

“Submissive Relationships”
Ephesians 6:1-9
May 31, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Beginning at the end of chapter 5, Paul addresses three fundamental relationships within Christian households: the husband-wife relationship, that of parents and children and then slaves and masters. The verse that summarizes all three of these relationships is verse 20 of chapter 5. Christians who are filled with the Holy Spirit will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, and this submission will fundamentally alter their most important relationships.

To say this differently, the gospel changes our view of power, and it is the misuse of power that most often causes problems in our relationships. When I seek to retaliate against my wife by giving her the silent treatment, I am engaged in a power play that will bring harm to my marriage. When I want to make my children be what I want them to be to meet my needs instead of recognizing who God has made them to be, I am engaged in a power play that will bring harm to my children. So Paul tells wives, children and slaves not to seek power, but to submit to the place in which God has put them. And those who have been given power are not to use it as they please, but to do so for the benefit of those who are called to submit to them. Paul is working out here the implications of the gospel in these everyday relationships. Let's look further at what he says to each group.

I. The Submission of Children

Paul reminds children of the fifth commandment to honor their parents and tells them to do so by obeying the parents God has given to them. This is the only message addressed directly to children in the Bible. The first thing children need to learn is to obey their parents. All children are born with the kind of rebellious nature that wants its own way. If this nature is not tamed, it will bear bitter fruit. Imagine a three-year old throwing a temper tantrum. Though we've probably all witnessed this, no one enjoys seeing such a display of self-will. I read last week of a family who was invited to meet President Obama at the White House. While they were with the President, their three-year old threw a temper tantrum, screaming and wailing on the floor right at the feet of the President. As unwelcome as such a display is for a three-year old, it is far more serious for an adult. It indicates a self-centeredness that is unwilling to submit to authority. Such an assertion of self-will destroys all good relationships and leads ultimately to hell.

The Bible takes seriously this matter of refusing to submit to authority. In the Old Testament, Moses directed that rebellious children who refused to obey their parents should be brought by the parents to the elders, and the men of the city were directed to stone the rebellious child to death (Deut. 21:18-21). Though in the New Testament the death penalty is removed for such rebellion, it is not removed because this is no longer a serious matter. As a matter of fact, disobedience to parents occurs in two lists of sins that bring the judgment of God, one in Romans 1:30 and the other in 2 Timothy 3:2.

So God begins to bring his grace into our lives through giving us the easiest situation for learning to submit ourselves to another authority. He places us in families with parents who love us and care for us and asks us to submit to these authorities he has placed over us. They will not be perfect, but still we are to submit to them. God's design is that children learn to fear authority and rest in the love of that authority at the same time, because that is to be our attitude toward God. We are to fear him at the same time that we rest in and delight in his love for us.

Paul makes this sweeter for children by reminding them of the promise associated with the fifth commandment. It is a double promise, **“that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land”** (v. 3). This promise should be read as a proverb, not as an absolute promise that never has exceptions. Obviously, there are obedient children who get diseases and die prematurely. But it is a general promise that children who learn to submit to proper authority do better than those who are still throwing temper tantrums at 40 years of age.

II. The Submission of Parents

I still remember the morning Wendy and I first became parents. Matthew was born after 36 hours of labor pains for Wendy, as the sun was rising over Philadelphia on a cold morning in December of 1982. Though we are still parents of our three children, something of a milestone was passed thirty years later when within a three month span our two oldest got married and our youngest graduated from college. It was thirty years filled with the joys and challenges all parents experience. One of the challenges I recall is how often we weren't sure what to do as parents. Have you ever wondered why God didn't provide us with a bigger parenting rulebook? God keeps his advice to parents pretty simple. Paul devotes only one verse here to parents. **“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”** (v. 4). Though it's only one verse, there is a great deal about parenting we can learn from this verse and its context.

There are several things we learn about parenting from the context of this verse. Remember that Paul devoted three chapters of his letter to explain the

riches of God's grace in the lives of Christians. He said that we already have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing. One of the most significant things you can do as a parent is to learn to rest in the love of God for you. One of the results of that is to free you from needing your children's love and acceptance. You become able to love your children as you learn not to need your children. A second principle about parenting that comes from the context of the letter is the importance of the church community. Paul speaks at length about the church as God's new community, and that helps us as parents. It helps us by supplying other mature Christians to assist us as parents. By God's grace, all of my children are now walking with the Lord, in spite of the many mistakes Wendy and I made as parents. I believe that one of the great resources God used in the Christian nurture of our children was this church. They saw many adults here who were serious about following Jesus, adults who loved them well and modeled for them what it means to walk with Christ. Parents, if you let outside pursuits dominate your children's schedules to the point that they have no time for involvement in the church, you are making a big mistake.

A third parenting principle we learn from the context is the importance of a solid, loving marriage for the raising of children. Paul addresses the marriage relationship before that of children and parents because it is foundational in the family. One of the most important things parents can do to raise godly, mature children is to give adequate attention to their own marriages. When a family instead centers on the children instead of the husband and wife, it is not just the marriage that is hurt—the children are hurt as well. When children see their parents love and forgive one another, it gives them both a gospel model for their own lives as well as great security.

A final principle learned from the context is the importance of teaching obedience to our children. If Paul limited his command to children to just this one matter of obedience to parents, then we are right to conclude that it is important to do what we can as parents to teach our children to obey. Though it's hard work, parents partner with God when we teach our children to obey their parents just because we say so. They don't need to like it, and they don't always need to be given an explanation. We have all witnessed that sad progression that sometimes happens when a parent's command is not met with obedience. The first step is usually a threat of punishment: "Johnny, come by the count of three or else." But when the parent doesn't follow through on the threat, Johnny soon learns that he needs not obey. Then the parent may try a bribe. "Johnny, come now and we'll go get some ice cream." If Johnny wants ice cream more than he wants to continue doing what he's doing, he may come. But when he doesn't, parents will sometimes resort to idle threats. "Johnny, we're leaving now; see you later." Of course, they won't really leave Johnny, and he knows it. Such parents are training their children to disobey. The need is to plan ahead with appropriate punishments, ones that will motivate children, and then follow through on the punishment no matter what.

Paul's specific commands to fathers involve something to be avoided and something to be embraced. Fathers (and mothers too) are to avoid provoking their children to anger. What kinds of parental behaviors unfairly provoke children to anger? Inconsistent boundaries can do it. Children never know where they stand because the rules are constantly changing. Inconsistent punishment is similar. Children are disciplined for behavior one day that was left unpunished the previous day. Another common parental behavior that provokes anger in children is to force them to become what the parents want them to become rather than what God has created them to be. God is the one who decides the gifts and interests of children, not parents. Our children came out quite different from one another. Our son, Matthew, would sit for several hours reading the encyclopedia as a six-year-old. Our youngest, Kathryn, preferred to spend her time setting up hurdles in the back yard and seeing how fast she could race over them. We do well to study what God has done with our children and then ask ourselves how we can cooperate with him. To do otherwise will frustrate and anger our children.

Paul gives a positive command when he tells parents to **“bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”** (v. 4). The verb that is translated “bring them up” is the same word that is used in the previous chapter of a husband nourishing and cherishing his wife as his own flesh. Children are to be cherished, and we do so not by letting them figure out on their own how they are to live. Rather, the two nouns translated “discipline” and “instruction” mean to instruct them and to warn them.

Before moving from this section, let me say a word to those parents whose children have grown up to bring great pain to your hearts because they are not walking with the Lord. I want to say that God hears your cry of pain on behalf of your children. Don't give up praying for them. And don't let yourself be ruled by guilt regarding them either. If God brings to mind any parenting sin that has hurt your children, confess it and repent of it, receive God's forgiveness and move on. The need is for love to rule in your relationship with your lapsed children, not your guilt.

III. The Submission of Slaves and Masters

I want to combine these last two categories and consider them together. One question that often comes up in Paul's instructions to slaves and masters is that of why Paul didn't more forcefully condemn slavery. I think there are several reasons for that, the first of which is that Paul was being practical. The church in Ephesus had in its midst both slaves and masters, and a theoretical treatise on the evils of slavery would have done them no good at all. If a friend of yours has a tyrannical boss, your friend would likely not find it helpful for you to write an essay about bad bosses. He would be better served to do what

Paul did here, which was to help both slaves and masters apply the gospel to their condition. If Christian slaves and masters both did so, then slavery would weaken and die wherever that gospel would take hold.

As we stated earlier, the gospel changes our view of power, allowing us to give up power instead of cling to it. What that would look like for a slave would be the enthusiastic service of his master. A Christian slave was instructed to seek the good of his master, not just when the master would see him, but at all times. He was to do this as if he were serving the Lord. His master may never reward the slave, but the Lord certainly will reward any work done for him. The remarkable implication of this is that the Lord guides his people into blessing through such authorities in life. Question 104 of the Heidelberg Catechism expands on the fifth commandment to describe the attitude God wants us to have to all those in authority over us, not just our parents. The last phrase of the answer gives the reason: “for through them God chooses to rule us.” Slaves need not be crushed under the power of their masters, because they are ruled by a God who can use even bad masters to bring good to his children.

Christian masters are also to have their view of power altered, forsaking all violence against their slaves. The threat of violence was the chief way a master would keep his slave in line, but Paul said that it was a tool they were not to use. Though he doesn't say so, the only tool left to them to motivate a slave would be the tool of love, and that is the appropriate one for a Christian master.

CONCLUSION:

As I pointed out last week, in all of these relationships, we are to do what Paul urges in verse 1 of chapter 5: imitate God by giving ourselves completely to others. Husbands, wives, children, parents, slaves and masters are all to submit by living for others. Bryan Chapell tells the story of something that happened at the crash of Amtrak's Sunset Limited in September, 1993. The train derailed on a bridge and plunged into the waters of a bayou outside Mobile. Gary and Mary Jane Chancey were traveling on that train with their eleven-year-old daughter, Andrea, who has cerebral palsy and was confined to a wheelchair. Water rushed into the Chancey's compartment through the window as the train sank further into the murky waters. Fighting the rush of water, the mother and father combined their efforts to lift Andrea to a rescuer. As they did so, the water pressure overwhelmed them and pushed them under, and they were gone. They gave their lives that another might live. We are called to imitate God by doing the same in our various relationships.