

XII. Lesson 12 Parent-Child & Master-Servant Relationships – Ephesians 6:1-9

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Stuart chapter 12

Aim: To understand how to submit to one another in our relationships.

Notice that Paul always talks to the subordinate first. That is because the church is more like a wife than a husband; more like a child than a father; more like a servant than a master.

A. Children & Parents (Eph. 6:1-4)

A Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves; he could make them work in his fields, even in chains; he could take the law into his own hands and punish as he liked; he could even inflict the death penalty on his child. Further, the power of the Roman father extended over the child's whole life, so long as the father lived. A Roman son never came of age. There was also the matter of child repudiation, leading to exposure of the newborn. When a baby was born it was placed before its father. If the father stooped and lifted the child, the child was accepted and was raised as his. If he turned away, the child was rejected and was literally discarded. Such rejected children were either left to die, or they were picked up by those who trafficked in infants. Against such pagan cruelty the new relations of parents to children and children to parents brought by the Christian gospel stand forth like sunshine after a dismal storm.

Paul had a family oriented view; he understood that disobedient children are symptomatic of social decay. A society with libertarian views on raising children produces children who are rebellious and disobedient to their parents (Rom. 1:30). The respect that children are to give their parents is essential for a well-ordered society, for the stability of the home, and also for the development of discipline and character in children. Therefore, Christian parents must set the example by rearing a godly generation to check the tide of a decaying society.

1. Obedience of Children (6:1-3)

- *Disobedience to parents is a symptom of the disintegration of society (6:1). How do Romans 1:30 and II Timothy 3:2 support this view? Does honoring parents mean you must obey them as long as they live?*

Paul's imperative to children displays the concept of submission from 5:21. The keyword for children is 'obey' (*hupakouō*); it is the fundamental relationship of children to parents. Paul specifically commands children to obey their parents and lists three reasons for doing so. First, it is the right thing to do (6:1). They must obey for no other reason than that their parents tell them to do it. This speaks to the natural law God has written in the hearts of men and seared in the consciences of humankind apart from special revelation (Rom. 2:15). This is not confined to Christian ethics. It is recognized and taught by all the world's cultures, both ancient and contemporary. Children owe obedience to parents. It is also right by the Old Testament law, and it is in accordance with the example of Christ Himself (Lk. 2:51).

This obligation is not merely on the side of the child, who must obey, but also on the side of the parent, who must enforce the obedience. This is because the parent stands as God in relationship to the child. To teach the child to obey the parent is to teach the child to obey God. To allow the

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child to defy and disobey the parent is to teach the child to defy and disobey God with all the obvious consequences.

Second, God commanded, “Honor (*timaō*) your father and mother” (6:2). This is the fifth commandment, which is placed in the first table of the law, dealing with our relationship to God. It is because obedience to parents is part of our spiritual relationship to God and because disobedience to parents is at heart a spiritual problem. Thus, showing respect for parents is based on divine revelation and not merely on natural law.

But is honoring obeying? Honoring one’s parents means acknowledging and accepting the authority God has given parents over children. Parents do not give themselves authority. Their right and duty to command their children is God-given. The rendering of obedience to one’s parents is not simply a social convention, but it is a duty that is to be rendered to God. Any resistant to such authority is therefore rebellion against God Himself. Children recognize this delegated authority and realize that in honoring parents they obey God. To honor parents means to respect and revere them and includes the element of obedience.

Does honoring parents mean that a person must obey his parents as long as they live? No doubt, as children grow towards maturity, their obedience also matures. As long as a child remains under the roof of his father, he subjects himself to the authority of his parents. His father stands as God’s delegated head of the family unit and, therefore, represents Christ to the whole family. As a child matures into adulthood and leaves the protection of the family unit, he is no longer accountable directly to his parents for his lifestyle. Genesis 2:24 says that a man leaves his father and mother when he gets married to his wife and establishes his own household. Then He must answer to God, for the rod of chastisement will now come from his heavenly Father, not his earthly one. This does not mean he ceases to respect and revere his parents. On the contrary, he should still give great weight to their counsel. Whatever their age and experience, children are to look up to their parents.

Third, children who obey their parents receive a blessing (6:3). This command to honor father and mother is the first of the Ten Commandments to have a promise attached to it. Children do not lose out by obeying their parents, despite what they themselves might sometimes think. This promise speaks to the stability of any society. Without a strong family unit, social stability crumbles. When the bonds of family life break up, when respect for parents fails, the community becomes decadent and will not ‘live long.’ This promise is not a blanket assurance that every individual who honors his or her parents will live longer than every individual who does not. But it is a general promise that God’s material and physical blessing rests on those who work at being Christians in these relationships.

Does this mean that children must obey parents in everything? No! Only in the Lord (6:1). A child owes obedience to a parent in all areas except those that contract the revealed law of God. If a parent commands a child not to worship the Lord or not to follow Christ, the child must refuse to obey, for Christ must be our authority. All owe obedience and respect to those over them, *but not at the expense of the obedience we owe to God.*

2. Duty of Parents (6:4)

- *How might fathers provoke their children (6:4)? Why do you think Paul admonished fathers and not mothers?*

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If children are to obey their parents, parents must give them proper directions to obey. And if they are to honor their parents, their parents must be worthy of that honor. Paul gives instructions to fathers specifically. This does not exclude mothers, of course. It includes them in the same way the word ‘brothers’ or ‘brethren’ is used to include all Christians in other passages, and because Paul is speaking of ‘parents’ in the first three verses. However, Paul addresses fathers specifically for the simple reason that the responsibility for managing a home and raising children is primarily theirs.

The keyword for fathers is ‘encourage’ (*cp.* Col 3:21). Why are fathers to be encouragers? God has constituted our world in such a way that parents are the greatest single influence on the life of their children. Seeing that his input is most likely to be the factor which will decide what direction his child’s character will take, let him take his awesome responsibility seriously!

Paul’s words to fathers have two parts, one negative and the other positive. The father is held accountable by God as the one who is responsible for teaching the children and for being the disciplinarian of the children. The negative part involves restraint. Fathers are not to ‘exasperate’ their children or ‘provoke them to wrath.’ The noun from the verb here, *parorgizō*, has been used in 4:25. It is right for parents to demand obedience, but there must not be a capricious exercise of authority.

Discipline is essential in the home, but fathers must exercise their authority in a balanced way. Although there is a proper and necessary place for discipline, that discipline must never be arbitrary or unkind. Remember the statement that the parent who will not discipline his child, hates the child (Prov. 13:24). There are a host of admonitions in Scripture that call parents to be very diligent in the administration of discipline to their children. But with this caveat – ‘Do not exasperate your children.’

Paul insists there is something which fathers are never to do: they are never to exasperate their children. A father should not make unreasonable demands upon his children or discipline in an arbitrary or unkind manner. Rather, the father’s role with respect to his children is to be an encourager. Paul wishes fathers to be gentle, patient, persevering, and instructional. A father should develop a child’s potential, mold his personality in order to serve God, and encourage him in his gifts. He does this in a loving way and not in an oppressive authoritarian manner.

Children ask two questions in their family relationship. One, ‘Am I loved?’ The other, ‘How much can I get away with?’ Every nonconforming response should not be labeled ‘rebellion.’ Children will experiment with their liberty and in so doing test the quality of their parents’ love. Boundaries, however, must be established. A child expects this and feels secure within the limits set. As he grows older, his parents extend the boundaries; but a child needs to know the extent of these boundaries and the consequences for stepping beyond them. Any parent who fails to deliver the consequences sends a message of ‘no love’ to that child.

In Colossians 3:21, the parallel passage says that fathers are not to exasperate their children and make them lose heart. We must neither be too harsh or too lax. A child will lose heart if the father is not interested in them. If you do not have constant interaction with your children, they will perceive you have no interest in them. Children want to please parents and particularly fathers. If fathers do not show interest in children, they will lose heart and become angry. Fathers show interest by being involved. Having quality time is the key. Involvement means real use of the rod and discipline. It also means involvement in teaching your children.

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On the positive side Paul says a father is to ‘bring up’ his children. The word used here has already been used in 5:29 and can be translated as ‘nourish’ or ‘nurture’ (*ektrephete*). The word was used originally of bodily nourishment, but came to be used for the nurture of the body, mind, and soul.

There are two aspects to this positive command to nurture children. The first is in ‘training’ or ‘discipline.’ The Greek word *paideia* has the force of ‘correcting’ or ‘chastening.’ ‘Discipline’ is perhaps the best translation. A father also has the responsibility to instruct his children in the Lord. The second Greek word used is *nouthesia*, which could be translated ‘instruction,’ ‘warning,’ or ‘correction.’ ‘The discipline and instruction of the Lord’ is that which the Lord is able to bring into the life of a child if parents do their work of teaching and training in the word of the Lord. This is the highest duty of Christian parents.

How are fathers to train their children in the instruction of the Lord unless they know what the Word of God teaches? Obviously fathers will fail at this great task unless they are themselves growing with God. They must be studying the Bible. They must be seeking to live by it and practice it in their own daily lives. Parents (and especially fathers) must be models. Parents use life’s situations to convey God’s truth. They take advantage of opportunities to teach God’s way. This means *time*. Parents must spend many hours with their children, for without a quantity of time, there will be no quality.

Ultimately, children as they mature become responsible for themselves. Although they may be taught wisely and raised morally with instruction supported by parental example, they nevertheless sometimes do go astray, and *that is not necessarily the parents’ fault*. (Consider Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel.) If your child has abandoned the Lord and is living a worldly life, it is not necessarily your fault. It may be, but not necessarily. Do not abandon hope. God has called many such children. Your duty is to continue to live as Christians and pray for your child regularly.

B. Servants & Masters (Eph. 6:5-9)

Stuart Olyott believes that the whole passage on submission (5:22-6:9) is applied only to the home. ‘The Christian life has to be lived at home. This is the theme of the whole passage. We must not, then, take what he says to slaves and masters and apply it to modern employees and employers. The apostle is not discussing industry, but the home. The master-slave relationship of 2,000 years ago has very little in common with the organization of our work places today.’

All other commentators apply the principles of slaves and masters to the arena of modern-day employee-employer relationships. For example, ‘the principles of the whole section apply to employees and employers in every age, whether in the home, in business, or in the state. This is another application of the principle of submission that is the keynote of this section.’

1. Did Paul Support Slavery?

- *Is Paul endorsing slavery? Why or why not?*

It seems by implication here that Paul is endorsing some forms of the institution of slavery. At the time this was written, slavery was a commonplace social phenomenon. It has been estimated that in The Roman Empire at this time there were about sixty million slaves. That means that about half of the population was enslaved to the other half. This work force consisted not only

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of domestic servants and manual laborers, but also highly educated people. Sometimes a slave's situation was quite good. Yet there was often terrible cruelty and abuse.

There were certain kinds of voluntary slavery in the ancient world, where a person would bind himself over to the service of another person, for example, to pay off his debts. But there was also the whole idea of selling people into slavery and the even worse practice of stealing people who were free and using them as slaves. Paul doesn't comment here on any of the variety of forms of slavery that did exist in the ancient world. He is not speaking for or against slavery in this passage; he just speaks in general to anyone who happens to be in that particular situation of slavery. If you are a slave, whether justly or unjustly, you are still under the authority of your designated master, and as such it is your duty to perform the services that are expected and required of you.

Although Paul did not condemn slavery here, he did not condone it. That makes his treatment of slavery entirely different from his treatment of marriage and the home. Paul grounded the relationship between spouses in the relationship of Christ to the church. He grounded the duty of children to parents in natural law ('for this is right') and revelation ('the first commandment with a promise'). This is not the case with his discussion of slaves' duties to masters or masters' responsibilities to slaves. Nothing in the passage affirms slavery as a naturally valid or divinely mandated institution.

Although Paul gives no command to masters to free their slaves, he does emphasize the brotherhood of man. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul strongly states that there is neither bond nor free in Christ Jesus, but all are one under the Lord's headship (Gal. 3:28).

Slavery was a critical ingredient for the survival of the Roman economy. The Roman government also took steps to protect slaves and provide freedom in certain situations. For Paul to incite slaves to rebellion would be a sin against God and to hinder the present movement of fair treatment to slaves. Furthermore, it would confirm the suspicion of those who sought to destroy Christianity that the apostles preached the gospel in order to subvert and destroy Roman society.

Paul, therefore, took the diplomatic approach and stated the principles of the gospel in such a manner that he left the decision of emancipating a slave to the conscience of the master. The Letter to Philemon is a perfect example of Paul's approach. Though he didn't instruct Philemon to release Onesimus, Paul hinted broadly that this is what he expected Philemon to do (Phlm. 12-13). Paul advised Philemon that Onesimus is no longer a slave, but rather a beloved brother (Phlm. 16) in his service. Paul preached the gospel (including that there is no slave in Christ) and then left the words to act upon Philemon's conscience. He did not obligate Philemon to emancipate Onesimus. The choice was Philemon's as he responded to the gospel (Phlm. 14).

In spite of Paul's instructions here in Ephesians to slaves, and in spite of his writing an entire letter to Philemon concerning a runaway slave, the New Testament in general and Paul's writings in particular, contained the seeds of the dissolution of the institution of slavery.

Paul's discussion of the duties of Christian slaves and the responsibilities of Christian masters transforms the institution, even if it falls short of calling for outright abolition. In the ancient world, the slave was a thing. Paul says that the slave, no less than the master, has been made in God's image. As such he possesses inestimable worth and great dignity. He is to be treated properly. In such a framework, slavery, even though it remained slavery, could never be the

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same institution as for non-Christians. It was this transformation (which came from viewing all persons as made in God's image) that ultimately destroyed slavery and continues to transform work relationships today.

2. Obedience of Servants (6:5-8)

- *Ephesians 6:5-9 concerns a servant-master or employee-employer relationship. What do you suppose Paul meant by "eye-service" (6:6)?*

Submission teaches the key principle of leadership and submission – to be able to put yourselves in the shoes of your subordinates. Jesus teaches that he who would be great must be the servant of all. If you can't put yourselves in the shoes of your subordinates, you cannot be successful as leaders. That is why it is so valuable to spend time as a servant, because it trains you to be a leader.

Paul's mention of slaves indicates that the church included slaves. What is required of them is consistent, good-natured obedience to their masters. This is the key concept. Paul exhorts them to serve their masters as if they are serving the Lord. In fact, he stresses this fact by mentioning Christ in verses 5, 6, 7, and 9. Christ is their true Master, and they are to behave towards their earthly masters as they would behave towards Him! The present master-slave relationship is only temporary. But all believers are slaves of Christ, and He is the Master of all, be they enslaved or free at this moment. Slaves must certainly do the will of their earthly masters, but in such a way that they are in fact doing the will of their eternal Master, before whom they shall certainly appear. The master-slave relationship which exists on earth reflects a heavenly reality which must not be forgotten.

Paul is speaking consistently about rendering service to whom service is due. Now we can speak more broadly here. There is a sense in which anyone who is in the employ of another person, although not a slave, is in a situation where services are to be rendered. Some of the principles that Paul applies to slaves can well be carried over and applied to anyone who is an employee. What Paul says is this: Work with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Wherever Christians are rendering a service, they must understand that such service is ultimately presented, not to employers or owners, but to Christ.

Twenty-first century employees have contracted to serve an employer and, therefore, must give total effort in performing their tasks. All of us tend to perform more diligently when the eyes of our supervisors are upon us. But when there is no-one there to give oversight, we may slack off and shirk our responsibilities. We should not be busy only when the boss is looking, but give a 100 percent effort at all times. Why? Because we ultimately serve the Lord. If you are going to please God it doesn't matter whether a supervisor is present or not present, for God is always looking at the heart. We are expected, as Christians, to be people of integrity, doing a full day's work, whether somebody is watching over our shoulders or not.

What does an employee owe an employer? 1) *Obedience*. This is the word Paul used to describe the responsibility children have to parents (*hupakouō*). In terms of the work to be done, employees stand in the same relationship to employers as children to parents.

2) *Respect*. Paul goes further than we might expect with his demand for submission by adding the phrase 'with fear and trembling.' Indeed, the thought that dominates the whole section on relationships is that of submission 'out of reverence for Christ' (5:21); it is a matter of reverence and respect, not of being afraid or terrified. The parallel passage in Colossians 3:22 enjoins

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servants to render obedience ‘fearing the Lord.’ The Godward relationship is the key to the entire paragraph. For slaves are to obey their earthly masters as they ‘would obey Christ,’ strive to win their favor ‘like slaves of Christ,’ and serve them as ‘serving the Lord.’

3) *Sincerity*. Paul does not merely present a high spiritual ideal and leave it there. He is searchingly practical. He demands that service be given ‘in singleness of heart.’ The word Paul uses is *aplotēti*, which has the idea of generosity or liberality as well as sincerity. It suggests that the employee should not hold back from his best but should actually pour himself out liberally in honest service. Honesty of purpose and whole-hearted effort must characterize the Christian employee.

4) *Loyalty*. Paul recommends a steady, faithful service that comes from having the heart in the right place. ‘Eye-service’ is excluded; here and in Colossians 3:22 a word seems to have been invented by the apostle to express his thought (*ophthalmodoulian*, from *ophthalmos*, an eye, and *doulos*, a slave).

5) *Goodwill (eunoias)*. Employees should work as if their ‘heart and soul’ are in it. The conviction of the Christian workman is that every single piece of work he produces must be good enough to show to God.

Paul’s exhortation means the transformation of the Christian’s entire standards of work and service into something totally different from the standards of the world. Work and service are to be rendered to an earthly master, as if they were being offered to the heavenly Lord Himself.

The incentive for the slaves in Paul’s day and for employees in the modern age is not temporal reward, although such rewards may come. Paul was probably thinking primarily of a heavenly reward, since slaves were not normally rewarded in earthly terms. But the interesting thing is that rewards, whether earthly or heavenly, do matter and that he is not afraid to introduce this as motivation. Slaves and employees are encouraged in their service, even if mundane and tedious, by the realization that whatever good they do in the service of others, they will receive blessings back from the Lord (6:8). Our work efforts should be fueled by our desire to labor for the Lord and not by our desire to earn money or fame.

Both good and bad are mentioned in the parallel Colossians 3:24-25. But only ‘good’ is mentioned here, since the apostle’s purpose at this point is encouragement rather than warning. So he reminds them that nothing is unwitnessed by the Lord in heaven, nothing well done is ever done in vain. There may be no thanks on earth. A person may reap only criticism and misunderstanding. But there is an unfailing reward for faithful service.

The phrase, ‘whether he is a slave or free’ is added as a link between verses 8 and 9. This principle, like everything else that can be said of human duty before God and God’s judgment of men and women applies to all alike, rich and poor, slave and free, servant and master.

3. Responsibility of Masters (6:9)

- *What is a godly employment relationship (6:7-9)?*

The Christian community also included masters like Philemon, who served the one true master, the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds them that they are over others; this is what makes them masters. But they are also under somebody. They have their own Master. Both the slave and the master were ultimately responsible to Christ. The keyword for masters is thus

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‘answerability,’ because just as their slaves are answerable to them, so they are answerable to their Master in heaven.

The main thing Paul says to masters is to give up threatening; in other words be kind. Paul is not saying there is never a time to be tough with your subordinates; because there is. But the context cannot be continual threats and demands. The principle again is to put yourself in their shoes.

‘Threatening’ (*apeilē*) came very easily to the lips of the master of slaves in the ancient world, and the slave could not answer back. But Christian masters are reminded that all that they say or do to their servants must be said or done remembering that they have a Lord and ‘Master ... in heaven.’ To Him both must give account. Servants have been told to render all their service as to a heavenly Lord. Masters are told to act towards their servants bearing in mind the fact that they are themselves servants, and the heavenly master is the one to whom they must give account.

‘In the same way’ does not mean that masters are to obey slaves just as slaves obey masters. But it does mean that they should treat their slaves in the same way they expect to be served. All are God’s children. If masters want respect from their slaves, they must treat them with respect. If they want good and faithful service, they must serve their slaves by providing for them, protecting them, and treating them as members of their households. In the final analysis, both are to be serving God and are to be rewarded or judged by that Master.

Likewise, modern employers must treat their employees with respect by giving them a fair wage and providing a good working environment. They should not threaten, badger, or browbeat their employees, but rather display an attitude of care and concern.

C. Application Questions

- *As a parent, how can I show my children love, honor, and respect for my spouse?*
- *I will instruct my children in the ways of the Lord by praying for them daily. What specific things can I pray for?*
- *Parents: Can I commit to spend at least one intimate and special hour this week with each of my children?*
- *Singles without children: Can I show love to a child by engaging in a specific activity with him/her?*
- *How can I show love to a co-worker or friend by doing something special this week for him/her?*

For next time: Read Ephesians 6:10-24 and Stuart chapter 13