

Introduction

Our culture does not tend to value the long game. We tend toward disposable things. Rather than remodel a building, we raze it and rebuild. Rather than repair a thing, we buy a new one. This is, in large part, due to our impatience. We want a thing and we want it now. We want immediate and measurable results. If we do not get immediate and measurable results we tend to become bored with a thing and we move on to the next shiny thing that captures our imagination.

We want businesses to explode. We want to get rich quick. We want to lose all the weight “in just two weeks”, like the magazines in the check-out aisle tell us is possible. We don’t want our Amazon package delivered in *two days*; we want it on our porch tomorrow morning between 5:00 and 8:00.

Part of this is the relative newness of our culture. We’ve been a nation fewer than 250 years. We don’t have anything that’s truly *old*—other than the mountains and rivers and such. There is a church building in New Mexico that was built around 1610, but other than abandoned ruins of prior cultures, all other buildings in this country are newer. Our culture has yet to discover the value of playing the long game—building things with future generations in mind.

As any mom can tell you, parenting feels like a short game that gets played over and over again. There is the daily grind of changing diapers, making breakfast, cleaning up, changing diapers, making lunch, cleaning up, doing laundry, changing diapers, cleaning up, making supper, cleaning up, changing diapers, cleaning up. Then there’s the non-stop refereeing sibling disputes. Oh, and one them is throwing up again. These things take place daily and sometimes all you can look for is immediate results. Even if you manage to get the toys picked up and put away, if you make the mistake of walking to the bathroom for a moment, you come back to needing to pick them up again. It’s easy to lose sight of the reality that even this, the same ol’ everyday routine, is really the long game. While life is made up of short and brief activities, often repeated, they’re all part of a much greater plan than we sometimes realize.

We are in the middle part of Paul’s “household code” written to the Ephesians. We must remember he is writing to the church, explaining specific ways they are to submit to one another. Last week we saw how husbands and wives submit to each other. Today we will see how children and parents submit to each other. In this we will see something else going on, something far more important than making sure homework is done or the toys are picked up or the teeth are brushed. The truth underlying our parenting is God is playing the long game. So should we. We’re in Ephesians 6.

Eph 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers,

do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:1–4

Children

Paul is continuing his household code. As we saw last week, he is not merely copying what the broader culture found acceptable. Instead, he is challenging cultural norms at every step. The instruction he offers here for husbands and wives, for parents and children, and for masters and servants is counter-cultural.

We see the counter-cultural nature of his instructions immediately in verse 1: he addresses children. In a household there are children, of course, but Paul addresses his instruction *to children*, not to their parents. In the ancient world this would have been surprising, for parents were told to control their children, to enforce their obedience. Steven Baugh, who is a leading expert in ancient Ephesus, says there were many authors who wrote about family dynamics, and every one of them addressed fathers, who would enforce their children's obedience. Paul writes *to children*.

The first question is who are the children? Every single person alive is someone's child. Is he referring to, say, adult children? Prepubescent children? Remember his instructions to husbands and wives. In chapter 5, verse 31 he cites Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife". That man is still their *child*. Yet Paul is indicating a change in his status with his parents; there is a separation. It seems, then, that the children Paul is addressing are those who have not yet left father and mother and are therefore under their authority.

Let me add a brief word to adult children. When a child shifts into adulthood the responsibility for the sort of obedience Paul means here changes. There remains a measure of it for as long as one lives with his or her parents, but even there, an adult is responsible for his or her own behavior. The parent of an adult child no longer carries the responsibility for the behavior of the adult child, yet a child of any age must honor father and mother.

Sadly, parents are sometimes not worthy of honor. There are many whose parents have not been good parents, and there is little to honor. Sometimes honoring parents is reduced to simply not *dishonoring* parents. Paul's instructions in our text assume something close to normal, healthy, and *functioning* family dynamics. Absent normal, healthy, and functioning relationships, this text may be painful for some, and even nearly impossible. We must recognize that our ability as adults to honor parents who are unworthy of honor is limited by the choices those parents have made. God is, of course, the perfect Father, and he would never place overly strict and even impossible requirements on his children to do what is not in their power to do, given the choices of others. If this is you this morning, know that I am feeling the same pain and lament you are.

As we saw last week, the context of this household code is submitting to one another in the church. This mutual submission extends into the home. A wife is to submit to her husband for he is the head of the wife. A husband is to submit to his wife for he is called to lay down his life for her. Here we see this mutual submission extends to children and parents.

This mutual submission does not obviate distinct roles in the household anymore than it obviates distinct roles in the church. A child must submit to his or her parents, but for Paul the word submit isn't quite strong enough so he uses another word: obey. It means to do what they're told to do. There is a clear line of authority and it rests on the parents. Children are under the authority of the parents even as children submit to their parents and parents submit to their children.

Paul indicates the seriousness of this obedience. Children are to obey their parents *in the Lord*. That clarification, "in the Lord", modifies obey, not parents. In other words, he does not say to obey their parents *who* are in the Lord. Rather, the obedience is *in the Lord*. This instruction for obedience is an instruction that comes from the Lord, indicating the importance of it.

We can look to the Lord's example here. In Luke 2 we read of the Lord Jesus as a preteen. So we're clear who it is I am speaking of, I am referring to the Creator God who is sovereign over all things, the one who created all that has been created, *the one for whom all things exist*. Think of who this is. This Creator God became one of us. He took on human form. This did not change the fact that all things exist by him and for him. This means Mary and Joseph exist by the Lord Jesus and *for* the Lord Jesus. Hear me carefully: when Jesus was twelve years old, Mary and Joseph existed for him and for his glory! Yet after spending some time teaching in the temple and his mother worrying where he was we read this:

Lk 2:51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. ~~And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.~~

Luke 2:51

Think of that! The Lord God submitted himself to Mary and Joseph though they exist entirely by his will and for his glory. *Yet somehow we think submission is degrading.*

Paul stresses the importance of children submitting to their parents by obeying them. He cites the fifth commandment: you shall honor your father and mother. While it is the fifth commandment, it is the first one that comes with a promise, indicating the level of importance God himself attaches to it. The promise of the land of Canaan would come with Israel's faithful obedience to God. God connects children's obedience to parents and Israel's obedience to God.

Because parents are the first authority in a child's life, learning to submit to that authority is important and necessary for that child's growth and development. If a child does not learn to obey her parents while young, later in life obedience to even more powerful authority will be difficult. Such children will struggle to obey teachers. Later it will be the government. This is the connection God himself seems to make. If Israel's children will honor their fathers and mothers, faithful obedience to the Lord will result in their reception of the covenant promises of life in the land.

Those promises are fulfilled in Christ. As Romans 4 says, Abraham is now heir of the entire world, not merely a tiny strip of land the size of New Jersey. Further, the promises of the new covenant depend entirely on the faithfulness of Jesus. Paul is indicating something else here. He cites the promise "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" to indicate a very practical blessing for children who obey their parents: there will be a more satisfying experience of life.

This isn't a one-to-one promise: obey your parents and you will open up the path to blessing. Practically speaking, wisdom shows us that children who learn to obey authority will learn to work hard and be honest and ethical and will, generally speaking, live a better life than those who do not. It isn't a guarantee that life will go well, for we live in the new covenant and the promise of the new covenant includes suffering for the Lord. It is a promise for while we endure suffering the Lord remains with us—there's the blessing.

As Paul commands in verse 21 of chapter 5, we must submit to one another. Children submit to their parents in a particular way: they obey them. They live under the rules their parents establish. Children, this means when your parents say, "Because I said so", they are giving you a legitimate reason for your obedience. You don't actually need to understand or agree with their rules; you must obey them in the Lord, for this is right.

Just as we may not agree with a particular law, if obeying that law does not cause us to sin against God, we must obey the government. As the apostles themselves demonstrated, we must also obey God before obeying man. When this is not the choice a child faces, that is, outside of being told to do something against God, disobedience to parents is not merely to parents, but to God.

Parents

Implicit in the command to children is a command to parents, to mothers and fathers. A child must submit to his or her parents by obeying them. Parents must submit to their child *by being parents*. Sadly, this needs to be clarified today. At a minimum this means caring for the child's physical and emotional well-being.

Children are pre-adults. That is, childhood is all about learning to be adults. The first fifteen or twenty years of life are spent learning how to function as productive people who contribute to the broader society for the betterment of society. Parents, implicit in Paul's instruction to children is an instruction to parents: raise them. Teach them. Guide them. Care for them. Provide for them. Correct them. Teach them to think.

In our culture we idolize youth and childhood. We think the primary aim for a child is play, but why do children play? Play is not simply for a child to have fun. Childhood is not about having fun all the time. Children play for the same reason baby animals play: they're learning how to grow up. A YouTube search for baby animals playing shows how much juvenile critters *play*. The play itself isn't what matters; it's what the play is intended to do. Play teaches a child how to function. Whether a child shakes a rattle or makes a car go "Vroom vroom" or dresses a doll, that child is not merely being entertained but is learning how to be. Parents have a significant role in guiding this.

In verse 4 Paul turns from children to parents, and specifically to fathers. This is because throughout human history fathers have been—largely—the disciplinarian in the home. This stems back to chapter 5 verse 23. Paul says "the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church". It follows, then, the husband is the head of the entire household. Due to the natural differences between men and women men tend to be the disciplinarian in the home. These instructions apply to both mothers and fathers, though it is more likely a father will find them corrective.

Over the last 50 years or so we've seen a significant change in our culture. When our culture decided to separate sex from marriage we also separated sex from responsibility. This

has enabled many men to be bad men. When a man can get what he wants with no real commitment necessary we separate sex from responsibility to raise children produced by that sex. This is an aberration historically.

In ancient Roman culture, it was understood to be the father's responsibility to discipline his children. Often this meant little more than punishing bad behavior and ensuring a proper education. A father's role was *merely* to produce an adult who could function properly in society. Paul has some very counter-cultural instructions for fathers.

He tells fathers to not provoke their children to anger. If you were a Roman man in the first century and hearing this read for the first time, you might think the reader got this line mixed up. You might even interrupt and say something like, "Hold a sec...you mean *children must not provoke their fathers to anger*, right? Your eye must have jumped a line while reading, right?" That is not what Paul says!

Fathers must not provoke *their children* to anger! They must not cause their children to become frustrated. They must not discourage their children by being overbearing with either excessive rules or excessive enforcement of rules. Not every bit of misbehavior requires the wrath of God to come down on your children!

Paul tells fathers, essentially, to not be ogres. Don't go around with an angry disposition toward your children, ready to snap every time they step out of line. There is an age-appropriate stepping out of line. A little kid may throw a ball in the living room and break a lamp. Was the kid being defiant? Or was the kid being ten? The response to each should be quite different. Defiance always deserves a stronger response than immaturity, though immaturity requires a response. Parents—especially fathers—must know the difference.

Paul offers a counter to provoking their children to anger by being overbearing, and the counter is not having a laissez-faire approach to parenting. The opposite of being overbearing is not letting them do whatever they want to do. Whether you over-control your child's behavior or you under-control a child's behavior, you're not parenting in a way that is truly submissive to your child. Being overly harsh *and being overly lenient* are both forms of child abuse, for both harm the child. I had an email conversation with a licensed counselor about this and she made this great clarification:

To clarify, the damaging effects of the child abuse from overbearing parenting manifest much sooner and are more evident than the hidden, detrimental effects of the child abuse from over-lenient parenting.

Sherilyn Shaffer

The opposite to being overbearing is enforcing rules in a consistent and loving manner. What Paul is forbidding here is not discipline, but excessively harsh discipline. He is not expecting fathers to give up discipline altogether, for that is merely a different kind of problem in fathers. Failing to properly discipline a child is unloving. Because husbands and fathers are the heads of their households, it falls to them to ensure proper discipline in the home. Look at verse 4 again.

^{Eph 6:4} Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:4

When he says, “bring them up”, he’s using a word that he used just a few sentences prior. When he tells husbands to love their wives he says they must do so as Christ loves his church. Christ’s love and self-sacrifice center on his bride. The wife is to be the locus of a husband’s devotion and care and protection and affection. He says in verse 29 that this love must reflect Christ’s love, for Christ “nourishes and cherishes” his body.

Christ *nourishes* his body. Fathers must *bring up* their children. It’s the same word. Fathers—parents—must raise their children by nourishing them. Here we see the idea of providing for and caring for them. Parents must submit to their children by seeking what is in their children’s best interest. The self-sacrificing love a husband has for his wife must extend to their children.

The approach that is often taken is to *allow* a child to grow up, rather than actively *raising* a child. The difference is the amount of effort required. If you feed a child and keep him or her from running into the street, that child will, barring a tragedy, grow up. This is not what Paul means. Children must be brought up—nourished—into mature adulthood. This requires effort.

Not only must fathers nourish their children, Paul says they do so “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”. Fathers *must* discipline their children. Discipline is two-fold: corrective and formative. We tend to think of discipline as only corrective. Your child disobeys, you correct her. When you make your seven-year-old brush his teeth, you are disciplining him. When you tell your twelve-year-old to do her homework, you’re disciplining her. Neither has done something wrong; you’re forming their character to learn to do what is right, to fulfill one’s responsibilities.

To discipline a child requires both formative discipline and corrective discipline. Hear this: the goal of discipline must not be to distract a child away from misbehavior but to discipline the child away from bad behavior *and toward* good behavior. When two children are misbehaving it is so much easier to separate them and thereby stop the fighting, but this isn’t discipline. This is behavior avoidance. When a parent merely distracts a child, that parent isn’t disciplining the child. I understand that sometimes when you’re in the grocery store that’s about all you can manage. If this is the normal practice, however, the child is not being trained to do what is right, but distracted from doing what is wrong. The attention to that wrong behavior *will return*, and mom or dad might not be there.

There is a teaching component in discipline and instruction. Because discipline is not merely avoiding bad behavior but instilling good behavior, a child must learn to understand *why* he must brush his teeth and *why* she cannot back-talk her mama. This is why discipline and instruction are so closely connected here. The word “instruction” means “to put the mind right”.

When your child hits another child, his mind isn’t right. When your child refuses to do her homework, her mind isn’t right. Parenting is about putting your child’s mind right, to learn to think rightly about the world. You shouldn’t need a rule for every single thing; that will only generate frustration and provoke a child to anger. Parents should teach their children *principles*, for in doing so they are setting their children’s minds right. Your child needs to know that when you say, “Don’t throw a ball in the house”, that means throwing things—anything—is forbidden. Your kid can’t just say, “Fine, I’ll throw a shoe instead.” If you have to provide a child with a list of things that cannot be thrown, your child does not understand why throwing things in the house is unacceptable.

Teaching proper behavior requires discipline, both formative discipline and corrective discipline. Discipline takes work. This means parents—fathers!—must set boundaries in a home and then enforce those boundaries. Those boundaries, of course, extend outside the home as well. If your child’s mind is being set right, he will understand that the rule against throwing things in your living applies to your neighbor’s living room as well.

Provoking a child to anger does not happen by enforcing boundaries. Don’t get me wrong, your child may well get angry at being told “No”, but telling your child “No” when it is accompanied by love and tenderness and compassion is what is required by this text. Provoking a child to anger in this text happens through angry outbursts and unrealistic expectations and harsh criticism of a child. Paul doesn’t mean here that your child should lovingly dote on you when you correct her for back-talking her mama. You *must* correct your child and you *must* set your child’s thinking right, even—or perhaps *especially*—when your child isn’t all that happy about being corrected.

Discipline focuses on behavior and instruction focuses on the mind. We must correct our children’s behavior and we must correct our children’s thinking. Both are absolutely necessary. Parents who will not discipline their children are not keeping Paul’s instruction in verse 21 of chapter 5 where he says we must submit to one another. Refusing to be the parent by disciplining the kids is not submitting to the kids. It is refusing to submit to the kids because it is a refusal to embrace the role God has given parents for the good of their children—and everyone else.

Parenting is Eschatological

It is remarkable to me that Paul writes this household code into a letter addressed to a church explaining to them how *to be the church*. The context of living as husband and wife, and as parent and child, is that of living in Christian community in the church. This means parenting is rooted in our eschatology. Eschatology is the doctrine of last things. According to the New Testament authors we are living in the last days. The last days—eschatology—began when Christ ascended into heaven and sent us his Spirit.

My wife’s favorite preacher wrote an article about this back in 2008. His words are helpful in understanding the seriousness of parenting.

When we think of Christian eschatology, we tend to think first of prophecy charts or apocalyptic novels, but nothing is more eschatological than parenting.

A parent disciplining a child, for instance, communicates to the child the discipline and judgment of God in ways deeper and more resonant than any Sunday school lesson (Heb 12:5-11). A parent who will not discipline a child for disobedience, or who is inconsistent in doing so, is teaching that child not to expect consequences for behavior.

In short, a parent who will not discipline is denying the doctrine of hell.

At the same time, a parent who disciplines in anger or with harshness teaches a judgment of God that is capricious and unjust. An abusive parent, worst of all, ingrains in a child’s mind a picture of God as a ruthless devil who cannot be trusted to judge justly.

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Parents who spend time with their children, especially at meals, demonstrate something of the harmony they want their children to long for beyond this life. It's a longing to eat at another Father's table in the kingdom of Christ.

Russell Moore, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2008/12/10/the-eschatology-of-parenting/>

Because the church is eschatological, the mission of the church is eschatological. That is, the mission of the church—making disciples—has the end of history in view. The present age, “the last days”, is drawing to a close. We await the return of the Lord, for then he will usher in a new age, an everlasting age—eternity. Everything we do now we do in light of what is to come.

Paul instructs us in how to live as Christians in our homes because living faithfully is how we are to engage in our mission. A year ago during my study break I read a couple books about evangelism in the early church. One was published in 2003 and was a revision of the author's earlier work in 1970, and the other was published in 2016. The elders and I are working through the second one, called “The Patient Ferment”.

What is remarkable about each of these books is the authors assert the early church simply did not have a strategy for reaching the lost with the gospel. For the first few hundred years of the church, very little was written about how to go about evangelizing the lost. In fact, Alan Kreider in “The Patient Ferment”, after explaining that not a single author wrote a treatise about evangelism in the early church, says this:

The best treatment of how a second-century Christian should persuade a pagan to become a believer was published in London in 1970!
Alan Kreider, “The Patient Ferment”

What we need to understand this morning is the importance of living out our faith. Paul's instructions to us are instructions for how we engage in the mission of the church. In the first century in Rome as many 90% of the population lived in apartment buildings. They were the poor—that's most people, for there was no middle class. The other ten percent of so were landowners and lived in palatial estates. Even in a city like Ephesus, the vast majority of people lived in apartment buildings, with all the problems we associate with apartment buildings, namely, an utter lack of privacy.

When a woman went to the local laundry, the other women there knew whether she and her husband had argued the night before. They knew whether she and her husband had been intimate. They knew whether her children were up vomiting or throwing tantrums. They knew how her husband responded to those tantrums. When a man worked in the field or engaged in manual labor in the city, his coworkers knew why he was so tired that morning—or why he was so chipper. They knew whether he had been up drinking again and they knew how he interacted with his children.

This inevitably led to questions addressed to Christians. “Why don't you complain about your husband? I know he can be grumpy!” “Why don't you and your wife fight, like, ever!? I never hear you two going at it. Why?” Both men and women were given incredible opportunities to share the truth of God in Christ. After explaining how he was taught to love his wife—and after the laughter of the other men who took a few moments to realize

he wasn't joking—he could further explain the gospel to them. A woman might share how her husband took the kids out the night before and spent time with them in the countryside so that she could get some rest, the women would naturally wonder how she found such an amazing husband. She could then share how the Lord Jesus had changed not only her attitude toward him, but his demeanor toward her.

In other words, the early church had a strategy, but that strategy was found in being transformed people. Those who are transformed by the gospel of Jesus are themselves attractive to a lost and hurting world. This doesn't mean the lives of the Christians were perfect. They weren't shiny, happy-clappy people. They had real struggles and real relationship issues. They had bills to pay and they got sick. They had real disagreements and children who might backtalk. The gospel, however, had transformed them so that their responses to the very real struggles of life were also transformed.

This is also why the early church not only didn't try to make their worship services appealing to the lost, they often weren't even *public* worship services—particularly during times of persecution. Rather than attracting the lost with fog machines and colored lights and raffles for AR15s, like a certain church in Grand Rapids last week, they pursued living transformed lives.

In my limited personal experience, churches that focus on attractive worship services are far less likely to focus on transformed living. They are far more likely to focus on living lives of prosperity that may appear attractive, without actually being transformed, even if they wouldn't directly proclaim a prosperity gospel. They simply live as if the prosperity gospel were true.

Both of the authors I mentioned show that during the early church, when the church continued to grow despite not having an evangelist strategy, they focused on living out the gospel in their everyday lives. They lived as though Christ had really lived, died, and rose again. They both point out that non-Christians weren't listening to the words they spoke. Non-Christians weren't reading the words they wrote. Instead, non-Christians were *observing their lives*.

Hearing this message might make you feel burdened or perhaps even broken. Maybe you were not parented well as you grew up and so you lament what should have been. Maybe you did not parent your children well. Or maybe you are not parenting all that well. If that is you, know the difference between us is I made most of my parenting mistakes years ago while you are making them right now. Many of you haven't made those mistakes—yet. Paul is not trying to pour out guilt and shame here. He isn't even trying to motivate us to do better. He's instructing us. He's not asking any of us here to do anything we are not equipped to do. I love how the great Chinese pastor Watchman Nee put it:

God has given us Christ. There is nothing for us to receive outside of him.
The Holy Spirit has been sent to produce what is of Christ within us, not to
produce anything that is apart from or outside of him.

Watchman Nee, "Sit, Walk, Stand"

The truth is there is only one Perfect Parent, and only one Perfect Child, and they conspired together before the foundation of the world so that all who trust in the Lord Jesus will be credited with that same righteousness. We take great comfort in knowing that God chooses to use ordinary and imperfect people who strive to be more like Jesus.

Whether you were a good parent or not, whether you had good parents or not, whether you will be a good parent or not, your righteousness is not based on you, but on the Perfect Parent and the Perfect Son in whom you trust. This faith creates in us a longing for what will be.

For now we sit in the truth of the cross. We sit in—we *rest* in the truth of God has done. We must also walk in that truth and for those who are parents, we strive to parent in faithfulness. Whether you're a parent or not, we're all children, and for those of us in Christ, we have a Perfect Parent and in Paul's instructions to parents and children we see a glimpse of the love of God to us in Christ. We see what God himself is doing in each one of us. We must rest in this work, and we must walk in it.