

Week 12: Ephesians 6:1–9: Respect and Obedience

Hook



Main Point: Christians in positions of authority lead the way Jesus does.

There's a popular idea called a "Yes Day"—for one day, within certain boundaries, parents agree to say "yes" to what their kids want to do. Ice cream for breakfast? Yes. Stay in pajamas all day? Yes. Go somewhere fun? Yes.

Q: If you had had a "Yes Day" when you were a child, what choices would you have made?

Q: What would your childhood have looked like if you had been allowed to make *every decision* for yourself, *every day*?

A "Yes Day" works because it's one day. Imagine if parents could never say no. Growing up, we didn't always understand why our parents told us no, established rules, or asked us to do things we didn't want to do. Looking back, we can often recognize that the very rules we resisted were intended for our good.

Q: What is a rule your parents had that you didn't appreciate as a child but understand now?

In Ephesians 6, Paul instructs children to obey and honor their parents. Parents aren't perfect, but learning to obey their parents is one way children learn to submit to the Lord's authority.

RECAP: In the first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1–3), Paul gave us doctrine: how the Gospel transforms us into new creations in Christ. In the second half, he described how to apply that doctrine to our lives and live as transformed people in the church community (4:1–5:21), in the home (5:22–6:9), and in the world (6:10–20).

In how to live in the church community, Paul used two metaphors to talk about living into our identity in Christ: taking off the old self/putting on the new self and light versus darkness.

In the next section (of which this passage is part), Paul talked about how to live as transformed people in the household. Paul reminded those under authority to respect that authority but completely redefined what it meant to be a good leader in a position of authority – humble servant leadership, as modeled by Jesus.

In the last lesson, Paul talked about marriage. In this lesson, he addresses children and slaves.

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Book

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Ephesians 6:1–3 [Read]

Talking Point 1: God calls us to obey our parents as children and honor them throughout our lives.

Q: Why does Proverbs say children should welcome discipline from their parents?

Q: What promise goes along with obeying parents?

Q: What is the difference between obeying your parents as a child and honoring your parents as an adult, and what might that look like in your life today?

This section continues the discussion of how transformed people should live in the household. In the last lesson, we saw that Paul's instructions to the head of household were radically different from the culture and pointed to the love, compassion and grace of Jesus. Paul was writing to Christians in a Greco-Roman culture where the head of household had the "power of the father" – absolute authority – over all members of his household; wife, children (including adult children), other relatives and slaves. God's original design for marriage and family also said men are the head of the household, but God has a radically different definition of a good head of household, which is a humble servant leader who sacrificially loves his family the way Jesus loves His people.

This same heart attitude continues in his instructions to parents and children. First, Paul stated what everyone in their culture would have expected – children, obey your parents. But his instructions to fathers not to provoke their children was shocking. Under Roman law, fathers held enormous authority over their families (*patria potestas*). But Paul challenged the culture: Just because you have authority doesn't mean you have permission to abuse it. God calls fathers not merely to exercise authority, but to reflect the character of Christ in how they use it.

It is into this context that Paul told children to obey their parents in the Lord. Two things make this different from the Greco-Roman model. First, he doesn't just say obey their father but *parents*, including their mother, too. This was something radically different about God's law in the Old Testament, too. In pagan cultures, fathers had absolute authority over children, but God's law commanded children to obey their fathers *and mothers* (Exodus 20:12). When God's law addressed punishing a disobedient son, it told both father *and mother* to take him to the elders (Deuteronomy 21:19). This reminds us again how God's Word gives equal value to women amid an ancient world that did not.

Secondly, Paul told children to obey their parents “in the Lord” –as part of their obedience to Christ. In other words, “Obey your parents because you belong to the Lord and this is what the Lord calls you to do.” This fits the surrounding context of Ephesians 5–6, where marriage, parenting, work and submission are all transformed by one’s relationship with Christ. However, children were not obligated to obey a parent if it required disobedience to God’s Word. Parental authority is subordinate to Christ’s authority.

Obedying your parents and God’s Word generally leads to fuller, happier, more peaceful and more rewarding life. There is also a real connection between honoring parents and longevity (“you may live long on the earth”). Those who follow godly wisdom often avoid destructive behaviors which can lead to a shorter lifespan (Proverbs 3:1–2; 19:16). This isn’t a *guarantee* that everything will be great in your life. Advice-type Bible verses such as those in Proverbs are not guarantees of success; they are more like general principles.¹ Also, the Bible teaches that if you’re following Jesus, things will “go well” even in the struggle and suffering (Romans 5:3–5).

Because adult children in our culture do not typically live with their parents in one household, we need to consider how to apply the principle of this command in our context. Today, adult children are not faced with obeying their parents’ day-to-day household rules or living under their authority. For us, the question is, how can the way we live bring honor to our parents?

For children who still live under their parents’ authority, obeying their parents is an act of obedience to the Lord. Paul does not limit this command to children with Christian parents. Children are called to obey their parents “in the Lord” – recognizing that parental authority is ultimately given by God and is therefore subordinate to His authority. If a parent commands a child to do something that clearly violates God’s Word, the child must obey God rather than the parent (Acts 5:29). Otherwise, children are called to obey and honor their parents, whether their parents are believers or not.

Q: How does your life bring honor to your parents, even as an adult?

Q: Describe some ways your parents have led you to grow in following Jesus, as a child, teen and even throughout your adulthood.

Ephesians 6:4 and Psalm 103:13–18 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Christian parents guide their children with compassion and grace.

Q: What is the contrast in Ephesians 6:4? What does this tell us about God as Father?

Q: On whom does the Lord have compassion? What does this tell us about the Gospel?

Q: How can parents practice biblical discipline without provoking their children to anger, and what does that teach their children about God's character?

This verse is the part that would have felt countercultural to the original hearers in the ancient Greco-Roman culture. Heads of household had unlimited authority over their children, which led many to be authoritarian and domineering. Yet, there were some Greek philosophers (Stoics) who taught that self-control is a virtue, and fathers should be firm but not cruel with their children.² Ephesus was a center of Greek philosophy, so they may have already heard some similar ideas about not provoking children to anger. But Paul went even further with his contrast – “but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This was Paul redefining the role of parent as discipler.

Paul uses “fathers” here as the head of household because of the context, but we can apply these principles to both parents, as the commandment is to honor your *father and mother*. As a Christian parent, our goal isn’t just to raise good people who contribute positively to society; our goal is to raise disciples of Jesus Christ. In the Roman world, parents wanted to raise well-behaved, respectable, successful Roman citizens. But for Paul, parenting wasn’t just about behavior modification because the Gospel isn’t about behavior modification. The discipline and instruction of the Lord isn’t just about making your kids behave. It’s about raising them to live as “new self” people.

As Christian parents, we want to raise our kids to do what’s right, but we don’t want them to grow up thinking being a Christian just means “being a good little girl/boy.” We want them to come to know Jesus and increasingly desire what is good because their hearts are aligned with His. On the outside, those two kinds of people may look very much alike. But we don’t want to raise kids who just *look like* good Christians on the outside; we want to raise kids who truly know Jesus on the inside. Behavior-modification style parenting can produce kids who read their Bibles, work hard, don’t drink, don’t have premarital sex, etc., yet never have a personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus said the Pharisees followed all the rules, but their hearts were far from God.

Gospel-style parenting doesn’t just focus on behavior but on the heart beneath the behavior. When our kids do something wrong, gospel-style parenting asks *why* they did it and helps them see their need for Jesus rather than just telling them to try harder to be good. Gospel-style parenting doesn’t expect kids to be perfect; it shows them how to confess, repent, and receive God’s grace when they mess up. Gospel-style parenting shows kids they don’t have to earn God’s love or their parents’ love by being good; they are already unconditionally loved. Most of all, Gospel-style parenting *models* spiritual maturity because faith is more caught than taught.

This is consistent with the imagery of parenting as discipleship. In the ancient world, disciples didn’t just learn their rabbi’s teaching; they imitated the way he lived. Our kids will imitate what we do, regardless of what we say. This is why Paul began with “do not provoke your children to anger.” If we deal with our kids harshly, we will raise harsh

children. But if we handle them with compassion, we will raise compassionate children. Because our kids usually reflect to the world the way we treat them.

Paul ended his instruction in verse four by telling fathers to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This means raising children according to God’s Word and His ways, teaching them what is right, correcting them when necessary, and treating them with the same compassion, mercy, and love that God shows His children. Paul went from a negative command (“do not”) to three positive ones – bring up, discipline, and instruct. The phrase “bring them up” is more literally “nourish” or “feed.” Parents should care for their children lovingly, as he described husbands caring for their wives as their own bodies. For godly parents, “instruction” and “discipline” are about teaching and training our children to grow in spiritual maturity, just as God’s discipline of us is “for our benefit” (Hebrews 12:5–11).

When we parent our children with the compassion, mercy, love, justice and grace of God, they will not only hear the Gospel preached and taught, they will *experience* the Gospel in the way their parents treat them – grace when they fail, forgiveness when they repent, patience when they’re difficult, correction when they need it, and unconditional love that doesn’t disappear when they mess up. They will see how to live in fellowship with Jesus rather than just obey a list of rules. Parents can’t save their children, but they can point them to the Savior. The goal isn’t just raising kids who know how to act Christian, but raising kids who know their need for Christ through faithful teaching and a life that models the Gospel.

Just as with headship in marriage, God’s design for parental authority may have looked similar in structure to the culture around them. But the way that parents were to exercise their authority in God’s design was radically different. Just as Jesus is the model for Christian husbands to relate to their wives, so God the Father is the model for Christian parents to relate to their children. Our Father disciplines us, but He does it with love and compassion (Psalm 103:13; Proverbs 3:12). Our Father is near to all who call upon Him (Psalm 145:18). He lovingly molds us into who He wants us to be (Isaiah 64:8). He protects us from danger and guides us in the right paths (Psalm 23). As a loving shepherd, He gently leads us and even carries us in His arms when we need it (Isaiah 40:11). Our Father provides for our every need and even knows what we need better than we do (Matthew 6:25–34). Over and above our needs, He abundantly showers us with every spiritual blessing (1:3) and delights in giving us good gifts (Matthew 7; James 1:17). Our Father showed His love for us by sacrificing Himself to save us, even when we were still His enemies (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).

Q: How does our culture’s view of parenting compare to God’s parenting of us?

Q: How did your parents reflect God's love and compassion? What things would you emulate, and what things would you change from the way they parented you?

Ephesians 6:5–9 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Anyone in authority should see their role as a servant leader.

Q: How do Paul's commands to servants address their heart attitude?

Q: What did Paul mean when he told masters to "do the same to them"?

Q: How does remembering that we ultimately serve Christ change the way we respond to unfair treatment from those in authority?

This final category can be harder for us to understand because slavery is foreign to our modern American experience and immediately brings to mind the horrific race-based slavery of our nation's history. Slavery was a widespread and accepted institution throughout the Roman Empire, and Paul's purpose in this passage was not to address whether the institution itself should continue. Instead, he addressed Christians living within that existing social structure and taught both slaves and masters how their relationship with Christ should transform the way they treated one another. Slaves were to serve sincerely as unto Christ, while masters were commanded to treat their slaves with the same goodwill, remembering that they too had a Master in heaven who shows no partiality.³

In Corinthians, Paul told slaves that if they had the opportunity to gain their freedom, they should take it. But if they couldn't, they could know they were truly free in Christ. Whether slave or free, all believers belong to Christ and serve Him (1 Corinthians 7:21–24). Paul also taught that slaves and free people have equal standing before God because all believers are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

We see this new relationship illustrated in Paul's appeal to Philemon concerning Onesimus. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave – as a dearly loved brother" (Philemon 16). Some interpreters understand this as suggesting that Paul hoped Philemon would free Onesimus, while others believe Paul expected the existing master-slave relationship to continue but to be radically transformed by their new relationship as brothers in Christ.⁴ Either way, Paul placed their relationship in Christ above their earthly social status. The world may measure people by their position, but God measures no believer by their status. In Christ, we all stand before the same Lord, answer to the same Master, and are called to show one another the same love and dignity.

In the last verse of this passage, Paul said something similar to masters – whatever their roles in this world, both master and slave ultimately serve the same Master in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him.

Paul first counseled slaves in a way their culture would have expected – obey your masters with fear. But he also added “with a sincere heart.” Again, God’s design was countercultural to the world, particularly in the way He calls us to treat each other. If we were enslaved, most of us would obey, but with anger and resentment, not sincerity. But Paul told them the attitude of their heart was between them and the Lord. “Not by way of eye-service” was a Greek term that meant only working hard when you were being watched and slacking off when no one was looking. This was common among slaves in the Greco-Roman world; it would be very natural to have this attitude. But “new self” people live differently, by God’s higher way. They love their enemies and do good even in unfair situations. Jesus understood what it is like to be in an unfair situation, falsely accused, beaten and killed. Yet on the Cross, He asked God to forgive them.

Paul redefined their thinking: You’re not trying to please people but you’re trying to please God (Galatians 1:10). This means serving wholeheartedly with love and grace, even in an unfair situation, even when no one is watching, because God is the One you are trying to please, and He is always watching. You aren’t responsible for how other people treat you, only how you behave, how you react. God will deal with your master about the way he treated you. For your part, don’t let your unjust situation drive you to bitterness, anger, resentment and a desire for vengeance. The Lord will avenge those who mistreat you (Romans 12:19). This is a very hard command; but if they could do it, they would know what it was like to love their oppressors as Jesus did. And they would find for themselves freedom from bitterness and anger.

Paul’s command to masters was even more countercultural: “Do the same to them”; treat slaves with the same sincerity and good will, recognizing you are both equally servants of Christ. Paul radically redefined authoritative roles in terms of servant leadership, even with a master/slave. Because in God’s view, leadership is not a privilege but a responsibility. Leaders are not there to be served but to serve their people. Christians in positions of authority should lead the way Jesus leads – guiding, providing, and caring the way a shepherd cares for his sheep.

Paul ended with saying there is no partiality with God. In the human power structures we have set up in our world, we have created differing levels of value between people. But in God’s kingdom, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free; we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). In the kingdom of God, the last will be first and the first will be last (Matthew 19:30).

There is no exact comparable situation in our culture, since we no longer allow slavery. But on a much lesser scale, we could apply these principles to a time when we are stuck in a job with an unfair boss or a class with an unfair teacher. We encourage anyone in an

abusive situation to get out of it, whether a marriage, friendship, job, family or any other situation. But sometimes you may be in a situation with an unfair boss, teacher or other authority figure, and you can't get out of it, at least not right away. Paul would call us to serve wholeheartedly even in those situations, as if we are working directly for the Lord, not for the unfair boss or teacher. And for those of us who are in positions of authority at home, work, church, in the community or anywhere else, Paul would tell us to lead and serve those under our authority as Jesus did, knowing that, ultimately, He is our Master, and we are leading in His stead.

Q: What human power structures exist in your life? If you're the one in authority, how can you lead more as Jesus did? If you're not in authority, how can you serve your "master" with sincerity of heart?

Q: How can the relationships between the people in your household better reflect the kingdom of God and the character of Jesus?

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Took

Main Point: Christians in positions of authority lead the way Jesus does.

Most of us live on both sides of authority. We are under someone's authority, and we probably have some measure of authority or influence over someone else. Paul's challenge in Ephesians 6 is that both should be transformed by our relationship with Christ. When we are *under authority*, we obey and serve as unto the Lord. When we are *given authority*, we lead and care for others as Jesus does. In either position, the ultimate question is the same: Does the way I lead or follow point people to Christ?

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on all the places in your life where there are leaders and followers (work, home, school, church, in the community, etc.). Reflect on the nature and character of those in leadership positions. If they are Christians, how are they reflecting Christlike servant leadership? In what ways does their leadership not look like Christ? If they are not Christians, how is their leadership different from what it could be if they led like Jesus? Now reflect on the nature and character of those in "follower" positions. How can they reflect God's character in the way they follow those in authority? In what ways might you need to change your leading or following to reflect the nature and character of God?

PRAY: Thank God first for being the perfect husband, Father and master for us. Thank God that in His kingdom there is no partiality. Ask Him to search your heart and show you any way you are not loving and serving others the way Jesus did. Ask Him to reveal any places you are being domineering or unfair. Ask Him to reveal any places you are not showing respect to those in authority over you. Pray for God to reveal opportunities to you to show selfless Christ-like love to others, whether you are in the position of authority or the position of servant.

ACT: Serve. Start this activity with prayer, asking God how He wants you to live this out this week. Choose a relationship in which someone is in authority over you or you are in authority over that person. Ask God how you can serve that person this week the way Jesus served His people. Then do it!

¹ Hard work typically leads to prosperity while laziness typically leads to poverty (Proverbs 10:4), but that doesn't always happen. Eating right and exercise typically makes you healthy, but you could still get cancer. It's not a guarantee, just a principle.

² Seneca, *On Anger*, Book 2:21–23. Seneca was a first-century Roman Stoic philosopher whose writings emphasized self-control and warned against destructive anger.

³ It's important when reading this to keep in mind that slavery in the Roman world was quite different from slavery in our country's history. Slaves in Rome were considered property, but Roman slaves had legal and social opportunities that American slaves did not have. Many slaves could earn wages, accumulate personal savings, own property, receive education, and purchase their freedom. Although some lived in brutal conditions working in mines or on farms, many lived relatively comfortable lives as household servants. Educated slaves often served as teachers, doctors, accountants, administrators or household managers.

The New Testament does not celebrate slavery. Paul told the Corinthians if they can get out of slavery, they should get out (1 Corinthians 7:21). But when slaves could not be freed, the apostles encouraged them to live for Christ and love others in the context of the existing system they had no political power to change. At the same time, the Gospel introduced principles that ultimately undermined slavery itself: the equal value of all people made in God's image, the unity of believers in Christ, and the truth that masters and slaves alike are accountable to the same Lord (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9; Philemon 16).

⁴ Edwin C. Deibler, "Philemon," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 773.