

Christian Homes: God's Will for Parents and Children

A Bible Study on Ephesians 6:1-4

Study Bible Studies Not stated

Ephesians 6:1-4

Merciful Father, we thank you for this wonderful evening. It is only due to your blessings that we have gathered today to study and understand your word. Open our hearts and minds to perceive the direction you have for each one of us. Lead us and guide us in our efforts to seek and know you better. Permit us to come closer to you so that we live our lives worthy of the blood you shed for us. We ask these in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before I start, let me set a couple of ground rules for today's discussion. Most of you know that I am a lay person, so please keep your expectations low and bear with me when I stumble. (Then why did I venture to do a session like this, you must be wondering.)

Today we are looking at the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 1 to 4. These four verses deal with the parent and child relationship. This reminds me of a short story I read on the Internet. It goes like this:

A teacher put this question to little John in the arithmetic class. "John, suppose your mother made a peach pie and there were ten of you at the table — your mother and father and eight children — how much of the pie would you get?" "A ninth, Ma'am," was the prompt answer. "No, John. Now pay attention," said the teacher. "There are ten of you. Ten, remember. Don't you know your fractions?" "Yes, Ma'am," was the swift reply of little John, "I know my fractions, but I know my mother, too. She'd say that she didn't want any pie."

Fathers, do not worry — it is just that I could not readily find one on the Internet about fathers.

How to bring up children has been a subject of discussion at various forums, beginning at our homes. The debates are still on. We could sit here all night, and perhaps for the next few days, without reaching a consensus on the matter. We will therefore steer clear of any controversial elements of this very lively topic and simply look at God's will for parents and children.

Introduction

One observation I have about Paul's epistles is that his writing is well structured, and a definite pattern can be seen in most of his letters. Paul never fails to write about the way the redeemed should conduct themselves in society, and he leads the reader to his favourite topic, "Christian homes." He discusses at length the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and employers and employees, just as he does in the latter part of chapter 5 and in chapter 6, verses 1 to 9, of Ephesians.

This calls for serious consideration, as we see the immense practicality of this epistle even in today's context. It is beautiful to see the way divine doctrine enters into the details of our lives and casts the fragrance of its perfection over every duty and every relationship. Paul enjoins mutual obedience as a Christian duty — "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21). Under this heading he treats the relative duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants, touching not merely the relationships but the hearts of the men and women in whom such relationships reside.

Last week we looked at what Paul had to say about the husband and wife relationship. We also noted that there is a rebellion within present-day marriage, so much so that marriages are declining day by day. We see a similar rebellion in the relationships between parents and children, between employers and employees, and extending beyond, into almost all other relationships — among friends, business partners, governments and citizens, teachers and students, and so on. Children are rebelling against their parents.

Today we will focus on the parent and child relationship and see what Paul had to say on this matter.

Parents and Children

For the sake of recollection, let us read once again Ephesians chapter 6, verses 1 to 4:

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2 Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; 3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. 4 And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4, KJV)

Though just four verses, these are so heavily loaded that one could speak at length on these thoughts alone. There are many ways to interpret what Paul was trying to say. I would like to choose a very basic method of interpreting these verses by identifying the operative

statements first, and then examining what Paul meant by each of them.

We will look at these under two main headings: first, God's will for children, and second, God's will for parents.

God's will for children (verses 1 to 3) gives us five critical statements to study: obedience to parents, honour for the parents, natural rightness, scriptural adherence, and resultant blessing.

God's will for parents (verse 4) gives us four operative statements to understand in detail: do not provoke, nurture, discipline, and instruct.

As I mentioned earlier, "Christian homes" is a subject Paul expounded with great care and intensity. The reasons could be twofold: that unless the relationships within Christian homes are harmonious, the believer's relationship with the Lord cannot be intense enough; and, conversely, unless our relationship with the Lord and our obedience to his word are intense enough, our earthly relationships will remain wanting. It may seem almost a Catch-22 situation. Paul also recognised the rampant rebellion in all earthly relationships and took pains to address this problem with remedies drawn from the Scriptures.

Paul's solution to what I like to describe as the "disconnects" in our relationships is found in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 10, which we looked at a few weeks ago:

That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him. (Ephesians 1:10, KJV)

That is the answer to all the divisions or disconnects we see in society, and at times even within the church of Jesus Christ. God's great plan for the ages is that one day, because of the atonement of Christ on the cross, he will bring all things together, one in Christ. In other words, God's answer to the problem of disconnects, and to bringing unity, is regeneration — to be born from above, to be born again of the Spirit of God. When that happens in the life of believers, there will be spiritual harmony everywhere.

The impact of this unity in the Christian family cannot be underestimated. We learnt in chapter 5 that when the wife is filled with the Spirit, she will be submissive to her husband and conduct herself gracefully and virtuously in all matters. We also learnt that when the husband is filled with the Spirit, he will love his wife and submit to the love of Christ. As Christ loved the church, so the couple, united together in matrimony, will submit to the lordship of Christ in their marriage.

It follows that harmony in relationships can be ensured only when each member of the family is filled with the Spirit. Attributes such as love, tolerance, submission and reconciliation can become part of a person's

life only if he or she is filled with the Spirit of God.

Let us now look at the operative statements we identified in chapter 6, verses 1 to 4.

Obedience to Parents

It is God's will that children should be obedient to their parents: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right." In Greek the word literally means "to hear under." It does not mean "Listen to me!" We know the way we sometimes lose our temper and say, "Listen to me!" That is not what Paul wants us to do. He is speaking of an ear that is listening, and a heart and mind that are willing to obey — not being forced, but willing to listen.

This is a stronger proposition than the obedience demanded of wives towards their husbands, because the word implies that the obedience is implicit. It is not something to be discussed, as a husband and wife would reason together over a decision they are about to make and then gracefully accept the outcome. Paul wants children to obey their parents implicitly.

This may sound a little harsh on children. But there is a relief that would motivate their obedience: it is God's desire that children should obey their parents "in the Lord." Please turn with me to Colossians chapter 3, verse 20, where we see an amplification of this thought. Here Paul says:

Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. (Colossians 3:20, KJV)

Children who obey godly parents are obeying the Lord, and that is the way children ought to see it — as pleasing to the Lord. It is not just an outward appearance; it is something that should come from within the heart and mind.

Honour the Parents

While the need for children to obey their parents speaks of action, the second term, "honour," speaks of attitude. When God gave his law in the Ten Commandments, the first commandment governing human relationships was "Honour thy father and thy mother." It is the only one of the ten that relates to the family, because that principle alone secures the family's fulfilment as a single unit.

The word "honour" literally means "to estimate" or "to fix value upon." That paints a beautiful picture of honouring father and mother — to value them, to hold them in high esteem. That is honour in the truest sense. This honour is the inward attitude that leads to the outward

obedience of obeying one's parents as unto the Lord. It is not mere obedience, but obedience that comes from a deep love, a deep respect and honour for one's parents.

Paul cites three reasons why he wants children to obey their parents, and to honour them from within their hearts just as they obey and honour the Lord.

Naturally Right

Paul shows us that it is naturally right to obey and honour parents. He says, "for this is right." The parent brought the child into the world and therefore should be obeyed by the child. Even the animal kingdom testifies to that natural order of authority and submission. Those who are immature, impulsive and inexperienced should submit to the authority of their parents, who are older, wiser and more experienced. It is, therefore, a law built into nature, ordained by God in creation. This proves the rightness of obeying one's parents. Sadly, however, as we look at the world, we see this natural relationship between parent and child breaking down — and with it, we see the breakdown of civilisation itself.

Scriptural Adherence

"Honour thy father and thy mother" is also a matter of scriptural adherence — something God has commanded the child to follow. Proverbs 1:8-9 says:

8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9 For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. (Proverbs 1:8-9, KJV)

Again, in Proverbs chapter 4, verses 1 to 3, it is said:

1 Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. 2 For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. 3 For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. (Proverbs 4:1-3, KJV)

In Matthew 15:4 our Lord said:

For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. (Matthew 15:4, KJV)

One can find numerous references along the same lines throughout the Scriptures.

Resultant Blessing

Although honour to parents should first of all be for the Lord's sake, Paul has graciously added the promise of a special blessing for those who obey this command. He echoes Exodus chapter 20, verse 12:

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. (Exodus 20:12, KJV)

Paul is not saying that we will inherit the earth; he is saying that obedience will promote a fuller life. "That thou mayest live long on the earth" — in the Old Testament this meant literal long life, but now it means something more. We all know that obedience and honour to parents does not guarantee long life; a good child can die young. We must understand this as a matter of principle: when children obey their parents in the Lord, they will escape a great deal of sin and danger, and so avoid the things that threaten to shorten their lives. In other words, irrespective of the number of years they live, they will live the most fulfilling life in our Lord.

Now let us look at God's will for fathers. Though Paul used the word "father" in his writing, he probably meant both parents.

Do Not Provoke

Paul emphasises that fathers should not provoke their children. In the days Paul lived, fathers were considered supreme, so it is not surprising that he speaks specifically to fathers. That being so, we need to look at the environment of the time to understand why Paul thought it necessary to instruct fathers in this way.

In those days, among the pagans, and even in many Jewish households, most fathers ruled their families with rigid and domineering authority. The desires and welfare of wives and children were rarely given serious consideration. So much so that when a baby was born, the baby was brought before the father; if he picked up the baby, it was accepted into the family, and if the father did not pick the baby up — believe it or not — it was rejected. Such a baby was either sold or given away, and in some cases left outside the door, where it would freeze to death from exposure. That was legal at the time. That was the world Paul was writing to, so one can imagine the impact of his telling fathers not to provoke their children.

The apostle makes it clear that a Christian father's authority over his children does not allow for unreasonable demands and strictures that might drive his children to anger, despair and resentment. He says, "Provoke not your children to wrath" — meaning, do not abuse the authority given to parents over their children; do not use that authority to ill-treat them. In Colossians chapter 3, verse 21, Paul writes:

Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. (Colossians 3:21, KJV)

He warns parents that if they continue to provoke their children through undue demands, unreasonable restrictions, constant nagging, or unreasonable expectations, the children are most likely to become discouraged and to rebel. We see this pattern almost everywhere in the world, even today. Children need encouragement, whether then or now.

The Greek word for "provoke" means to infuriate, frustrate or incite. Many children have been sinfully driven from the side of the Lord by a harsh, legalistic tyrant who calls himself a father.

Children must be loved; children must know encouragement and self-esteem. You provoke a child by saying one thing and doing another — children see through that right away. You provoke a child by blaming and never praising, by an inconsistent and unfair approach to discipline, by showing favouritism to one child over another, by making unreasonable comparisons, by making a promise and not keeping it, by making light of problems that seem very great to the child. All of these are sure to frustrate a child, leading to provocation and rebellion. Parents, in the first place, are required to be obedient to the Lord and his teaching. Parents should humble themselves and be considerate, tolerant, loving, impartial and, above all, forgiving, just as our Master set the example — and the results would be remarkable. There would be harmony in the house, and the children would learn to look up to their parents, be proud of them, and learn from them to be good human beings in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Nourish

Secondly, Paul tells fathers: do not provoke, but nurture, or nourish, your children. The word "nourish" in Greek literally means "to bring up." "Nourish" conjures up the idea of providing food, shelter and clothing — the basics of life, and a natural responsibility God has ordained for all parents, especially fathers, to provide. But here Paul means more than that. He is speaking of emotional and spiritual nourishment. Parents have the great responsibility of nourishing their children by sharing love and encouragement, and by instilling in them the love of God and the teaching of our Master.

Remember our Lord Jesus Christ as a little boy. Luke 2:52 says:

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52, KJV)

That was a balanced growth if ever there was one. He increased in wisdom — growth intellectually. He increased in stature — growth

physically. In favour with God — spiritual fulfilment. And in favour with man — social acceptance. Our Lord Jesus Christ received the greater part of that formation in the home, with a holy mother and a God-fearing earthly father, and, most importantly, from his heavenly Father — a perfect role model for all ages and times.

In today's context, we live in a fast-changing world; we are, in fact, living a super-express life. Parents have little time for their homes. Working parents have become the norm, and as a result our children are left with strangers to be taken care of. Little children are left in the custody of hired help, who often have little time for somebody else's child, and no time away from their mobile phones. The new concept of pre-nursery and play school has become the standard, and little children now go to school at the age of two. Where, then, do they receive their moral and spiritual nourishment? We hand our children over to be brought up by strangers whom we do not even know. There are undoubtedly material gains for working parents — they may earn a great deal, or climb the professional or business ladder — but their families suffer for want of the attention that is required.

We dare not let the world bring up our children; we must nourish and cherish them ourselves. Otherwise the result will be disastrous, and at times beyond any hope of correction.

Discipline

Here is a fitting quotation on this point:

What if God should place in your hand a diamond, and tell you to inscribe on it a sentence which should be read at the last day, and be shown then as an index of your own thoughts and feelings? What care, what caution, would you exercise in the selection! Now, this is what God has done. He has placed before you the immortal minds of your children, more imperishable than the diamond, on which you are inscribing, every day and every hour, by your instruction, by your spirit, or by your example, something which will remain and be exhibited for or against you at the judgment day.

We are to discipline our children. The word "nurture" is perhaps a rather weak translation; a stronger rendering would be "chasten." It carries the idea of learning through discipline, and speaks of the corrections that may be required as we go along. Today's psychologists, educators, child welfare workers and social workers may have much to say about child discipline. They see it as an ancient philosophy that civilisation has evolved beyond. The cry is: "Let them express themselves! Let them do as they wish! If you discipline them, if you punish them, it will suppress their personalities and perhaps warp their

characters."

A heavy-handed approach to child discipline, however, is forbidden by the word of God. "Provoke not thy children to wrath" covers it: do not correct them in anger, lest you injure their body or their spirit, and they turn away from you, or from God.

Instruct

Fourthly, Paul says "instruct" — "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." This implies "to instruct" and "to encourage." It calls for systematic and balanced discipline and instruction, bringing children to respect the commands of the Lord as the foundation of all life, godliness and blessing. The book of Proverbs is full of this — a picture of a father encouraging, sharing wise counsel with his own children. If we do not teach them, the world will teach them, and we know how the world loves to get at them.

Paul is telling us that if children are left to themselves, they will become rebels. In fact, if any of us are left to ourselves, we too become rebels. Had we not been arrested by the grace of God along life's road, and converted by his Son, we would have continued as servants of sin and slaves to our bodily and fleshly desires. Little children are no different. Paul therefore tells parents in chapter 6, verse 4: train them, instruct them.

But here, as we close, is God's instruction to us:

Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.
(Deuteronomy 6:7, KJV)

Now here is the question: do we teach our children the word of God, and do we talk to them about it? Do we instruct them to fear sin, and inform and excite them about their duties towards God? It will not give you the perfect child, but it will give them the greatest opportunity of living a godly life in a sinful world.

And sadly, as we read the word of God, the Bible records the unhappy consequences for men who did not instruct or train their children. We read of David, who neglected Absalom and then pampered him, and later we find a dead Absalom. No matter how David wept over him, it would not bring him back. David set a bad example, and the result was death; Absalom himself had rebelled against his own father. Then there is Eli, who failed to discipline his sons; the word of God tells us that this brought disgrace and defeat to Israel. God said that his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not; and God cursed the land because of it. We read of Isaac, who pampered Esau, while his wife

showed favouritism towards Jacob — and the result was a divided home and a divided nation.

Ten Commandments for Parents

In conclusion, here are ten commandments for parents, all drawn from the Scriptures:

1. Teach them, using God's word — Deuteronomy 6:4-9.
2. Tell them what is right and wrong — 1 Kings 1:6.
3. See them as gifts from God — Psalm 127:3.
4. Guide them in godly ways — Proverbs 22:6.
5. Discipline them — Proverbs 29:17.
6. Love them unconditionally — Luke 15:11-32.
7. Do not provoke them to wrath — Ephesians 6:4.
8. Earn their respect by example — 1 Timothy 3:4.
9. Provide for their physical needs — 1 Timothy 5:8.
10. Pass your faith along to them — 2 Timothy 1:5.

Amen.