

Love's Response to Love

Ephesians 6:1-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 20, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹Children, 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“so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

⁴And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

⁹And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality. (Ephesians 6:1-9, NRSV)

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When I was a kid my parents were forever trying to get me to try foods that I didn't want to eat. This was especially true with seafood. My parents both love seafood. My Dad grew up near the shore in New Jersey and since the time he was a kid has loved anything that swims in the ocean, or crawls in the ocean, or attaches itself to something in the ocean. Whenever I would refuse to eat the seafood they tried to give me their argument was always the same, “You don't like it because you haven't tried it.” So I'd take a nibble just to pacify them and then confirm what I already knew, “I told you, I don't like it.” And they'd say, “You just took a little nibble. How can you know? You've got to eat some more. Get a full mouthful. It's an acquired taste, you know.”

On several occasions I have witnessed my dad eat something called a softshell crab sandwich. Do you know what this is? Who here has eaten one of these? It's basically an entire crab – eyes, claws, guts, everything – just cooked up and slapped between two pieces of toast with a bit of lettuce and tomato. I could barely watch him eat it. And he's trying to tell me, “You don't like it because you haven't tried it.” Some things I just don't need to try to know.

The sad thing is that no matter how hard we try, as parents ourselves we can't help from now saying the same things to our kids we hated hearing from our parents when we were kids. Now I'm telling my own kids that the reason they don't like something just might be because they've never really tried it. I mean look at me, I even eat seafood now...with limitations of course.

This particular section in Paul's letter to the Ephesians may need some similar words of encouragement if some of us are ever going to hear what it really has to say. Beginning in Ephesians 5:21, Paul teaches us about how human relationships have been revolutionized because of Christ. Some of us, however, have only nibbled at what Paul is serving up here. We've read verses like Ephesians 5:22: “**Wives, submit to your husbands.**” Or Ephesians 6:1, “**Children, obey your parents.**” Or Ephesians 6:5, “**Slaves, obey your earthly masters.**” If these have been your only nibbles of Paul's teaching here you may have said, “Thanks but no thanks; I've had enough.” And I realize that I'm sounding a whole lot like my father when I tell you, “Trust me. You don't like it because you haven't really tried it.” Truth is, these are some of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted verses in the whole New Testament. There is fantastic good news here but to get at that good news we're going to have to take more than a nibble.

The whole context of this passage on human relationships is set in Ephesians 5:21, a verse Brett introduced us to two weeks ago. There Paul writes, “**Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.**” We need to keep this verse in mind as we examine what Paul teaches us about human relationships, remembering that he is not setting up subservient relationships, where one person is beneath another person, but is calling us to *mutually submit to one another* as a way of ultimately submitting to Christ. In the same way that Brett explained that husbands and wives ought to

submit to one another, we're about to see that the same is true of children and parents, and even slaves and masters. And as we learn the principles Paul teaches us in these examples of human relationships we can take those same principles and apply them to all human relationships.

So let's dig in. In the passage we just read, Paul offers a word to four different groups of people: children, parents, slaves, and masters. Let's take them one at a time.

Speaking first to children, Paul writes, **"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—this is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'"**

The first thing we have to say here is how radical it was that Paul would write a letter to the church in his day and directly address children. In the Roman Empire of that time children were treated with callous indifference at best and, at worst, with wretched cruelty. Roman fathers, in fact, frequently treated their children as slaves or property. Legally, they could be sold away, forced to work in the field in chains, or even punished with the death penalty.¹ The fact that Paul addresses children as a part of the community speaks to just how far the Gospel had already raised the status of society's youngest members in the church.

Still, Paul has a word of firm instruction for children. "Obey your parents. Do whatever it is they tell you to do." Why? He gives two main reasons.

First, it is "right." In other words, it's the natural thing to do. All cultures at all times have understood the reality that parents are meant to be in charge of children. It's why everybody who looks at a family where the children rule the roost knows that something is off kilter. It's why when your kid asks you why he or she has to do what you just told them to do, the time-worn response that first comes to mind is, "Because I said so." And though that answer is perpetually unsatisfying to kids, Paul says it ought to be good enough. Obey your parents; that's just the way it's meant to be.

Not only is obedience of children naturally expected, however, it is also divinely commanded. Paul reminds us here that in the heart of God's law, in the fifth of the 10 Commandments, God tells us to honor our fathers and mothers. In fact, life goes better for us when we do.

What's interesting is that in ancient Israel, the Jews believed that the 10 Commandments were originally given to Moses on two stone tablets, each containing five commandments, and that the first tablet contained the five commandments which specify our duty to God and the second tablet contained the second five commandments which specify our duty to our neighbors.² With that in mind, notice where the fifth commandment is located, the one dealing with parents. It's on the *first* tablet. You see, in Jewish understanding, when we honor our parents we honor God because our parents, especially when we are children, stand in the place of God and are to be, you might say, mediators of both God's love towards us and God's boundaries for us. If you are still a young person under your parents' responsibility, you need to know that your parents have been placed over you as God's representative. That's what Paul is getting at when he commands children to obey their parents "in the Lord."

And right about now those of us who are parents are starting to feel the gravity of it all. The responsibility of parenthood is a serious thing. *We are to represent God to our children.* It's what Paul means when he writes, **"And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."** We understand him, of course, to mean mothers as well. Yes, all parents are called to help their children excel academically, athletically, culturally, socially, and so on, but our main calling as *Christian* parents goes beyond that as we do whatever we can to "bring them up" in the Lord. That phrase in the original Greek literally means, "to nourish". In the same way I feed my own body carefully, I am to feed my children, not just their bodies, but their hearts, minds and spirits, with the grace and truth I have been given from Christ to pass on to them.

I think of the analogy of a rope. A woman leading a horse does not need to drag the horse where she wants it to go. If the horse wanted to, in fact, it could easily break free of the rope. All the rope needs to do is gently but firmly guide the

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Ephesians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1979), 245.

² Stott, 239.

horse in the right direction. As parents we are like that rope. We don't decide where our children should be led, that's the job of the guide, who is Christ. As we remain in Christ's hands, then, we can gently but firmly guide our children in the direction he leads.

In some ways, Paul is not promoting the exercise of authority here as much as he is promoting the restraint of authority. Parents are indeed called to train, discipline and correct their children, taking Christ's lead in all of this. But we are not to do so harshly, in ways that embitter or unfairly frustrate our children. And frankly, that's convicting for me. You see, I have no problem giving my children discipline or instruction. I know God expects this of me. However, I also realize that there are times when I do so in ways that can frustrate my kids. When I punish my children simply because they have annoyed me or inconvenienced me I fail to faithfully represent God to my kids. If I'm rough with my kids because I've had a rough day, I'm letting myself get in the way of how God wants me to parent. When I frustrate my kids because I try to force them to become the person *I* want them to become, I've lost sight of my job as God's representative and have tried to take on the role of God myself.

I heard this saying a long time ago and it always stuck with me, "Children are not containers to be filled but fountains to be released." I love this because it reminds me that as my children are called to submit to me in obedience, that only works if I, in turn, submit to them in sacrifice. Because my children do not ultimately belong to me. Nor yours to you. They are their own people, made in the image of their creator, and stamped even before birth with his purposes and plans. They are not here to fulfill our purposes but Christ's purposes. It's true, no other person has more influence over our children than we do as parents. That's how God has designed it. But let us handle that influence with humility and wisdom, seeking help from God and from one another to represent Christ, in all grace and truth, to our children.



After husbands and wives, and then children and parents, Paul gives one final example of how Christ leads us to mutually submit in our relationships as he speaks to slaves and masters. He writes, "**Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.**"

And here we have another example where a nibble will simply not suffice. We have to fully digest what Paul is saying here if we are to appreciate how even this is good news. To do that we have to first remember the context, for in Paul's day there was no part of the ancient world where slavery was not commonplace. In fact, there were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire alone at that time which constituted the main work force. Slaves were a part of nearly every household, except those of the very poor, and these slaves were not just domestic servants but also educated people like doctors, teachers and administrators. Furthermore, slavery in Paul's day was not typically racially-based as we experienced it in our country. Instead, there were slaves of all races, including Romans, who were inherited, purchased, captured in war, or acquired by their masters in settlement of bad debt. And while it's true that some slaves were horribly abused, more often than not slaves were well cared for and, in some cases, even treated like family members. Many, many slaves even earned their freedom, in some cases going on to become more prosperous than their former masters.³

When we read Paul's words here through the lens of our 21st century perspective, we want him to command the church of his day to abolish all slavery at once. That is not only unfair but unrealistic. Imagine declaring to human society in our day that we must abolish at once all use of machinery, including computers. Utter chaos would ensue. The society of Paul's day similarly could not have functioned without slaves.

Of course, we know from other parts of his writing that Paul envisioned a day when slavery would be no more⁴ and he and the early church were planting seeds that would, years later, lead to the abolition of slavery. In fact, though some have accused Paul here of being woefully bound to the culture of his day, when we understand his context accurately we see that he was actually radically counter-cultural and progressive in his view of slaves. For all his intellect and culture, Aristotle himself could go only go as far as to call a slave "a kind of possession with a soul." And yet here is Paul addressing slaves, as he also addressed children, as equal and full members of the church community who were, in many cases, called to worship and serve right alongside their masters!

³ Stott, 250-251. Also, N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 70-71.

⁴ See Galatians 3:28, for example. Also, read Paul's letter of Philemon in which he urges the release of slaves by believing masters. Jesus' declaration of fulfilled prophesy in Luke 4:18-19 most certainly must have influenced Paul's thinking along these lines.

Though human trafficking and slavery still exists in our world, none of us here are slaves. That does not mean, however, that Paul's teaching at this point is irrelevant for us. As we hear Paul's instructions to slaves about how they are to relate to their masters, let's think about people in our work lives who are in authority over us, a boss or supervisor, a company or board of directors, or even clients we serve. As we do, the principles Paul gives to the slaves of his day can apply to us in our day.

First, we are reminded that in our work we ultimately submit to Christ. You may have a boss at work and you are called to respect and submit to that person's authority, but only as God's representative and not God himself. We all serve imperfect human authorities. No boss is perfect. I've had some really lousy bosses in the past. I've probably been a lousy boss at points along the way. It will help us all to remember that when we submit to the authority of another person it is not that person I am honoring as much as it is Christ I am honoring.

In the next verses Paul gets specific with his instructions: “[Obey] **not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.**” Simply put, when we submit in our work to authorities, whether that work be paid or volunteer, we are to offer that work with integrity.

Commentator N.T. Wright tells of a time when as a young man he worked on a construction crew which, as he puts it, was “committed to doing the smallest amount of work they could during the main working hours.” Whenever the foreman would wander by there was a flurry of digging, bricklaying, sweeping, and general busyness. As he disappeared again, however, immediately the tools would be set down and the cigarette packets would come out. When the workday was over the foreman would regularly ask for volunteers to work overtime because things, of course, never seemed to be keeping up with schedule. It was common practice then for workmen to volunteer for the extra work, but then leave after only one hour of work after bribing the night-watchman to stay behind and punch the timecards after three hours.⁵

Sadly, his experience is not unique. Let's be honest. In your work - whether on a job, at school, or as a volunteer - do you ever do just the minimum required to get by? Or does the quality of your work ever change depending on who is watching, especially when it's your boss or supervisor who is nearby? Can we see that when we do this we are serving the wrong authority? Four times in his address to slaves Paul reminds them that it is ultimately Christ, their Lord, they are serving and not their master. When you are a pastor people assume that God is your boss. But that's too narrow. I would say that if you are a *Christian* then Christ is your boss, and whatever work you do is done for him and is, therefore, holy work. Whether your work is that of a custodian, a teacher, an attorney, a student, or a salesperson, when that work is done with diligence and honesty, and is full of integrity and kindness, and it in some way contributes to the well-being of our society, even when done under the watchful eye of an imperfect human boss, than that work is holy work and pleasing to the One who is your supreme Master in this life.

Of course, that work becomes much more joyful, even more productive, when human bosses, like human parents, represent God in their roles of authority. And so Paul has a word for human masters of all kinds, “**And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.**” This is a warning to those of us who find ourselves in places of human authority, giving direction to those who work under our supervision. As slaves submit to masters, so masters, in the Lord, are to submit to slaves. We will be held accountable for how we have handled positions of authority in which we have been placed, for in those places we are to represent Christ. I may be your boss at work, but at the end of the day we both have the same master and all those human titles and positions immediately fall away when we stand together before Christ.

Now, before I finish let me offer a word of caution. Clearly, God through Christ is working to reorient human relationships in the church around this idea of mutual submission in Christ. As we serve Christ he will call us, in turn, to serve one another. This applies even when Christ calls some among us to positions of leadership. Husbands are called to lead in their marriages, not in a domineering way of course, but as servant leaders who look out for the interests of their wives even before their own interests. The same goes for parents and masters of all kinds.

⁵ N.T. Wright, 69-70.

If and when, however, this leadership ceases to be sacrificial and becomes neglectful or even abusive, then there is a covenant which has been broken. In other words, Christ does not call us to submit to those who consistently refuse to submit to him as well and lead with humility, and grace, and truth, and compassion. Sadly, there are so many examples of ungodly leadership in our world and even in the church that some would argue that we ought not to submit at all. But just because some get it wrong doesn't mean it isn't possible to get it right. As somebody once said, just because the garden grows weeds doesn't mean we pave it over with concrete.⁶

Theologian John Stott gives a definition of submission which I think provides an outstanding summary point in all this: "Submission is voluntary self-giving to a lover whose responsibility is defined in terms of constructive care; it is love's response to love." Whether in marriage, or parenting, or the workplace, or the church, Jesus calls me to submit to you of my own free will because I know that Jesus has called you to look out for my best interests. Because Christ put in your heart a love for me I am then able to love you. When I serve you and I submit to you it is because I know you, in turn, serve me and submit to me. It is simply love responding to love.

Of course this is true in the ultimate sense. We love and serve one another in Christ because Christ has already loved and served us. Though himself God, the head over all things, the one to whom we are all ultimately subject, Christ submitted to us first, even giving his very life on the cross to save those who had to that point refused to submit. In all of this, of course, it is Jesus who is our supreme example.

What wife doesn't want to follow the lead of a husband who is absolutely committed, even to death, to the best interests of his wife? What child would not want to obey a parent whose sole commitment is to give to that child every good thing God has to give? What servant would not joyfully honor a master who is willing to sacrifice everything for those who work for him? Above all, what man or woman or child would not be willing to lovingly serve a God who has already loved and served us in ways beyond what we could ever imagine?

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Ephesians 6:1-9 again. What sticks out to you? What do you like here? What troubles you here?
2. Paul tells children to obey their parents "in the Lord". How is obeying "in the Lord" different than just plain old obeying?
3. What qualities would characterize a home where parents and children applied verses 1-4 consistently?
4. Parents are called to bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord? What does this look like practically? How can the church help parents in this?
5. How can Paul's words to slaves and masters be applied to us? How can you specifically take Paul's teaching in verses 5-9 and apply it to your workplace (school, volunteer work, etc.) this week?
6. When you work are you usually trying to work to please a human 'master' or are you able to do your work, whatever it is, in honor of your Heavenly Master? What's the difference?

Continued...

⁶ N.T. Wright, 71.

7. Consider this quote from John Stott, "Submission is voluntary self-giving to a lover whose responsibility is defined in terms of constructive care; it is love's response to love." How does this apply to our relationships with one another? How does this apply to our relationship to Christ?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do you think that God wants children to obey their parents?

Why do you think God wants parents to make sure they do not make their children frustrated?