

Eph. 6:1 ¶ 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
SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH.⁴
Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The focus of this passage on family relationships is now with an admonition from Paul to children and a subsequent command to fathers in relation to their children.

As we seek to understand the intent of this passage we will follow the same guidelines that we have used for the rest of the passage in the letter concerning family relationships. We are not doing a thematic study we are trying to understand what this letter meant to the Ephesians in the context of the letter and how it may apply to us. We want to remember that Paul is writing this letter to the church at Ephesus, a church that was nurtured in the “whole counsel of God” by Paul over a period of three years. It was a body of believers that loved the apostle and wept when he departed from Ephesus. We know that the letter was written to a church that existed in the midst of a pagan culture that had many pagan gods and goddesses.

We determined in our earlier studies that the reasons why Paul gave such specific instructions concerning familial relationships was not because wives were not submissive to their husband or because husbands did not necessarily love their wives. These traits existed in the pagan culture, naturally, although there were reasons in the Greco-Roman culture for marital, parental and master slave relationships to exist with certain characteristics that were simply part of the socio-religious and socio-political traditions. However, Paul had very specific ideas that he wanted to present to the church in Ephesus concerning the structure of the family in a Christian context to a sub-culture and a counter culture to the predominant culture.

This was made evident because the husband-wife relationship is meant to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. This relationship that pictures Christ and His church in the human relationship can only be ultimately, no matter how often imperfectly, revealed in the context of marriage between Christians.

This brings us to the part of the letter where Paul addresses the “children” and how they should relate to the parents.

The first thing we must understand is who are the children that Paul is addressing, so I will propose four questions concerning these verses.

Were children atypically disobedient and dishonoring their parents in Ephesus? Did they do more disobeying than others?

Is this a universal statement to all children, regardless of age, that were assembled with the believers in Ephesus?

Is this being addressed to believing children?

There is nothing in the letter to tell us that children in the church at Ephesus were any more naturally disobedient or dishonoring of their parents than any other children, in or out of the church.

It is in the natural order of family life from culture to culture for children to obey their parents and children are not little innocents when it comes to sin. All disobedience to that which is right, by God’s standards is sin.

All children obey and disobey their parents openly or in secret.

Paul is saying that it is right, it is correct for children to obey their parents. Even the pagans in Ephesus would agree with Paul.

So, his statement cannot be a universal truth being declared as a reminder to the Ephesian children specifically.

What age are children in the context of what Paul is saying?

It cannot be determined. Children, as used here has no context of age or status, meaning still in the home of the parent or out of the home.

It cannot be relegated to “little children” only.

Nor does it have a sexual limitation. The same word is used for son or sons in other passages, but here it is generic, children, teknon.

So it would seem that Paul is speaking to anyone who meets the qualification of being a child is one who should obey their parents because it is the correct thing to do.

Again neither the Ephesian Christians nor pagans would argue with Paul about this.

Yet, a more specific qualifier is included in the verse and that is “in the Lord”.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”

What does Paul mean when he writes in the Lord?

Does he mean obey regarding the things of the Lord, the teaching of Christ and or the scripture as they had access to it?

It cannot mean that, because it would mean that unless the obedience was in direct response to the parents quoting Scripture or presenting a principle of truth from Scripture, directly or indirectly there would be nothing else that would be required for obedience.

“Alexander, lace up your sandal!”

“Why?”

Because I said so.

But Mother, the lace got wet and it is to tight right now.”

“Alexander, lace up your sandal!”

“But mother.”

“No buts Alexander, do as you are told. Remember what Paul taught you in his letter that was read to us last week in our assembly.”

“But mother, he is not in my sandals.”

To only obey in the things of the Lord would be a very limiting obedience.

So, what does it mean to obey in the Lord.

I believe two English translations, Goodspeed and Twentieth Century New Testament make it clear.

“Children, obey your parents as children of the Lord” and “Children, as Christians, obey your parents.”

Without these translations, a proper treatment of the text draws the same conclusion.

Paul is speaking to children, regardless of age, who are Christians.

This letter is written to a church of believers with instructions for believers.

The doctrines of the earlier part of the letter are to encourage the believers of the Sovereign grace of God. The practical teaching on the body of Christ and leadership is to enrich the church in how it should practice the body life of the church, something which is different than the culture around them.

In Eph 5:18-21 Paul writes, And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; 21 and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

This list concludes the responses that should characterize the Spirit filled living of those in Christ. Christian children and later, slaves who heed this apostolic exhortation to obey and wives who voluntarily submit in vs. 22, show that they are receptive to the Spirit's work of transforming them into the likeness of God and of Christ. They demonstrate that understand the Lord's will 5:17 " So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." And they provide solid examples of a godly lifestyle Eph 5:15 "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise."

Previously he had taught many things to them about the Christian nature and character that is to be lived out daily.

In 5:21 mutual submission, in God's ordained order in the home, brings the bridge between generalizations for all to follow and specifics as to how to live in the Christian home.

All of these things apply to believers. Unbelievers cannot obey Christ or the things of the Lord.

The children here in 6:1 are believers who would understand the rightness of obeying their parents. They are responsible members of the assembly.

This rightness is what is proper in Eph.5:3, fitting in Eph. 5:4 or characterized by righteousness in Eph. 5:9 and the exhortation not to exasperate has a relation to Eph. 4:26-27,31 regarding not being angry.

Bringing up children in the training and admonition of the Lord relates to Eph. 4:20-21 where Paul teaches about learning the traditions of Christian teaching.

For Christian children it is correct godly behavior to obey their parents because it is also submission to Christ. In the Lord is equal to as to the Lord or as to Christ in 5:22, 6:5 and indicates that their obedience is part of their discipleship.

Then Paul provides motivations for this obedience.

The first motivation is because it is right as we have discussed.

Paul then brings an application of obedience by means of honoring parents and connecting the rightness to a quote from the Mosaic Law and includes a seemingly specific, not a general promise to those who do honor their parents.

"HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH."

Paul quotes from the Old Testament Ex. 20:12, but he changes part of the quote.

In Exodus the passage reads, Ex 20:12 "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you (or "is giving you").

Why would Paul quote from the Mosaic Law to a group that was primarily, gentiles before their conversion? They had no context for understanding the Mosaic Law. It was not their Law. It was not taught to them nor was it understood by them, unless some had been converts to Judaism.

And why did Paul change the quote?

First of all, we have already acknowledged in our study that Paul taught them the whole counsel of God the three years he was with them. He would have contextualized all that he knew and interpreted it for them in light of Christ with a Christian application not a Jewish one. This part of the Law of Moses was carried over to the New Covenant and made part of the Law of Christ, where for example the Sabbath and tithing were not. We can say this because it is in the record of the New Testament written by an Apostle expressly for the purpose of teaching that to be applied to the Christian life.

Paul was saying that God had a people in the Old Testament under the Old Covenant. There were certain things that set them apart from the rest of the world. Honoring parents was a way of obeying God. Honoring them after leaving home by caring for them in old age and maintaining a respectful attitude for them was God's purpose for His people. In the New Covenant this represents submission to Christ.

This is part of the higher standard of Christian ethics and morality, not just cultural or socio-political correctness in Greco-Roman society.

But, notice the change in the quote.

The promise is different. It is not about the land specifically, it is universalized, it is about a prolonged life.

The New Covenant believer has no physical land promise anywhere in Scripture except for dwelling in the New Heaven on the New Earth.

The promise of a prolonged life or a good life is in the temporal sense, not the eternal.

The Old Covenant believer was given a specific land to dwell in and obedience to the Mosaic Law and all of its parts were specifically correlated to particular blessings in the land. Disobedience brought about specific curses.

So, if honoring parents, regardless of ones age as a child was acceptable to the pagan culture that dominated them, how much more so did God require His New Covenant people, Jew and Gentile, to honor their parents and attach a promise, that when it was being fulfilled, could have been witnessed by the pagans around them unto the glory of God.

Then Paul addresses the fathers.

Eph. 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

In the culture of the day, fathers , generally speaking, had ultimate and unlimited power over their children. In Hellenistic Judaism, severe punishments could be meted out to disobedient children.

Paul already instructed them about anger in 4:26-27,31.

Anger can be a tool of Satan that can disrupt community and family relationships. Fathers are urged to avoid these attitudes, words, actions that would provoke their children to anger or exasperate (to stand beside one's self) them .

So in contrast to a harsher culture, Paul is effectively ruling out excessively harsh and severe discipline, abuse of authority, unfairness or anything that would cause a child to be consistently humiliated at the whim of an uncontrolled authoritarian.

Rather, the children, those who know Christ and those who do not, are to be taught in the things of Christ. They are to be admonished in how God looks at things and how we look at things and what are the consequences of godly and ungodly living. Eph. 2 is a perfect example.

Ultimately, the parents concern is not whether or not the child obeys their authority but rather, whether or not the child through godly training and admonition will come to obey

the Lord. So, in contrast to the contemporary culture, Paul wants Christian fathers to be gentle, patient educators of their children whose chief weapon is Christian instruction focused on loyalty to Christ as Lord.

There is no true distinction made between this mutual submission and obedience to Christ for adults, or for children. There is no exclusive behavior that separates adult and children in Christ.

Christian children are to show the same fruit of the Holy Spirit as any other believer, at the level of maturity that is suitable. Just like any new believer in Christ, we are all babes in Christ at the beginning of our conversion experience. Adults, as children of the Lord need to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ and so do physical children who know Christ.