

Open the Eyes of My Heart (Part 23)

Ephesians 6:1-4

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July 12, 2020

We're going through the book of Ephesians, and Paul is explaining how to walk wisely (Ephesians 5:15) with regard to our relationships. Last time in 5:22-33, we talked about husbands and wives, which singles may have found inapplicable. But today's instruction applies to everyone because it's about children and parents. If we don't have children yet, we probably still have parents. Paul first talks to children, then addresses parents. It's tempting for children to focus on the instruction to parents to validate their grievances, and likewise for parents to focus on the part about children to guilt them into obedience. But we must not just listen to the parts of Scripture we agree with, while dismissing the uncomfortable parts. Let us sincerely take all of Paul's instructions into account, and use them to examine ourselves.

One commonality in all the three relationships Paul discusses – wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters – is that he speaks first to those who need to submit. So in 6:1-3 Paul addresses children first. The obedience of children to their parents is highly valued in both Jewish and Chinese culture. My father told me that the thing he wanted the most was for me to listen and obey him. This is how children demonstrate respect to their parents. Only a very few times do we disobey parents out of obedience to God's commands. More often than because we are following after our own desires, not that of the Lord's. And this shows a lack of respect and love for our parents.

But who does Paul mean by children? I don't think there is a threshold age when this command no longer applies. At least from Chinese culture, we know that we never stop being our parents' children. That's why when my mother died at age 45, my grandmother lamented that it wasn't right for her to bury her daughter, even though she was an adult. You never become the same as your parents. They are always your parents, so your response must still be to obey.

In v. 1 Paul tells children to obey in the Lord, just as he told wives to do in 5:22. Similar to wives at this time, it was normal for children to submit. They had no choice in this patriarchal society. But Paul now gives new motivation for what they were already doing. If you are a Christian, then obedience to parents is a response and reflection of your love towards God, a manifestation of faith in Jesus. Obey not out of fear of your parents' punishment, but because this is what God wants. This first implies that you first are walking with Jesus, and second that

your perspective on life has been transformed by Jesus. Paul goes on to explain why obedience to parents is so important. First in v.1 he says that it is right. We should obey because it's good and righteous. It's what God wants, and we should seek to live accordingly. Second, in v. 2 Paul says that it's foundational, since it's in the Ten Commandments. It was an integral part of Jewish society. We also see the weight and severity of disobedience passages such as, Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Romans 1:29-30; and 2 Timothy 3:2. Finally, Paul mentions in vv. 2-3 that this command was the first that came with a promise (referring to Deuteronomy 5:16). This isn't to say that the promise of peace and prosperity as a result of obedience to parents applies directly to Christians, but it once again emphasizes the importance of obedience by making it stand out amongst the other commandments.

Moving on to parents in v.4, Paul gives a command that most parents likely were not following at that time, when parents had absolute authority over children, even to the point of being able to put them in prison. He tells them not to anger their children. This doesn't mean that you have to make sure your children never have any reason to be angry, but rather that at least you take their feelings into account and care if they are upset. You should care about how they receive your instruction, and don't make it harder for them to accept your words because you are insensitive towards their feelings. Chinese culture is terrible at this. Parents command; children obey. There is no dialogue or consideration. It's so foreign to us, as it was in Paul's day. As I experienced as a child and no doubt many of you experienced, Chinese parents are often critical and demanding, never apologizing or encouraging. But Paul tells parents here to nurture and encourage children. Take their feelings into account.

Next, Paul tells parents to raise children up in the Lord. Spiritual things must be a priority in your parenting. Is your children's faith more important to you than grades or piano skills? What do you emphasize to your children? Again, children and parents shouldn't use these passages to attack the other side. That's not what God's word is for. Rather it is to evaluate your own heart and let the Holy Spirit convict the other side. I know most of us fall short as parents and children. Let us consider these things sincerely and ask God for strength to live wisely in this matter.