

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Regarding Kids, Parents, Work

(Ephesians 6:1-9)

Study #11

Introduction: It's all about the relationships...

It would be odd to hear someone say about a friend, *"She's a fine Christ-follower, but she's not very loving."* Or *"He's a strong Christian, but he's lousy with people."*

When you believed in Jesus, you were saved eternally.

Then, when, as a saved person, you began to follow Jesus into discipleship, you began to be saved (i.e. - delivered) from a life of self-centeredness and isolation into a world of relational wholeness.

Jesus was the most loving Person who has ever lived. He was capable of tender love toward the weak, sacrificial love toward the needy, and bold love toward the rebellious.

And He leads those who follow Him into a life of love.

He will lead you into a life of love for your friends and even for those who oppose you. He will sometimes prompt you to relationally connect with people you barely know, and He will definitely lead you to deeply love those you see all the time.

So, in the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, we're not surprised that we get great instruction about how to love.

Paul tells us how we are to love each other in the church. (5:15-21) Then, last Sunday, we listened to what he had to say about growing love between husbands and wives. (5:22-33)

Today, he takes on two other key life relationships.

First, he addresses the parent/child relationship; second, people in power and those who work for them. In both of these relationships, Paul shows us the path to health by love.

First, the relationship between the parent and the child. It is one of the most - if not THE most - formative relationship in life.

Parents need to know how to lovingly pass the torch of faith, maturity, wisdom on to the next generation. Kids need to know how to best relate to and love their parents.¹

These are Paul's themes, and he doesn't tell grown-ups how to tell kids how to act. No, he speaks directly to kids.

Parenting. 101 (Ephesians 6:1-4)

Kids - Listen Carefully (6:1-3)

The ins and outs of obedience (v. 1)

[1] Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Paul's direct audience

This is Paul speaking to preschoolers, elementary school-aged kids, and to teens, all of whom know the difference between obeying and disobeying.

He's probably writing to anyone who is living in his or her parents' home or is in a dependent relationship with mom and/or dad.

¹ Not all of us are in the active parenting season of life, either because we haven't gotten there yet or because that season is past. But all of us can use the wisdom of Scripture on this topic, because all of us love children and want to know as much as we can about how to nurture kids in a God-honoring life.

So, with every child and parent and caregiver of a child paying rapt attention, what does Paul mean by what he says here?

Paul's precise meaning

For the most part, we all understand obedience.

In the Army or in the Air Force, a captain obeys a major, and a major obeys a colonel. "Obey" means to carry out orders.

Paul adds here that children are to obey their parents "***in the Lord***", which is to say, "*Obey your parents, because that is what Jesus wants you to do.*"

Children who are old enough to understand obeying and disobeying are soon able to appreciate that obeying mom or dad is a great way to say "Yes" to God.

Most of the time...

And here's where we'll do well to differentiate between *submission* and *obedience*.

The instruction of Ephesians 5:21 to all of us in the church to be mutually submissive to each other is *absolute*. There is never a time when we are not to use our resources to bless each other here.

The same holds true for the instruction to the wife in Ephesians 5:22. There is never a time when a wife is not to use her strengths and resources to help, to bless, her husband.

But the command to children to obey their parents is not an *absolute* command. We are all *absolutely* commanded to obey God, but if any human authority figure tells us to do something that goes against God's command, we must obey God.²

So, if a parent tells their child to do something illegal or immoral - lie to a friend, cheat on a test at school, rob a bank - the child is not obligated to obey.

Most of the time, though, when a parent tells their child to do something, they are not telling them to commit a crime or to sin.

They want their child to carry out a responsibility around the house. They're providing a guideline for life outside the home.

Children are to obey their parents in these things. And here's the rub.

Some of what parents tell a child to do isn't fun. At times, it is inconvenient. The Bible says, though, that parents can tell children what to do and that kids are obliged to do what they say.

They are allowed to do this because, besides having brought the child into the world (!), they provide for the child's material needs.

The child owes the roof over his head, the food on his plate, and the clothes on his back to his parents. Obedience is a reasonable way to say, "*Thanks for taking care of me.*"

And this obedience trains a child in an even greater obedience.

As a child grows in faith, Jesus will often call him or her to inconvenient obediences. If a child learns early on that obedience means saying, "Yes", even to hard commands, he or she will be better equipped to follow Jesus into a hard obedience later.

Paul's not quite finished with his remarks to kids. In fact, what he says next is harder.

Honoring parents (v. 2)

[2] HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise)

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Think of an honorable person. Maybe you're thinking of a sports figure, or someone in academia, entertainment, or politics. You admire this person.

² See Acts 4:13-22.

How would you treat that person if he or she came into your home? That's how kids are supposed to treat their parents.

Parents are not perfect people, but they are honorable. They love their kids.

They'd make sure their kids had food to eat if it meant starving themselves. They'd throw themselves in front of a bus to protect their kid. All of this makes them deserving of honor and respect.³

There is a further meaning to this command, though, especially as it is applied to adult children whose parents are getting along in years.

Meet needs (see Matthew 15)

The command to "**honor**" your parents means that you should bless your parents with your financial resources if they need them.

In Jesus' day, wealthy people would sometimes give large amounts of money to support the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, mainly to gain a reputation for generosity, while leaving their elderly parents to live in poverty.

Jesus said that by doing this, they were violating the 5th of the Ten Commandment to "**honor**" parents.⁴ (See Mark 7:11-12)

The Bible is clear that a prime responsibility of grown children is to care for elderly parents, or to ensure that they are cared for.

That means that if you need to provide for your elderly parents *and* want to support the work of the local church, *but* can't do both, support your parents. That honors them and obeys God.

And, when children honor their parents, certain benefits follow.

The blessing obedience and honor bring you (v. 3)

[3]...SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH."

No, that doesn't mean that obedience to parents leads to a problem-free life or that disobedience is a capital offense. It is a general statement of blessing. And, yes, it is undeniably true that you will avoid some very avoidable problems if you obey and respect your parents.

- Kids will avoid the dangers of the street if they obey their parents' warning to look both ways before crossing.
- Children of all ages will avoid the problem of getting into fights with their parents if they obey and honor them.

Children learn life's lessons in one of two ways: the **smart** way (on the back of someone's else's experience) or the **hard** way (our own experience). God provided parents so that children will learn at least some of life's lessons the smart way.

"Life in the family" involves parent/child relationships. If those relationships are going to work, lovingly, children must obey and honor their parents.

And now, Paul addresses the other half of the parent / child relationship.

You'll notice that while he devoted three verses to children, Paul has one verse for parents and that the verse speaks only to dads.

It's OK that three is only one verse. It's a powerful verse, so this one is enough.

As far as the focus on fathers goes, that might be due to first-century cultural, patriarchal realities. To the extent that this is the case, I'll expand application beyond fathers to mothers.

It just might be, though, that there is something about a dad's role in the home that makes it uniquely important for Paul to put his focus there.

³ Capital punishment was allowed when children treated their parents without respect in Old Testament times. (Exodus 21:15,17) No, I'm not suggesting that we bring that policy back. But we should understand how serious God is about the whole matter of children treating parents with respect.

⁴ See Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5.

Dads - Listen Just as Carefully (6:4)

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

Fathers, then and now

Today, it's popular to paint fathers as buffoons, as weaklings, or as abusive.

I think that's really sad, because while there are some terrible fathers out there, most aren't. Most dads are attentive, loving, and caring. And dads are vital to the welfare of a family.

A father's good gifts

Of course, mothers are vital, too. (Duh) But Paul had good reason to highlight fathers here. It has to do with both the reality of male headship in a home and with the impact that the presence (or absence) of a man in a home makes.

So, yes, I think that by addressing fathers, Paul is saying that there is something unique about a father's contribution to a family.

In the family of the ancient world - especially in the Greek and Roman world - fathers had nearly absolute authority. What they said was law. They could legally treat their kids most any way they wished.

Today, in America, fathers are not protected by law to do anything they want to do at home - and that is a good thing.

But it is no less true today than it was two thousand years ago that fathers bring a powerful presence into a home.

Fathers, there is something about you, as a man, that makes impact. You can't help it. You make a difference. And to be a man in a home, with children, is to make a BIG difference.⁵

⁵ It has been said - and I believe it - that the next generation is always dependent for its health on the strength and character of its fathers.

You distribute gifts as you walk through your home and as you interact with your kids. Those gifts will stay with them for life.

Some of them are very good gifts. You give the gifts of attention, care, tender strength, affirming words, confidence,

But there is one gift you don't want to give your kids. It's the gift of exasperation.

The "gift" of exasperation

My version says, "**do not provoke your children to anger**", but other translations differ. Several versions have, "**Do not exasperate.**"⁶

A not so careful reading might yield The American Dad's Version: "*Thou shalt not get exasperated with thy children!*" While important and true, that's not what Paul says.

He is telling fathers to not exasperate their children. Dads are to be especially careful to NOT do that.

A father might exasperate his child via public shaming him or bullying. He might give the exasperating message - overtly or subtly - "*You'll never measure up. You don't have what it takes to succeed in life.*"

Exasperation grows in the heart of a child who believes he or she can never measure up to Dad's standards. And fathers are to do what they can to not exasperate their kids.

****A word to dads...*

And now I'm going to say something that might sound a little bit nutty. This is not a "*Thus saith the Lord*" thing.

I'm going to give my opinion on something, based on having raised kids, being a dad and a granddad, and having watched hundreds of families over the years.

⁶ See Colossians 3:21 where Paul says essentially the same thing, even though he uses a different Greek word. There, he warns that a child who is exasperated / provoked may eventually become discouraged and "**lose heart.**"

Sometimes, try as you might, you will exasperate your kids.

To tell a man to not provoke his children to anger is to warn him against certain bad ways of relating. To say that its dad's fault every time a child gets exasperated is just wrong.⁷

Kids may get exasperated by what their father tells them to do, or with the way their father deals with them, but that doesn't *necessarily* mean that the father is in the wrong.

Fathers are to make sure that nothing they do is calculated to exasperate AND that their interaction with their kids doesn't generally end in exasperation.

But, there will be times, when a father is sincerely trying to give direction to his child (of whatever age), that the father will sense the onset of exasperation in his child. What should he do then?

Should he back off? Ease up? Change directions so that he doesn't risk inciting his children's anger or exasperation?

Not necessarily...

I think a father needs to be careful to give the message to his children, *"I love you so much that I would throw myself in front of a bus to protect you. And, no, you can't have your own way."*

That message just might exasperate a child and the day in which we live calls for bold fathering and mothering.

One of the bigger mistakes a parent might make would be to be so afraid of a child's response that he or she avoids making the tough call.

Kids need a dad and a mom who will love them with passion and who will lead, even if they don't always want to be led. There are risks associated with bold, loving parenting. The risks are worth it.

⁷ Elders in a church are called to be "above reproach." Does that mean that no one might ever accuse an elder of something? No, there might be a false accusation. Jesus was certainly above reproach, but He was still reproached.

So, dads and moms, like the Bible says, do all you can to not exasperate your kids. You'll mark your children's souls with the indelible ink of love as you nurture and pursue and engage with them.

And when you do all of that and when your children bless you with respect and obedience, great blessing will *generally* follow.

I say *generally* because obeying the commands of Ephesians 6 doesn't come with a "money-back guarantee."

Good parenting does not guarantee a certain outcome in children, nor does respectfulness, honoring, and obedience guarantee that parents will not be "exasperators."

There is one guarantee, though.

When either children or parents, out of love for the Lord, follow Scripture's path for them, God smiles. And the pleasure of Heaven is a guarantee that makes any obedience more than worth it.

Another massively important aspect of life involves our work life and Paul now shifts from kids and parents to masters and slaves.

Like most preachers you will hear who speak from this passage, I will also say that the closest parallel in American society to what Paul addresses here is the employer / employee relationship.

Of course, there isn't a perfect parallel between the two.

- In employment, the relationship of the worker to the who is over the worker is voluntary; in the other, slavery, it is involuntary.
- With employment, the employee has the right to stop working. That is not the case with slavery.
- An employee maintains his or her personal autonomy. The slave is considered property.

Our country has a tragic history with respect to slavery, one that is extra ugly due to the racial component. But all slavery involves the subordination of one person to another and the "ownership" (as if that was even possible!) of one person by another.

At the same time, there are similarities. Both arrangements - employment and slavery - form hierarchies and both involve people in relationships of authority and obedience.

The similarities set us up for a *how much more* approach to application today.

If Paul can urge respectful attitudes of slaves toward masters, *how much more* can the same be urged, today, of employees toward employers. And if he can urge masters to kindness, *how much more* can employers and bosses in 2019 be expected to do the same.

And before launching into the text, I wondered if maybe a couple of words about the Bible and slavery are in order.

- **First**, and perhaps to our surprise, Paul doesn't write against slavery, *per se*, just as Jesus didn't speak against the Roman Empire's many evils. This silence about societal ills does not mean that God (or the Bible) is "pro-slavery." It speaks more to the place of Christians in a fallen world. You and I are called to live as lights in a dark world that includes much injustice. And, we are to promote justice as we have opportunity to do that, as believers have done through the ages.
- **Second**, it's important to point out that slavery in ancient times was different from the racially based slavery of America. Most ancient peoples were enslaved due to poverty or military conquest. By laying out loving, respectful, just guidelines for the slave/master relationship, Paul is here laying the seed for slavery's demise.
- **Third**, remember that this is not Paul's instruction to the society, at large. This is given to believers who have found themselves, post-conversion, in the role of slave or slave-owner.

We listen, now, as Paul speaks to a situation in which the two most disparate classes of society in the first century world - slaves and masters - not only worked together. They went to church together.

First, let's look at the players, beginning with the slaves.

It's Off to Work We Go (Ephesians 6:5-9)

The Players

Slaves

Slaves were the ultimate "*have-nots*" of the ancient world. It's the same in the modern world, too, where, tragically, slavery still exists. Slaves have countless reasons to harbor resentment, especially when their masters are cruel and unjust.

In the first and twenty-first centuries, slaves are considered possessions. Slaves can neither choose what work they are going to do, nor where, how, or when they are going to do it. They were and are forced to do what their master tells them to do.

Masters

At the other end of the spectrum, were the slave owners. They were the "*haves*." They pretty much had the legal freedom to treat their slaves however they wished. Some treated slaves well, others didn't.

Since the slave's life was in the hands of the master, fear was an integral aspect of the relationship between the two, and most Roman masters didn't hesitate to play the fear card.

So, there in the same church at Ephesus, singing songs together, listening to the Word preached, you had slaves and masters. There was not a "slave service" and a "master's service." There was church.

And, as odd as this may sound, this is actually one of the great glories of the church of Jesus.

Here in the church all the elements of humanity come together.

We welcome differences in ethnicity, age and gender, political affiliation, wealth and poverty. In the first century church at Ephesus, that included the presence of both slaves and slave-owners.

We'll listen, first, to what Paul has to say to slaves (for our purposes, employees) about how they are to "be" with their masters.

The Roles the Players Play

Slaves (vv. 5-6)

[6:5] Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; [6] not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

Slaves were to sincerely obey their masters. The slave's obedience to his master was considered part of obedience to God, just as all believers are to view themselves as slaves to God.

So, the Bible celebrates the equality of all people under God - and then affirms the hierarchical relationship implicit in slavery. That might not be quite what we expected.

Today, hierarchical relationships remain.

At USAA and at Tink-a-Taco, there are bosses to whom people report, and there are people to whom the bosses report.

Hierarchy remains in city, state, and national government, in the education system, and, obviously, in the military.⁸

In the first century, slaves were to obey their masters.

By extension, those in subordinate roles in the workforce and in the military and in government owe their superiors obedience in the 21st century.

That is good and right. Assuming that the orders are legal and moral, carrying out orders from those who are in authority over us is what God wants us to do.

And what about those on the other end? What about masters?

Masters (v. 9)

[9] And, masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening⁹

The relationship between master and slave changed when the master "got" that he was first a Christian, and secondly a master.

Likewise, in 2019, the relationship between a boss and those under him or her changes when the boss remembers that he / she is a Christian first, and a boss, second.

No more threatening. No more verbal cruelty. No more unreasonable demands.

The reasonableness of the instructions to both parties becomes crystal clear when we pay attention to the God-centeredness of the whole discussion. Listen -

Everybody's Boss (vv. 5-9)

[6:5] Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, AS TO CHRIST; [6] not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but AS SLAVES OF CHRIST, DOING THE WILL OF GOD FROM THE HEART. [7] With good will render service, AS TO THE LORD, and not to men, [8] knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this HE WILL RECEIVE BACK FROM THE LORD, whether slave or free. [9] And, masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, KNOWING THAT BOTH THEIR MASTER AND YOURS IS IN HEAVEN, AND THERE IS NO PARTIALITY WITH HIM."

The ultimate Boss of the slave / employee

The key to being a God-honoring employee is to ultimately work, not for your human boss, but for Jesus.

⁸ One grade of officer is over another grade. There are ways in which officers are to relate and NOT relate to enlisted personnel.

⁹ It's great to hold employees accountable to clearly understood principles and expectations. But if slave owners in the first century were to put aside intimidation and fear, the same holds for bosses today.

For the first century slave, that would have made a tough assignment possible. Same for every employee today, too.

The ultimate Boss of the master / employer

And the key to being a God-honoring boss is to remember that he or she also has a Boss. The Boss is their boss.

Because of their different roles in the workplace, the employer and the employee learn different faith lessons.

The employee learns the valuable lesson of obedience. No one goes very far in the spiritual life without learning obedience to God.

And, by remembering that he has a Boss in heaven, a Boss who laid down His life for him, the earthly boss learns to lead as Jesus leads, to sacrifice for the employees, and to not “lord it over” others.

We’ll conclude by noticing the final thought of our passage.

The ultimate Boss’ policy - reward without partiality

Paul says that “**there is no partiality**” with God.¹⁰

A San Antonio police officer might be tempted to not give a traffic citation to a mayor or a councilperson - or even to a friend.

God isn’t like that. When it comes time to reward or hold back reward, He is not swayed by someone’s high or low position in life or by social status.

And He does know how to reward those who are faithful employers and employees.¹¹

Sometimes employers do not reward good work and goodwill from their employees. Sometimes, employees do not appreciate respectful leadership from their employers.

Tomorrow when you go to work, in whatever capacity you will be working, remember that your Lord is pleased with your work. And He will reward you as you labor “**as to**” Him.

¹⁰ The Greek word “partiality” is literally “to receive a face.” The temptation would be to show partiality to a familiar face or to a famous face.

¹¹ Paul is likely referring to the judgment seat of Christ. 2 Cor. 5.