

In Christ: At Home and Work
The Truth about our Life in Christ
Ephesians 6:1-9
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I think all of us understand that the environment where it's easiest to put on a mask and pretend to be super-Christian is this environment here. Anybody can put on a mask and show up here at church for a couple of hours and appear to be super-Christian. I think it is equally true that the one environment where it's the most difficult to hide or pretend or wear a mask is at home. I think it is fair to say who you are at home is who you are.

So what does it look like to be *in Christ* at home? We started this conversation last week. We want to continue this week. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ephesians, Chapter 6, starting into the last chapter of Ephesians. This whole discussion started in chapter 5, verse 18—that God's will for our lives is that we be filled with the Spirit. It results in a mutual submission one to another, verse 21, and then rolls into this conversation: last week—what does it look like between the relationship of a husband and a wife; this morning—parents and children, and then slaves and masters.

A couple of background issues that would be helpful to know: One is Paul chooses these three couplets—husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters. In each of those he starts with the person in the relationship that the culture devalued. You start with the wives; you start with the children; you start with the slaves. Those three groups of people would have been highly mistreated and devalued in a first century Roman culture. So Paul starts with them basically in a way of honoring them because it's all new now in this new culture in Christ. He told us in chapter 3 that as people in Christ there's nobody that's *more than*, nobody that's *less than*; we're all of equal value. So what does that look like now in these various relationships? It's also helpful to understand these three categories of people—wives, children, and slaves—by and large were not allowed in teaching environments. The idea was they just didn't have enough value to even be taught. So it's worth noting that in the text Paul isn't saying, "Husbands, you need to tell your wife this. Parents, you need to tell your children this. Masters, you need to tell the slaves this." But actually they're spoken to directly because Paul's assumption is they are in the teaching environment. This is a new environment. So appreciate how absolutely radical this was in a first century Roman culture. Chapter 6, verse 1:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (*NASB, Eph. 6:1)

Children is kind of a broad, Greek word that would include anyone under the authority of a parent; so children, teenagers, anybody still at home under the authority of a parent is included in that term. What is the responsibility of children? To **obey your parents in the Lord**; that phrase, **in the Lord**, very similar to what we saw in chapter 5, verse 22, is a reminder that ultimately what the children are modeling is the church's obedience to Christ. So everything that we as parents would expect from our children, Christ expects from us in terms of our behavior, our surrender, our response or submission to Him. So they are to respond to *their* parents as we would expect us as the children of God to respond to *our* heavenly Parent.

The text says, "**Children, obey your parents in the Lord...**" Why? "For they are always right!" (*laughter*) That's actually *not* what the text says. It's not because they're always right; it's because

they're *not* always right. I would like to tell you as a parent I always got it right. I *wanted* to always get it right, but I didn't. Sometimes I just didn't get it right. I find parenting to be very complicated. These children are people whom you deeply love and you've been given a responsibility to steward them, which includes not only protecting them—which frankly is the easy part—but also to prepare them to go out into a world that is dangerous and hurtful and confusing. And sometimes as parents it's very difficult to know what is the right thing to do? So as a parent—true confession—we don't always get it right. But what the text is saying is children need to respect the authority that's been put in their lives because *that's the right thing to do*. Then he goes on in verse 2 and quotes the 5th of the Ten Commandments:

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment, with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. (Vs. 2-3)

Now there are several challenging things with verses 2 and 3. The word **honor** means to *value or esteem*. **Honor your father and mother**...and then it gets difficult...**which is the first commandment with a promise**. We're left with the discussion, what does that mean? Some would say it's the first commandment, meaning most important commandment, but that really doesn't seem to wash. Jesus was very clear. The most important commandment is "*to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength*;" the first commandment *is* the most important commandment. There aren't too many people, then, who take that view.

A very popular view would be it is just simply the first of the Ten Commandments that includes a promise. The discussion then centers around the 2nd commandment that also seems to have a promise, and so it's not the first commandment with a promise and so the discussion goes, "Maybe the 2nd commandment isn't really a promise; it's just kind of a consequence of the choices that are made, and maybe that is what Paul is saying." That argument still seems rather weak.

My opinion would be what Paul is saying is: "How does a child fulfill the first commandment?" And the answer would be: "By the 5th commandment." In other words, who are the God figures in the life of a child? How does a child really understand what it means to obey and to love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength? It starts by learning to obey those who represent God to him or her, so it's the 5th commandment! So by obeying the 5th commandment, they are learning what it means to obey the 1st commandment. So, in essence to a child, the 5th commandment is the 1st commandment. So if you're going to rewrite it that way—and in the Greek language there isn't really punctuation; it's always a guessing game—it would look like this: This is the first commandment, (comma) and it includes a promise. So in other words Paul is saying that for a child this is their first commandment that teaches them how to obey *the* first commandment, and by the way, it's so important it includes a promise.

So now we get into the challenge of the promise. If you go back up and look it up in the Old Testament, it's not worded exactly the way Paul words it here because he's trying to adjust for how does it apply now to us in the New Covenant? The promise in the Ten Commandments was about a nation and a nation that was the ethnic nation of Israel inheriting a physical piece of land, the Land of Promise. So the idea was as a nation, an ethnic nation, that they would go into a physical piece of ground and they would live long and prosper there if each generation learned to honor their father and mother, thereby learning how to honor God, thereby God would bless them in the nation. It's what we refer to as a national promise. Another way of saying that is it's a group promise. By and large that was true of the nation, but that was not to say that every single child that honored father

and mother lived a long and prosperous life. They didn't. Some of them died very young. But by and large, as a nation, that promise held true.

So then how do we bring that into contemporary culture? We're not an ethnic people. We're not a nation. We don't inherit a literal, physical piece of ground. So Paul kind of edits it a little bit and basically says that, by and large that we, as the church, will experience long and prosperous lives if we learn how to obey mother and father, which teaches us how to honor and obey God. And I think studies would show by and large that is true. If you want to prosper in life, you have to learn how to submit and obey those who are in authority over you. But again, it still remains a group promise, meaning that what the text is *not* saying is that every child that honors father and mother is guaranteed to live a long, prosperous life. That just simply isn't true. There are children who have been very honorable to their mothers and fathers who died at a very young age. They're the exception to the promise, but it's not a "Lets Make a Deal" theology. This is where we often believe something that isn't true; then it breaks our heart. If you think God is saying if your child honors father and mother that God is promising that they will live long, prosperous lives, but then tragically that child dies, it breaks your heart. There's an understanding that God didn't keep His promise; God ripped us off; when the reality is we were claiming something God didn't say. So by and large, principally speaking, that is true; and over the church in general, it is true, but it doesn't mean that will be absolutely true for every single child. So that's where it gets a little bit confusing.

Basically then the opening challenge is for children, teenagers, to respect their parents, to honor them as the authority that God has put into their lives. That, then, becomes a picture for all of us that this is how Christ expects us as the church, the children of God, to respond to Him as our parent. If a child wants to experience freedom, it's a bit counterintuitive. Freedom comes when you learn to submit and obey those in authority over you.

Years ago when Patty and I lived in town, we lived down around 40th and Highway 2, and I had a Golden Retriever. Of all the dogs I've had (and I've had quite a few), he is by far my favorite. He was just an obedience machine. Probably three or four times a week we would get out in the neighborhood and on the bike path and we would go for walks, and I virtually never took a leash. I just didn't have to. The dog always stayed right at my side. When we would get to the park, I'd turn him loose to play. When I said, "Come back," he'd come back, and he'd walk beside me just like a machine. When we'd walk through the neighborhoods, we always encountered dogs that were chained to the porch or to a pole or to tree. I remember some particularly, always chained to a big tree in the front lawn, and those dogs would take off toward us and then hit the end of the chain and practically strangle themselves, and they always had this look in their eyes like, "What's the deal?" And I'm sure I used to see Jacob kind of look up at me with a smirk on his face, (*laughter*) without a leash, and we would walk on. The dogs in those yards so desperately wanted to be free, but it was free on their own terms and because of that, they ended up spending their lives chained to a tree. Jacob on the other hand chose to surrender his will to mine and experience freedom on my terms. Therefore what he got in return was almost unlimited freedom.

When my girls were going through their adolescent years, they had almost unlimited freedom. And one of the things I used to hear from their peers is that they wanted that same freedom. They would talk about my girls' freedom and then they would talk about how their parents just don't give them the same freedom. On more than one occasion I told them the story I just told you, and I would tell them the problem is you want freedom on your terms, and because of that your parents can no longer trust you. Therefore they chain you to a tree. And the reason my girls had unlimited freedom is because each of them chose to surrender to my rules, to my guidelines, to what I asked

of them, and as long as they chose to surrender to me, what they got in return was almost unlimited freedom.

That is an accurate picture of our lives as Christians. If we're determined to pursue freedom on our own terms, trust me, you're going to end up chained to a tree. But if you're willing to surrender and to experience freedom on God's terms, in return what God gives you is almost unlimited freedom. That's kind of the message from verses 1, 2, and 3. Of course children flourish best when parents do their job well which is the next part of the discussion. Verse 4:

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...

Now some would translate that "*parents*"; I think it's specifically, **fathers**. There is a Greek word for parents; it's the word used in verse 1, but in verse 2 you have two distinct terms—father and mother—**honor your father and your mother**. It's the word from verse 2 that's used in verse 4, so I think clearly Paul is specifically addressing *fathers*. I think there are a couple of reasons for that: One is because in a first century Roman culture a father could do literally anything to a child without recourse. A father could sell a child into slavery. A father could abuse a child anyway that he wanted. A father even had permission to put his child to death under the law. So imagine a culture where fathers could do virtually anything to a child; imagine the level of mistreatment and abuse that often defined those relationships. So, again, Paul is calling these fathers to a whole different standard. I think it also represents that the biblical role of the father is to be the primary disciplinarian. He represents the disciplining, instructing nature of God, whereas a mom represents the nourishing character or part of God. So the fathers are the most likely to exacerbate, to frustrate their children. So fathers, "Don't do that; don't make your children angry; **don't provoke your children to anger**." But do what?

...but bring them up... (Vs. 4b)

That phrase **bring them up** is the exact same word that is used in chapter 5, verse 29, translated *nourishes*; he nourishes his own flesh. So imagine a father who previously could do anything he wanted to his children; now, in this new economy under God, he is actually challenged to *not provoke your children to anger*, but actually to nourish them—a dramatic change.

...but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Vs. 4c)

Both the term **discipline and instruction** have strong teaching overtones. **Discipline** is the idea of *correction*. **Instruction** carries more the idea of *verbal instruction and teaching*. It's very helpful to understand that ultimately discipline is meant for teaching. It's not punitive; it's not punishment. It's really helpful to remember, then, when I as a father am disciplining my children, I am demonstrating for them, "This is how God disciplines you." Hebrews, chapter 12 is the most obvious text on that. In Hebrews 12 it talks about: if you love your children, you discipline them. If you don't discipline them, you obviously don't love them. But there's also the reminder that *how* you discipline those children is a picture of how God disciplines us. I think it's very helpful for every parent to have in his or her mind, before you discipline your children, to be aware of what I am about to teach you is: this is how God treats you. When was the last time God lost his temper on you? When was the last time when God took you by the arm and shook you? When was the last time God aggressively plopped you down in a chair? Is that how God cares for you? Is that how God disciplines you? And so we rightly picture the discipline of God for us as we discipline our children. And again, Romans reminds us "*There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ*

Jesus.” When Jesus disciplines us, He is correcting us in order to teach us. It’s not punitive; He’s not just punishing us. It’s corrective.

Oftentimes I hear parents say, “But I still have to punish you.” I don’t really know what that phrase means. In God’s economy, if your child has done something wrong and you have that discussion and you conclude that that child has listened to me and I believe understands and will not repeat the same behavior, that’s what we want. The need to punish beyond that is more reflective of the *Law* than it is reflective of life under *grace*. All we’re asking is to correct the behavior because we love that child. So the text is saying that the role of the father is to nourish his children and he does that by disciplining them, which is a way of teaching them and by instructing them—verbally instructing them in the Lord.

I would say, by and large, as parents we have a habit of disciplining way more than teaching. I would encourage you to think about doing it just the opposite. I think oftentimes we’re disciplining before our children really clearly understand what you’re asking of them. I would spend much more time teaching and less time disciplining. Basically the way it makes sense to me is I think I need to teach and teach and teach and teach over and over again until I am convinced that my child knows exactly what I’m asking. I don’t think we’re nearly as clear as we think we are.

Once I believe my child knows exactly what I’m asking, but chooses willfully to disobey, then there’s a need to be disciplined or to be corrected. I think as a child grows up and gets into those teen years, I think there’s far more risk; I think a parent of a teenager can’t make as many mistakes as you made when your children were younger. The stakes get higher and higher. So my advice is that I think there are three things that are very helpful in parenting a teenager. Number one: Ask more questions...ask more questions! Number two: Become a better listener, and number three: minimize the lectures. Lectures by and large don’t work. I would say having a lot of teenagers hang out at our house for lots of years, if I boiled it all down, the three complaints I heard the most often: too many lectures; my parents don’t listen, and I wish my parents would ask more questions! Oftentimes we are jumping to conclusions and disciplining for something we don’t really even understand.

Part then, again, of the application of this text is that how you were parented, and specifically this morning by your father, has dramatically shaped your view of God. Whether your father was an absentee father, whether he was an abusive father, whether he was a passive father, whether he was a great father—whatever your story is, however you were parented, and particularly as it relates to your father—has dramatically affected your view of God. If you grew up in a home where your dad was never satisfied—good was never good enough—chances are you see God that way. Perhaps you grew up in a home where your dad had a quick temper and you never knew when your dad was going to go off. I would suggest you probably struggle with intimacy with God because you can never be intimate with someone with whom you feel unsafe; and if you feel like at any moment God’s going to go off like your dad used to go off, it really prohibits your ability to be intimate with God. So think about your life growing up, what did you experience with your father, and how might that have affected your view of God?

Over a lifetime you have to separate out: This is earthly dad; this is heavenly Dad, and begin to realize they are not necessarily one in the same. Years ago Paul Vitz, who was the head of Psychology at New York University, wrote a book called, *Faith of the Fatherless*, and basically he’s making a case as a psychologist that the overwhelming majority of atheists had deep father wounds—either an absentee father or an abusive father. So if your experience is such with your earthly father, and God is portrayed as the ultimate heavenly Father, the only way they can deal

with that deep father wound is just to determine more in their emotion than their head that God doesn't exist. And so they dismiss God as a concept. It's a very interesting book and it reminds us how dramatically our experiences with our earthly fathers do affect our view of God.

Starting then in verse 5, he moves to the discussion of slaves and masters. Now this concept of slavery gets confusing sometimes in the Scriptures because at times it almost seems like the Bible endorses such behavior. So it's helpful to get a little background. In the ancient world where there were nations or often walled cities that were nations unto themselves, when they would engage in combat, when you ultimately defeated another nation, what are you going to do with all those people? They didn't have sophisticated prison and jail systems like we have today. So what do you do with them? There were two options: Either you slaughter them all or you bring them back and you make them into slaves. The one option you don't have is, you can't release them. They just go back and regroup and come attack again. So in many ways in an ancient culture, slavery was by far the more humane option. In the Roman Empire, roughly one-third of the Roman Empire was slavery. Slaves were anything from simple laborers to professionals. They were doctors and teachers and lawyers. Some slaves were treated extremely poorly; some were treated extremely well, and everything in between. There were even people in the Roman Empire that willingly sold themselves into slavery because they could experience a better life than what they were experiencing on their own. So it's really a very different culture than what we went through as a nation.

Also, it's helpful to understand you're talking about a few fledgling Christians who simply had no capacity to turn over the Roman Empire that was one-third slavery, so what they are left with is: what does it look like to be *in Christ* in this context? So imagine this: One day you're the master and you have a slave and then both of you come to Christ. You get to Ephesians chapter 3 and the teaching is you are equal before God in every single way. There no longer is this sense of master and slave, but brothers in Christ. But how is that lived out in their culture? So that's the nature of the discussion here. For us, I would say it's any relationship where there is an authority and submission relationship—for a student with your teachers, for employees with your employers, business owners with the people that work for you, with citizens under a government—wherever you see that kind of a structure.

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh... (Vs. 5a)

According to the flesh is saying these roles apply on earth. It's necessary to have roles in order for a society to function, but before God we are equal in every way. The slave is equal to the master.

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling... (Vs. 5b)

In other words respecting that the master is still the master; the employer is still the employer; the government is still the government. There are some realities of that and if you challenge that, you may find out what those realities are.

...in the sincerity of your heart as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. (Vs. 5c-8)

Basically the text is saying, “Do your best!” Do the right thing, not just when people are watching, which is what the world does, but because ultimately you are serving Christ, and Christ is always watching. So whatever your role is, seek to be faithful, and sincerely choose to do your best. I think there’s also an acknowledgement that you might not always be treated fairly. You may choose to do your best at work and somebody else beside you works the system and gets the promotion that you deserved. At the end of the day, it’s not always going to be fair, but it’s important to remember ultimately the one you are serving is God, and God always sees the truth, and God is ultimately your rewarder. So you’re not just serving human authorities, you’re ultimately serving Christ, and you have to trust at the end of the day, God will reward you and God will do what is fair. Verse 9:

And masters, do the same things to them...

It’s very interesting that he doesn’t go back through his same spiel again, but rather he just says, “Masters, it’s the same for you.” Actually if you go back and read through from 5:22 on—basically what God is asking of wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters is exactly the same thing. He’s asking all of them to live out *in Christ* in whatever that role is—to rightly represent Christ. All of us are mutually submissive to one another (5:21) and then how does that heart of humility look whether you’re the boss or whether you’re the employee, whether you’re the husband or the wife or parent or child? And I think that’s why at the end of this discussion he says, “Masters, it’s just all the same for you. I’m asking the same from the masters as I’m asking from the slave.” Now, again, stop and think about: if you’ve been a master, your slave was basically a possession and you could do anything you wanted under the law to this slave. Now in this new economy under Christ, what Paul is saying is it’s not like that anymore. You now have a responsibility before God to treat that person as a brother or sister in Christ and do the right thing before God. It was totally turning these relationships upside down. So he says:

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. (Vs 9)

It’s a very helpful perspective to realize that in the home before Christ, your child is just as valuable, equal in every way before Christ, as the parent. The husband and the wife, the slave and the master—**there is no partiality** before God. Therefore, with that in mind, it needs to be lived out in the most ordinary, everyday context of life. If you’re a business owner, you have a responsibility to those employees to represent Christ to them in how you treat them in every way. If you are an employee, you have a responsibility as an employee to represent Christ to your boss, to the business owner, to represent Christ in every way in that role. If you’re a student, your responsibility is to represent Christ to your teachers and to the administration—to say this is what it looks like to be *in Christ* as a student. Most of us throughout the week have different roles—we put on different hats—so this is going to be fulfilled in different ways. But, at the end of the day, it goes back to 5:21—a heart of brokenness and submission and humility.

Now that we’ve defined our identity in Christ, it sets us free to fulfill these roles as God has called us. In a sense, when you think about what God is asking in the most ordinary, everyday relationships, day in, day out, in some ways it seems overwhelming. It almost seems impossible, which takes us back to chapter 5, verse 18. That’s why God’s will for you is *to be filled with the Spirit*. There is virtually no way you can do what God is asking apart from the power of the Spirit of God in you, empowering you to live out *in Christ* in the most ordinary, everyday roles of your life.

Father, we celebrate today what it means to be in Christ, but we also understand with that comes great responsibility to represent this new economy, this new context, into a selfish and confused world. God, only by the power of Your Spirit will we be able to fulfill our calling. Lord, I pray for each of us as husbands and wives, as parents and children, as business owners, as employers, as employees, as students and teachers, as citizens and government, Lord, that we would rightly represent Christ in the context where You have placed us for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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