strong rebuke to some Christians who show contempt for parents, and for the disdainful way they speak of parents who are not so quick thinking, or well-educated, or had the same chances in life.

But what if the wishes of the parent clash with Christian discipleship. Still to be obedient? Difficult and painful subject with many practical problems. Jesus envisaged He would cause division in the family, father against son, mother against daughter, that man's foes would be from his own household (Matthew 10:36; Luke 12:53). When a minor, obedience to parents should be the norm, and disobedience the rare exception. No right of parents to forbid us worshipping and following Christ in our hearts. Ought not to be obedient if parents require us to sin, e.g. lie or thief. But perhaps if they forbid baptism, that could wait till they change their minds, or when older and allowed by law more independence. We are to be as accommodating as possible – without compromise. However painful, loyalty to Christ to come first (Matthew 10:34-39). Do not seek conflict, but be peace-makers. Do not make issues of unimportant matters.

Responsibility of Parents

Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). Note the balance found in Scripture – duties and responsibilities of both sides are set forth, as in the teaching about marriage.

No parallel in Paul's world where all rights and privileges belonged to the parents, and none to the children. Here parents are taught they are not to be tyrants and bullies. We may all deplore neglect of parental duties, but must not to go too far on the other side in controlling children.

Do not provoke to wrath, as is sometimes translated, don't irritate by unreasonable demands, constant interference, empty threats, ceaseless nagging, fault-finding, endless "don't"s, dictatorial manner. Don't forget to make allowances for a child's immaturity. Do not destroy child's confidence, wound his spirit, lower his self-respect by exposing and laughing at faults and personal defects about the child which are sensitive. Do not act so that the child fears and abhors his home, and cannot get away soon enough. Do not speak roughly or violently to them. Do not have favourites. Do not mock failures, or rub it in when they are not top of the class, when they did their best. Do not be scornful of their friends or cynical of their interests. Do not use vindictive weapons of sarcasm and ridicule.

These attitudes can prevail even when parents have sacrificed and worked hard for their children, and then are surprised that children want to run away. Feeding and clothing is important, but love is the main thing. If parents want to be willingly obeyed and sincerely honoured, they will not provoke their children to wrath.

Paul recognizes how delicate a child's personality is. It may make us wonder was he, in his own childhood, brought up in a strictly religious and moral home but deprived of love? Is this instruction a flashback to his own childhood?

Rear them tenderly, *εκτρέφετε*, nurture them with the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Children need training and discipline, including punishment. They need clear instruction, education, counselling and encouragement. Not just regarding good behaviour, but "of the Lord" – specifically Christian approach and Christian understanding on everything and every aspect of life. Not just concern for their health, prosperity, work, happy relationships, but concerned for their relationship with the

Lord. So the most important aspect of their training is to lead them to a personal knowledge of Christ as Saviour and Lord. Then to help to build them up, encourage them, lead them on, help them in their relationship with the Lord. Prepare them for future life and for eternity.

This is the responsibility not of the church, and even less of the state, but of the Christian family. So we are to teach and answer their questions through His Word, but unless that is backed up by personal example we may be wasting our time. Someone [name unclear] said, "To give children good instruction and bad example is like beckoning with the head to show them the way to heaven, but taking them by the hand and leading them to hell". Children learn more through sight than by sound. Ability to learn by imitation is far stronger than ability to learn from memory. "Who sins before a child, sins double." They are quick observers to see through hypocrisy and empty talk.

How that throws us back on our own relationship with the Lord. Remember the context of this instruction is in being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Need to be controlled ourselves first to ensure we do not act out of pride or in bad temper. Need to be disciplined ourselves before we can discipline others. So we can make Christ and the Gospel attractive, because they will want to be like us.

Above all, we shall pray that God will work in the our children's hearts and bring them to Himself. Without this, our best endeavours are no use. Cannot name names too often before Him. Prayers not always answered at once, but do not lose heart. Many of us can testify to knowing people who have come to Christ late in life, though they have been prayed for since birth by faithful parents.

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (Proverbs 22:6). Rely on that as much as you rely on John 6:37 **All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.** One promise is as certain as the other. **Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again** (Ecclesiastes 11:1). These promises will encourage when disappointments multiply and things do not turn out as we expect. We may not always see the fruit of our teaching and prayer. God does not give everything at once. It may be later in life when conviction comes to life, seeds of early instruction bear fruit, and Scriptural teaching returns with power.

Conclusion

This passage, along with other passages of Scripture, are of great importance on the subject of the relationship between parent and child. Sadly in many places the whole idea of teaching, training and disciplining children is neglected. The situation today is always typical of time of irreligion, just as the best and most moral periods in the history of this and every other country are those following great awakenings, i.e. revivals. The situation of today was not present 50 years ago, when the influences of great 18th century revivals were still operating. But that has gone now, hence great moral and social problems.

The tragedy is the blindness of many who are so concerned with the situation to see the link between ungodliness and unrighteousness. Therefore their hope is in modern

psychology. But the present situation is a unique opportunity to witness to the world – by simply standing out and being different. We can all be evangelists by adhering to this admonition, being disciplined, and by demonstrating this true relationship between parents and children. This will help to make Christ and the Word of God known and central. We can be salt and light, even in our family relationships. The Christian parent, the Christian child, the Christian wife, the Christian husband, the Christian family – the best witnesses.