

God's New Society

Message 11

The Family in God's Society

Ephesians 6:1-9

Introduction

Welcome! You are brave to come out here tonight after last week's message on submission and sacrificial love. Tonight we continue on the topic of relationships, and submission continues to be a major component of Paul's teaching. This passage may be even more disturbing, however, because it is directed to your situation right now, not to some future possibility. But before we plunge into tonight's message, let us review the context of the passage.

Since spring break we have been working through the application section of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. Chapters one to three cover the good news of our salvation – how God planned our salvation before He even made the world, sent Jesus to die for our sins, and now by the Spirit gives us life and makes us into His new society. When Paul turned to discuss how this gospel affects our lives, he summed it up by saying we should live in a manner worthy of this salvation. God has made us saints – holy ones – and has made us together a holy temple. Now we should live up to this new reality. The key to living as a Christian is found in 4:23 where Paul says, “be renewed in the spirit of your mind”. The key to living right is thinking right. There are many ways to change behavior, but they are incomplete and temporary. Paul follows with many specific commands and instructions for Christian living, but if you approach these as primarily a list of things to do, life will be frustrating and joyless. Paul's commands only make sense as God changes the way you think about Him and this life – and you can obey them joyfully only as you think more like God. So as we approach Paul's instructions, when you find yourself objecting or resenting or resisting his teaching, ask yourself where you are not thinking like Christ, and ask God to mold your mind to His.

Tonight we are going to look at two relationship and discuss the responsibilities of the people involved in each. First we will consider the responsibilities of children, then of parents. Next we will look at the responsibilities of slaves, and then of masters.

Family Basics

Paul's command to children is simple and direct: obey. Children are not equal partners in the family. They do not have a vote in family decisions and may not exercise veto power over decisions they dislike. This should be obvious from the nature of the case. Children enter this world with the power to melt hearts and the potential to achieve greatness – but their greatness is only potential. Their first achievements are eating, sleeping, and pooping. Parents are delighted when new children do these things correctly and on schedule. One hopes that children move beyond this hopeful start – but that requires careful training. First the child is trained to nurse properly, then to sleep at night and at nap time. Next he is introduced to “solid” food – although it is really a disgusting mush. In a year or two he advances to the great feat of pooping in the toilet instead of his diaper. Walking, talking, and singing; playing baseball, reading, and writing – all these basic functions of life require training. The child has the basic aptitude to do these things, but his potential will never be achieved without training – and that means obedience. A child cannot learn to become an adult without obeying his parents as they teach him how to live.

It is self-evident that children must obey their parents, yet we live in a society which is confused about this simple concept. John Rosemond writes a weekly column on parenting, and the stories he recounts are outrageous. Parents write in wondering how to handle children who become obnoxious about the clothes they wear, the food they eat, etc. The obvious answer is to require obedience and punish disobedience. Parents need not negotiate with their children. The family is not a democracy. It is an amazing condition of

contemporary American society that parents cannot grasp this simple fact. What we are establishing first is the basic premise of family relations. As Paul said, the responsibility of children is to obey their parents. Now of course how this principle applies changes as children mature. But we will return to those issues momentarily.

If the basic requirement of children is obedience, the basic requirement of parents is to train their children. Parents ought to know how to live successfully, and they ought to teach their children how to do so. This also is self-evident. Is it not perverse for parents to refuse to train their children in the basic skills they need to succeed in life? Yet parents are abdicating this responsibility. Some are misled by the ridiculous idea that they should treat their children as equals, but others are just plain lazy. It is hard work to make an eating, sleeping, pooping creature into a thoughtful, skillful, and disciplined adult. It is *very* hard work – and many parents wickedly refuse to do their job. When parents abdicate their responsibility, they abandon their children to figure out their own way in the world, and it is tough. It is frightening and frustrating for a child to be cast out into the world without careful parental instruction. And eventually children catch on to their parents selfishness, and they resent them for it.

Without even considering sin and its effects on parents and children, it is obvious that children must obey their parents, and parents must train their children. There is no other way in which the next generation will succeed in life. But now we must consider sin, for we live in a world in which all people and every relationship is marred by it. Sin is the reason behind three of the qualifiers in this passage.

Family Qualifiers

Childhood obedience is conditioned, but not as you might expect. Obedience is not conditioned upon the child's pleasure or understanding. Those do not matter. But it *is* conditioned upon God's word. Paul says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord..." Children may not – must not – obey their parents when it requires disobedience to the Lord. Children are under no obligation to lie, steal, or fornicate – even if parents order them to do so. God is the supreme Father, and His word trumps the word of earthly fathers. But Christians must be careful not to stretch this principle to cover anything they want to do. The ten commandments are a good summary of God's law, and those we must obey. But there is no divine law that a Christian must attend this RUF meeting or other Christian event. Some Christians are tempted to make use their faith as a cover for disobeying their parents, but others use parental opposition as an excuse for neglecting their Christian duties. You must do all you can to join in fellowship with other believers – but you must seek to do so within the will of your parents. For example, you must not come to camp if your parents forbid it. But you must not give up if they forbid it. The correct course is to pray fervently for God to change their hearts to allow you to go.

The second qualifier is for parents – to train children in the "admonition of the Lord". Beyond the basics of life, parents must also train their children to live for God. This means far more than taking them to church, although even this is neglected by many parents. It is scandalous that Christian parents allow their children to miss Lord's Day worship to play sports or participate in other activities. The first and most basic step in training children to live for God is to resist the pressure to do something on Sunday morning other than worship. But life consists of more than one hour on Sunday – or even two hours if you include Sunday school. Sunday school or its equivalent is essential in training children, but every hour of every day must be an captured to train them. Listen to Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶ And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

All day long children are learning about God. They are either learning to love and obey Him, or to ignore Him. Parents teach their children by their words and actions to do one or the other. Children also learn from their school and their friends, and parents must carefully choose these so that their children will grow in the Lord.

Children must obey in the Lord, and parents must teach obedience to the Lord. The third qualifier is that parents, especially fathers, must not provoke their children to anger. This is a broad command, but you can flesh it out by remembering those actions and occasions which provoked you. Impatience leads to unwise acts which provoke anyone. A domineering attitude is hard for anyone to like, and coarseness grates against others. Parental refusal to explain the reason for family policies and decisions is bound to frustrate. The common element in these points is the failure to treat children as real human beings. This is the opposite of treating them as equals. Children *are* equals in human dignity, and should be treated as thinking individuals – but they are not equals in position in the family. It is essential to maintain these two distinctions. Perhaps the most important provocation of parents, however, is lack of integrity. Nothing is guaranteed to anger people faster than a “do as I say, not as I do” attitude. Parents must demand the same submissiveness of themselves that they expect of their children.

It is not addressed in this passage, but we can not leave it without asking when obedience to parents comes to an end. It tells us something that everyone in America asks this question. It is not so in other cultures. Roman law incorporated *patria potestas* (“father’s power”). “A Roman father had absolute power over his family....Further, the power of the Roman father extended over the child’s whole life, so long as the father lived.”¹ I am no expert on Oriental culture, but I know that fathers exert much influence over children even when they become adults. I think the Romans were wrong about this, but so are we in the opposite direction.

Biblically, a young man or woman must obey his or her father as long as he or she is part of his household. This principle is expressed in Genesis 2:23-24 when God first created woman. “And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.’”²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” There comes a time when a man leaves his father and mother and establishes his own household. Until then he is under his father’s authority. American culture operates a little differently than ancient, agricultural cultures. I think the best application of this principle is to ask when a man becomes financially independent of his father. For us that seems to be a good indication that he is at the point of taking responsibility for his own life.

For you in college, most of you are still financially dependent on your parents. If so, that means you must obey them. If they tell you to major in engineering, you must do it. If they require you to live at home this summer, you must. You can certainly ask them to reconsider, and you should pray for God to work in their hearts to make good decisions. But you must not nag or manipulate them. God will work out His will somehow if you will obey Him.

This brings us back to the question of how parent-child relationship change over time. Part of training a child is giving him increasing responsibility. If your parents have trained you well, they should not need to tell you what to do day to day – nor will they want to. If your parents no longer tell you to get up for class and pick up your clothes, that is not because they no longer care about these things. For you, obedience means doing what your parents have taught you to do, even if they no longer remind you every

¹ Quoted from William Barclay in Boice, p 211.

day.

The last point in all this is that even when you have your own household you are still your parents' children. It is wrong then for you to obey them. You must live on your own as mature adults. So then your obligation to your parents is to honor. You will still treat them with respect. You will seek their advice and listen to their opinions. You will serve them and care for them, without neglecting your own family.

Slaves and Masters

Paul's command to slaves is similarly simple and direct: obey your masters. In Paul's day this applied literally to slaves. There were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire – and some were believers. Without commenting on the ethics of slavery, Paul clearly orders slaves to obey their masters. Today this would of course still apply to slaves. Praise God slavery has been abolished in the west, but it persists in the Sudan and other parts of Africa and Asia. Odious as this practice is, for those caught in it, godly behavior is obedience. This applies to all masters, as Peter said in his letter: "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh." (1 Peter 2:18) If this offends you, you should get busy and see what you can do to end slavery in these countries. Perhaps this can be the life calling of one of you. For us in America, this principle applies to our employment situations. We must obey our employers, whether they are wise or foolish, kind or harsh, Christian or not.

Paul explains that our service to our masters is really service to Christ – and He personally will reward us for our work. In this life you may earn a wage for your labor, and it may be reasonable or not. But whatever happens here, if you work with the attitude of pleasing Christ, He will reward you in heaven. This point is worth repeating – when you work for Lehigh University, or Burger King, or D&B Contractors, you are working for Jesus. You should act as though you are working for Him because you *are* working for Him. And if you slack off, if you grumble and cut corners, if you come in late and take a long lunch break – you are cheating Jesus.

Paul tells us to work with sincerity of heart. The Greek word here carries the "idea of generosity or liberality as well as sincerity".² It suggests that the godly employee seeks to do all he can to advance the state of his employer. This was Daniel's attitude in serving pagan king Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Daniel's nation and God's temple, and carried Daniel captive. Yet Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar well. Daniel even desired Nebuchadnezzar's prosperity, and was distressed when it was threatened. Let me read from Daniel 4:19, as Daniel begins to interpret the king's dream that foretells his fall.

Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astonished for a time, and his thoughts troubled him. So the king spoke, and said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its interpretation trouble you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream concern those who hate you, and its interpretation concern your enemies!" Daniel 4:19

If your enemy, who destroyed your home and temple, were about to lose his throne, would you weep, or rejoice? Daniel sought the welfare of his master.

I tried to practice this generous spirit when I worked in a lab at Johns Hopkins. One Friday I was making culture medium and set it in the autoclave to sterilize for 15 minutes. Fifteen minutes went by and I worked on oblivious at my desk. When I noticed the clock the medium was cooked, not sterilized. I had to go then, but I decided to come back in the next day on my own time to prepare the medium. I was not required to. Anyone can make an honest mistake, and my professor would have accepted this lapse. But I

² Boice, p. 220.

wanted to serve him well, so I returned Saturday morning. Guess what? I did it again! So a third time I mixed up the medium, and finally I remembered to retrieve it after 15 minutes.

Some of you have jobs now, and most of you have a job this summer, but everyone here is serving a master – several, actually. For students, the application of this passage is to do your course work well. Your professor may be dull or difficult, the material may be boring or irrelevant – but Jesus gave you these professors and these courses. You are not studying merely for grades, or to please your parents, or to enter a career – you are studying for Jesus. If you skip classes, hand in assignments late, write sloppy papers, and squeak by your exams, you are cheating Jesus. And do not excuse yourself by saying you are busy serving Jesus in RUF. God has given you enough time to do all that is required of you. Use your time well and you will be able to do what you need to do.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6

Conclusion

Did I make this sound easy tonight? Do not worry, I know it is not easy. Submission and obedience are hard because they cut across the grain of our flesh. God has broken the power of sin by Jesus' death on the cross, but sin still tempts us. Sin does its work by deceiving us into thinking that we cannot obey God. Sin convinces us that obedience is not necessary, not possible, or simply too hard. This is a lie. You *can* obey and honor your parents. You *can*, as a parent someday, train your children to love God. You *can* serve your employer with generosity and a good spirit. But only in the power of the Spirit of God. You cannot do this on your own. If you depend on your own power you will be tricked, misled, and confused. Your life will be a mess if you go it alone. But God promises to go with you if you believe in Him. The first step is to accept His word, including what we discussed tonight. Repent of your sin, including the sin of rebellion against parents and masters. Commit yourself to God and to obeying His word. Do this everyday, and watch Him make your life a spectacular testimony to His mercy and grace.

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April 19, 2005