

Submit to One Another, Part 3

“Under Your Roof”

Ephesians 5:21; 6:1-4

Do you remember when Mary and Joseph left the Passover in Jerusalem to return to Nazareth? They were well down the road before they discovered that they had left the twelve-year-old Jesus behind. I used to struggle with that. How could parents forget a child? Of course, that was before one of our girls' softball games a few years ago at Saint Joseph field. Linda and I were in separate cars. Only when we got to the Turkey Hill for the post-victory ice cream, did we discover that neither of us had Caleb. We did retrieve him from the playground before he missed us.

The existence of children was nothing short of precarious in Paul's day. Legal wives mothered legal heirs for Greek men. A man might leave illegitimate children wherever he ventured, and there was no social stigma attached, for he was expected to find affection and intimacy in casual relationships. The typical Greek father felt little affection or sense of responsibility for any of his children. Why should he? Living totally for oneself was the norm. Affection for children was no significant virtue.

Under the Roman legal doctrine of *patria potesta* (meaning father's power), a father held absolute sway over his child's life. He could direct a child's life. He could legally have a child's life terminated. Technically, this power survived even into the child's adult years and without regard for how successful the child might become. Common sense, public opinion and human nature usually compelled a father to "let go" of control at a reasonable age, but still, on the books, fathers ruled.

In practice, it was infants and small children who were the most imperiled. When a child was born, he or she was presented at the father's feet. If the father stooped down and lifted the child, he was signaling his desire to acknowledge and keep the child. If the father simply turned and walked away, the child was discarded, typically by being abandoned at the forum or at a pagan temple with countless other rejected children. The criteria for rejecting a child ring troublesomely familiar to us. A child might be deformed. It might be the wrong gender. It might not be convenient. Divorce and remarriage were so commonplace that children were considered a nuisance. In fact, at one point, so few children were being born that the Roman legislature passed laws to penalize childless couples.

Today, *patria potesta* sounds chauvinistically archaic. Instead, absolute sway over whether a child lives or dies is granted to the mother, at least so long as she decides before her child is actually born. We have sanitized how we describe child rejection. We speak of "a woman's right over her own body" and "freedom of choice," but make no mistake; our culture is no less barbaric or wicked in this matter. It may even be more depraved, for at least then abandoned children had a chance of survival. A few people took compassion on them. More often, however, they either died of exposure or were taken in by those who would raise them only to sell them later into slavery or prostitution.

Romans 1 described the social chaos of the day, but, in many respects, it also vividly describes the present state of disorder. That which is obvious from the nature of what has been created is denied. Man turns away from the worship of the Creator to idolize the work of his own hands. Sexual deviancy is mainstreamed. Man proves himself a fool in God's eyes even as he claims to be wise.

In Romans 1:31, a word appears that is translated, "heartless" in the *New International Version* and "unloving" in the *New American Standard Version*. Both are attempts to clean up the archaic sound of "without natural affection" as the *King James Version* renders it. However, some concepts just don't clean up well. The literal translation of this compound word is "without love" and it uses a noun for love that typically described a love of kindred. Affection between those who are family is natural. However, when a culture is in moral disarray, a love that should be the most self-evidently normal thing in the world, the love of one's own child, is discarded at the altar of self-worship.

One of the biggest hoaxes ever foisted upon the world is the myth that humanity evolves. Left to our own devices, we regress, becoming more like animals, not less. The farther we move from what is revealed in nature, in the Law of Moses, and ultimately in the Person of Jesus Christ, the more decadent we become. Mankind cannot make moral progress without honoring God. Jesus came to restore the Creator's ideal for man. Part of this mission is to restore God's ideal for the family.

People in Paul's day were largely illiterate. A letter from the great Apostle was most likely read to the congregated assembly as husbands, wives, parents, children, masters and slaves all took their places alongside one another as one family of believers. One can imagine the excitement in the air as every believer made every attempt to be present for this particular gathering. It must have been tough for the kiddos that the children's moment in the message didn't occur until five-sixths of the letter had been read, but surely it would be worth waiting for. Would it include a story, some fanciful tale intended to teach little ones a lesson? Not quite. "Children, obey your parents ..."

This text is one specific application of a governing premise that was established in chapter 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." To assume a posture that places one's own interest beneath the well-being of another is a profoundly Christian behavior and it is expected by God from every believer. In this text, Paul applied his premise of mutual submission to the home.

I. How Does a Godly Child Express Submission to His or Her Parent? (6:1-3)

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²"Honor your father and mother" - which is the first commandment with a promise - ³"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

A. A Disobedient Child Is Not a Child Who Honors Christ

Paul delivers his message to the children of Ephesus with no props, no purple dinosaurs and no Elmo. He just gives them the simple will of God in a simple matter: "Children, obey your parents ..." "Obey" means to listen and to attend to what is heard. The word implies more than just a conditioned, Pavlovian response to commands. It presupposes a teaching relationship and a teaching spirit on the part of the parent. It also implies on the part of the child a spirit which is intent on comprehending and applying information, wisdom and direction.

While children are responsible for obeying their parents because it pleases God, obviously parents can facilitate a child's submission by striving at all times to demonstrate a "teaching spirit." If a child asks, "Why?" a parent is within his rights to respond, "Because I said so!" I am open to the possibility that there are occasions when that may be an appropriate thing to say, but over the long-haul, does demanding devoid of teaching significantly fuel a child's desire to honor God or a parent? What, after all, is the parental objective in training a child? To condition a response? Perhaps. But it is always a worthy objective to develop little people who care about honoring God.

B. The “Rightness” of Obedience Is Self-evident

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* defines “right” as something which is “in accordance with rule and right and justice.” Children should obey their parents because that is the nature of things. The “nature of things” may not satisfy the post-modern mind that casts off any notion that any value or truth can be objectively absolute, but it satisfactorily explains matters for most of us. Children need parents for survival, provision, instruction and direction. It is the “nature of things” that children abide under the guidance and protection of parents at least until they are equipped to stand on their own.

A child’s hunger for independence often nullifies his ability to appreciate the nature of things, but with love and consistency, coupled with God’s grace, a child comes to embrace the “rightness” of obedience eventually. Solomon reinforced this principle: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Still, before the law or Solomon, certain truths were understood simply by observing “the nature of things.” One of these indisputable natural truths is that the rightful subordination of a child to the parent is in his or her best interest.

C. The Rightness of Obedience Was Confirmed by the Law of Moses

Obedience to parents was the subject of the fifth commandment, which Paul cited: “Honor your father and mother.” “Honor” goes beyond obedience. A child was not only expected to obey his parents, but to value them as well. A teenager told a friend, “I’m really worried. Dad slaves away at his job so I’ll never want for anything and so I can go to college. Mom spends every day washing, ironing, cleaning up after me and taking care of me.” His friend asks, “Are you worried about your parents’ health?” The first teenager replies, “No, I’m afraid they might try to escape.”

For the Jews, the honoring of one’s own parents was to extend well beyond one’s childhood. God was shaping a nation when He worded the Ten Commandments, but even today, there is little real question that the family is the basic building unit for society. The essential character equipping for life is best learned in the family. A society can only be as strong as its families. If this principle were only biblical, it could be discounted by many. It is, however, a solid historic principle as well.

Paul speaks of a promise attached to obedience to parents; “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” In its original context, this promise was worded to the Hebrews in terms of a prosperous existence in the land of Canaan, but the principle endures. Obedience builds a good foundation for the rest of life. There are exceptions to the principle. Sometimes, the good die young or the rotten just get older and meaner, but generally speaking, obedient children emerge from godly homes with the necessary tools for leading full lives.

⁸Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.

⁹They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. – Proverbs 1:8, 10

II. How Does a Godly Parent Express Submission to a Child? (6:4)

⁴Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

A. A Father in Submission to His Children Is Not as Strange as It May Sound

When asked how he would handle his twelve-year-old daughter's future boyfriends, NBA hall-of-famer Charles Barkley responded, "I figure if I kill the first one, word will get out." We fully expect fathers to be deeply committed to the wellbeing of their children. Remember, all the instructions in this section of Ephesians spring from 5:21, *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."* Remember as well, the meaning of submission. It is the willingness to arrange oneself beneath the needs and best interest of another. Christ modeled submission when He died for us. Clearly, there is nothing radical about the idea that a father might "lay down his life" for his children.

B. Do Not Exasperate Your Children

"Exasperate" means to "arouse to wrath." Why are fathers singled out in this teaching? It could be that Paul considers the father, as head of the family, to be the chief party responsible for the proper instruction, nurture and admonition of his children. It has also been suggested, however, that fathers are singled out because they are by nature less tender than mothers and therefore, more prone to overbearing authoritarianism. In scripture, always assume that God addresses that which is most urgent. Fallen man has difficulty grasping what it means to be the "head" of anything. One of the symptoms of the male misunderstanding of authority is his tendency to rule rather than lead.

How do fathers exasperate their children? Let me count the ways, for I have been guilty of them all. They don't make ground rules clear. They don't stick to the ground rules when they punish. They make unrealistic demands. It can be an excruciating judgment to know when to reign in a child's freedom as opposed to extending it. Poor judgment in either regard can be exasperating. A father may get unduly angry, not so much because a child is willfully misbehaving, but because the father is interrupted. Fathers may take other issues they struggle with out on their children. Sometimes, the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Sometimes, Dad forgets that the child is, after all, a child.

Does Christian parenting sound easy? I would be doing a disservice to everyone if I suggested that it was. It should be understood that parenting involves a series of grueling calls and tough points of balance. Get a good child psychology book if you think that will help. But, there is one other tool that is of infinitely greater worth, and that is to acknowledge and to revere the ever-present Christ.

III. What Is the Backdrop for Any Godly Family?

There's a fine line between nagging and reinforcing. That's true of parenting. That's also true of preaching. I may have mentioned this 700 times already, but I do not want to let your minds to wander from the premise that the foundational exhortation that greases the machinery of all Christian relationships is mutual submission. Of course, if mutual submission was simply a linear agreement between two parties in community, it would break down, because we are sinful. We require a degree of sensitivity to a third party: *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."*

A. Children, obey your parents *"in the Lord ..."* verse 1

Jesus taught that would-be disciples must be willing to follow Him at the expense of severing ties with one's own family. People often come to Christ out of a family of unbelievers. There is no such conflict here. Paul is speaking to Christian families, parents and children who are in Christ. Does this mean that unbelieving parents should be ignored? Of course not! An obedient nature is in the Lord's will for every child. At some point in life, a child might find that obedience to parental wishes poses a moral dilemma. He will have to struggle at that time to find out what pleases the Lord. In most cases, however, an obedient spirit is a reflection of a child's relationship with God.

B. Fathers ... bring them up *"in the training and instruction of the Lord."* Verse 4

"Training" is a general word for discipline, not simply punishing so much as the shaping of a child. "Instruction" was verbal teaching. Regarding the Law, these were very important to the Hebrews:

⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. – Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Godly parents are responsible for raising their children according to the will of God. Christian parents who think it's improper to impose their faith or church attendance upon their children should take a step back and rethink the eternal "life and death" issues at stake. Your child's world is inundated with a billion distractions, none of them godly. Besides, as believers, we are at war, not with "flesh and blood," but certainly against the forces that shape the twisted values of this present world order. The world will not play fair with any parent's naïve "neutral" approach to shaping a child's religious values. It is God's will that godly parents both shape and teach their children.

It is an unfortunate judgment whenever any Christian parent concludes that a child should be taught to be open-minded about matters of faith. That child's faith will be tested and challenged at some point in the future. The grounding he or she receives early in life is critical to whether or not that faith will sustain them. Paul commanded fathers to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." He does not command that we teach them to be open to the merits of every belief system. It is essential that Christian parents be spiritually proactive and not passive, for the culture is actively decadent and it becomes more so every day. Too much is at stake to justify passiveness.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Mutual submission in the family is the realization on the part of fathers, mothers, and children that God did not place any of us where we are, so that others might simply revolve their lives around our needs. We are to serve and to better those around us. That is neither profound nor novel, and the family is probably the easiest place in the world to see its wisdom, but one of the most challenging places in the world to work it out. But it is also one of the most crucial places in the world to work it out.