

Ephesians 5-6

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to turn back to the passage which we read in the letter to the Ephesians and look for a few moments at the opening verses of chapter 6.

That's on page 1177 of the Pew Bible. Children, obey your parents and the Lord, for this is right.

But, honour your father and mother, which is the first commandment of the promise, that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

The story is told of a family that had a special vase in the living room, which had been in that family for many generations.

[1 : 07] And it was highly regarded by all members of the family. It was passed on from one generation to another. And it was there on a small table in the living room.

It was regularly dusted and treated with great respect. However, one of the younger members of the family one day took this beautiful vase and was admiring it when he accidentally dropped it.

And it smashed into pieces. And the spirits were very upset. And they said, don't you realise that this vase has been in this family for many generations and we've respected it, we've kept it whole.

And the young man said, well, he said, I'm afraid this generation has dropped it. Now, there are many things that this generation has dropped.

And one of the things that this generation which we now live is dropping is the biblical concern for the family.

[2 : 17] We live in an age in which family life in many ways is under assault. The deconstruction of the Christian family is part of an attempt by some at least in our society to, as it were, deconstruct Western civilization and Western culture and we live in a society where what is regarded as traditional is regarded with suspicion and has to be, as they say, deconstructed and then reconstructed in some new way.

And in our society today, our Western society, we have been very much influenced by Christian values as well as by the classical values of ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

that those who are bent on deconstructing our Western civilization are focusing on these key issues, these key things, the cement, that keep our culture together.

So I was coming up on the train last night. I read a review of a book in one of the weekly supplements, which was a review really of two books, two books which were in celebrating atheism and decrying religion.

And the reviewer made a very interesting point, and I just quote from what he said. He said, Religion is not something distinct from culture as a whole. It is not a brick in the wall ready for neat extraction, but the mortar holding together the entire building.

[4 : 01] Even our own secular civilization is more deeply pervaded by Christian assumptions than most of us realize. A lot of people think that they can just remove a brick and the wall will remain standing.

But what this reviewer is saying is that things like the family are simply not the bricks, they are the cement. And if you take these away, then you will have the dissolution of our Western values and the Christian content that they exhibit.

So I thought it would be appropriate for us today, given that a week today, in seven days' time, in the UK, at least we celebrate Father's Day.

And as we prepare for that, I thought a reflection on the Christian family might be appropriate.

Now Paul is writing here against a background of two cultures. There's the culture to which he belonged ethnically, the Jewish culture, which had a strong emphasis on the family.

[5 : 22] But he himself was brought up in a Greek-speaking city. He was a Roman citizen. And in that particular culture, families tended to have a much lower value and be much less highly regarded.

And so we see here Paul affirming what was good in the culture to which he belonged, but at the same time confronting the lack of family values in the Roman and Hellenistic culture in which he lived.

Now in the culture of ancient Israel, juvenile delinquency was almost unheard of. To attack one's parents in ancient Israel was a capital offence.

And perhaps as a result of that, there is very little evidence in the Old Testament or in such secular history as we have from the period of juvenile rebellion and juvenile delinquency.

Paul certainly regarded the situation around him in the Roman Empire in which there was widespread disrespect for family values as evidence of a sick society.

[6 : 53] A society which God, in a sense, had given up in judgment. A society which was going against God rather than with God.

There's a very real sense that the Bible presents a picture of society in which society is a pyramid of families. And the health of the family determines the health of society.

Now these values are of great importance. It's important, I think, for us to recognize this. Now, I do believe that the Bible has something to say also about those who are called to singleness.

And there is a Christian calling of singleness. And anything that I say this morning, I don't want to disparage in any way those who may be called to singleness.

They have a very real contribution to make to the family of God and to the families to which they belong. But having said that, the nuclear family is a key component in God's pattern.

[8 : 05] God's pattern for society today and every day. Paul is speaking here about the Christian family because he's saying children will be your pains in the Lord.

That is, you do it for the sake of the Lord, you do it as those who believe in the Lord. There's a sense in which children of Christian parents share in their parents' relationship with the Lord.

And we reflect that in the practice of infant baptism when we believe that the faith of the parents stands vicariously for their children until the children themselves come to an age of responsibility.

And what Paul is saying here is that Christian values ought to be the values by which we live as the children live in Christian homes until they themselves are in a position to affirm these values for themselves.

Now it's important to recognize that in this passage we have at the very beginning, although in the NIV it's in the previous section for some strange reason, verse 21 where we have an exhortation to mutual submission.

[9 : 29] Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. And so we're talking here not about a one-sided submit submission.

We're talking about mutual submission. And just as husbands are to submit to their wives as well as wives submit to their husbands, so also parents are in certain circumstances and ways to submit to their children as well as the children submit to their parents.

So we are to submit to one another. We are not here, I don't think Paul is presenting to us here an authoritarian regime.

He is emphasizing that there is an authority structure in the family and in society, but that is not authoritarian. There is a mutual submission, there is a mutual respect, one for the other.

So for a few moments I would like just to emphasize the obligations of children and then the obligations of parents. Children are to obey their parents and the Lord for this is right.

[10 : 41] There is an authority structure in the family and the parents, the children are to respect the authority of their parents.

This duty imposed upon children is not of course absolute. If a father or mother were to tell a child to do something which was clearly harmful to themselves or hurtful to others, then the child would have the right to refuse.

But generally speaking, what Paul is saying here is that there is an authority structure in the home and that children are to obey their parents.

He said this is right, it's a moral obligation, it's one of the Ten Commandments. We are to honor our parents according to the Fifth Commandment. We are to honor them and to respect them and to obey them and not simply when we are underage but we are to honor them right throughout their lives and show them the greatest of respect.

Paul says that this is not only something which is right, something which is built into the moral law of God, given to the whole universe, not just to the ancient people of Israel, but it is also the first commandment with a promise.

[12 : 03] The promise was that as we know from the commandment that they would have lived upon the earth, that they would live long upon the earth.

The reference to the earth very often in the Old Testament is a reference to the land, the land of promise. in the Aramaic language, the word for earth and the word for land are identical and we see that Jesus recognizes this in the Beatitudes when he speaks about the meek shall inherit the earth.

Jesus there is using, I think, the idea of the land, the figure, it's a metaphor and it's not to be interpreted literally, it's a metaphor, they will inherit the kingdom of God because the promised land was a type of the kingdom of God and that's probably what is at the back of the fifth commandment that we shall live long upon the earth if we honour our parents.

we will become, we will have this privilege of living in the kingdom of God. It's not something purely earthly, it's not something purely material, it is referring here to the great spiritual realities of the kingdom of God.

This certainly was the interpretation of the commandment in the early church, John Chrysostom, who was one of the great preachers of the early centuries said, commenting on this commandment, seek not that the child should live a long life here, but that he or she might have a boundless and endless life hereafter.

[13 : 55] Now, as I've said, in our Western society there tends to be an expectation that children will rebel against their parents.

I think that as Christians we ought to try to resist this. As we'll see in a moment, we must not exasperate our children, but on the other hand, we ought not to expect them to rebel.

We ought not to expect some manifestation of some form of delinquency. We ought to expect them to trust in the Lord and encourage them to trust in the Lord and to believe in the Lord, to bring them up to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

trust. Now, often children who are brought up in Christian homes do not come to believe.

Sometimes, often they do, often they don't. And it's not always the fault of the parents when this happens. And I think it's important for us, those of us who are parents who may be in that kind of situation, to recognize that children as they grow up have come to an age of responsibility and they're called upon to make their own decisions before God and we must respect that.

[15 : 28] However much we may be concerned about it, it is a matter for prayer rather than for coercion.

And this often happens. And there are many stories of children who in reaching the age of adolescence do rebel and later life come back to trust in the Lord and we need to pray that that may be the case.

Indeed, if we believe the covenant promises we ought to expect that to happen and that it is not happening, perhaps we need to ask God to show us why it is not happening and plead with God to fulfill his covenant promises as the psalmist did repeatedly.

So Paul is emphasizing here that the obligation of children is to obey their parents. There is an authority structure, it is not authoritarian, but it is certainly authority.

We live in an age of autonomy, of independence, rather than of respect for authority. autonomy. But we all know that you can only push autonomy so far until everything collapses.

[16 : 46] The reason when you drive on the road that you're able to get to Dundee or wherever you go to is that everyone or most of the people obey the rules. And if people just drive as they, whatever way they want, then you have a problem.

Someone was telling me recently that they visited Nigeria and that the street, you know, a double jewel carriageway got so clogged up that the driver just moved on to the other side and went down against the traffic.

Of course, within five minutes, no one went anywhere. Everything stopped. The whole road system came to change, was in chaos. And that's what will happen unless we have this inbuilt respect for authority that God has given to us.

We have a spiritual independence before God that is true, but it's not an independence to do what we like, it's not an autonomy. It is the right to trust God.

God has called us to trust him and to honour him. And we live in a society which has fallen and therefore we have a, if you like, in the fall, as a result of the fall, we have this inbuilt bias against doing what is right.

[18 : 06] And we have to recognise that. We can't, as it were, wish that away. That is there. That there is this authority structure in life that God has created which I think we need to respect.

And we see it in the home. And parents, children, sorry, children must first of all respect that. But then we come secondly to the obligation of parents in the fourth verse.

Fathers, and here fathers includes mothers, do not exacerbate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Now Paul here is going very much counter culture to the Roman and Hellenistic society which he knew.

In Roman law the Patria Potestas gave absolute dominion of a father over his children. He was entitled in law to expose an unwanted infant and leave that infant to die.

He was entitled in law to sell a grown child into slavery. He was entitled by law to disinherit his children, to scourge him which was a terrible thing and even to imprison him and even to have a child.

[19 : 26] quote to death. Now that is the background against which Paul is writing. That was the culture in which the people in Ephesus and the churches around Ephesus were living.

And Paul is saying that in that society parents must have this respect for their children not to exasperate their children and to bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

So Paul is here warning those of us who are parents against harshness and high-handed treatment in dealing with our children.

And perhaps it's worth bearing in mind that sometimes when our children go in the direction we would not like them to go, it may be that we are to blame, at least in part, as well as they.

We need to be careful lest we exercise the authority that God has given us in a capricious and in a tyrannical way. Discipline and authority is one thing, but unnecessary rules and regulations and petty corrections are another.

[20 : 55] Now such parental insensitivity can lead to exasperation. The idea behind this word exasperation, this latest exasperation here is we make the children angry.

We make the children angry in a way which they ought not to need to be angry. In the parallel passage to the Colossians where Paul has a similar emphasis, he speaks about discouraging the children.

So we can really make them angry, make them rebel, or we can simply discourage them and they give up. And those of us who are parents need to be very sensitive here and to get the balance right, to recognize there is an authority structure, that we're not to exercise to apply that authority structure in a way that's going to cause rebellion, unnecessary rebellion, or discouragement so that people just, our children just give up.

Rather we're to bring them up, we're told, in the instruction, in the training and instruction of the Lord. We're to bring them up.

life. This is the same word that Paul has used earlier in Christ feeding the church.

[22 : 29] It's got a sense of nourishment. We need to, you know how we've got, those of us who are interested in houseplants, or gardening, we water the plants, we feed the plants, we encourage them to grow.

And that's the idea that Paul is seeing here, we need to encourage our children to grow, to grow not simply intellectually, to grow not simply physically, but to grow spiritually, to be brought up in the sense of nourishing them in the kingdom of God.

And we're to help them to grow by bringing them up in training and instruction of the Lord. This word is a word which is sometimes used in the sense of discipline in the New Testament, and it can have that sense as it does have in the 12th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews.

But here I think it means education in the widest sense. It's important for us, I think, to help our children to see that the whole educational process is within the framework of the kingdom of God.

And that the Bible is not just the Bible is here and secular education is there, but that we need to bring the Bible around it all, and that's the framework.

[23 : 56] That is the way in which people see it. Children wouldn't understand the term worldview, but it's helping children to have a biblical worldview so that they see the world and they see life in terms of the biblical story, in terms of the biblical teaching that we give.

That's why it's so important not to abandon our children to the Sunday school teacher, important as the Sunday school's role is. We need to recognize that the essential teaching is given at home, and it is in the home, and it is parents who have the prime responsibility to provide this biblical framework to life, so that education in its broader senses, seen within a Christian context.

The word instruction here is a practical word. It sometimes is translated correction, or even as rebuke.

And there are times when we do need to correct our children. There are times when we need to say no, and if we don't, then we discover that we may have problems of discipline later on.

But it's important that when we do say no, and when we are negative, that we do it in the right spirit, in a way which demonstrates that we're doing it for their good, that we're not simply imposing an authoritarian regime, but that we're seeking their well-being and ultimate spiritual good.

[25 : 36] The key is that this instruction is the instruction of the Lord. We've got the phrase here, of the Lord, at the end of verse 4, and we've got the phrase, in the Lord, near the beginning of verse 6.

And all of this is to be seen in the Lord. It's in the Lord and of the Lord. Lord. And that's, we're called to live our lives and to help other people to live their lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And ultimately, that is the ultimate point of authority in the life of the Christian family. Jesus is Lord, and we are called to live our lives, our family life, our individual life, our church life, as an acknowledgement, as a submission of Jesus as Lord.

And here we see the importance, as I've said, of teaching the Word of God. R. W. Dale, who was an English preacher of a previous generation, spoke on these words, emphasising that they express the highest duty of Christian parents.

and I quote what he said. Parents, he said, should care more for the loyalty of their children to Christ than for anything besides.

[27 : 09] More for this than for their health, their intellectual vigor and brilliance, their material prosperity, their social position, their exemption from great sorrows and great misfortunes.

parents. The supreme value of a Christian parent, he says, is to have a concern for the spiritual loyalty of their children to Christ.

That's why Paul wrote this. And that's why God has placed us in the families in order that these families might be the seedbed of the church of the future.

And that we may see in our families young people growing up into Christ, trusting in him and becoming servants of the church and instruments of the kingdom of God.

May that be through all of our families. May it be through all of us, whether we are parents or not. That we may seek to serve the kingdom of God.

[28 : 19] And that we may have this concern for the younger generation to recognize that the young people are the future. And that is where we need to make, if you like, our greatest investment if we're going to invest for the future.

Children are the future, not only of the country, but the future of the church. church. And parents have a key, key role to play here.

And although I know sometimes people think that the Bible emphasizes the role of men more than women, that is strictly speaking not true. The role of the mother in the Bible is crucial.

The role of the mother is absolutely crucial, in many ways much more influential than the role of the father. And this has been confirmed today by sociologists who are seeking to help people to become democratic throughout the world, to value freedom.

And they tell us that the biggest single indicator of social change for the good is female literacy. society. And that tells me that the people who change society are the mothers and the women.

[29 : 44] Not the men who pass the laws in many countries. The women, the home, is the key influencer still in our society. It's an enormous privilege and women especially have a tremendous privilege, a tremendous responsibility.

responsibility. But that responsibility is a responsibility of all of us, fathers as well as mothers, singles as well as married, old as well as young. We all have a responsibility to care for the younger generation, to care for the future and to commit ourselves not simply to the present but to the future of the kingdom of God.

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