

## The grace of keeping your power in check

### Ephesians 6:1-9

This week we come to the second of two controversial passages.

Last week we were thinking about Paul's words to husbands and wives.

This week we are thinking about *parenting* and *slavery*.

(Some might say it's the same thing, but that would be too cynical!)

All three topics are tricky for different reasons.

When speaking about husbands and wives Paul says something controversial:

*Wives submit* he says. Have a listen online if you want to know more!

His take on slavery is controversial more because of what he *doesn't* say.

He doesn't come out and condemn slavery outright, and we wish he had.

So Paul is causing controversy by saying things we might wish he hadn't, but also by not saying the things we wish he had!

But we don't need the Apostle to make parenting controversial, do we?

Next time you're in a social setting you could run an experiment.

Just make some kind of pronouncement about parenting

—doesn't matter what it is: about watching TV, children's diets, discipline—  
and within seconds you'll find yourself in an argument.

Paul doesn't have a lot to say on the matter,

which for him is probably a wise move!

But he does say some things and so we'll have a listen to what he says

Were at the beginning of Eph 6. V 1: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

The fact that Paul addresses children directly

tells us something about their value within the Christian community.

Christian faith is addressed to children as well as adults.

The British Atheist Richard Dawkins says

that teaching some religious truths to children is a type of child abuse.

We mustn't be persuaded by such claims.

To exclude children from Christian teaching is to deny our faith

because here in Eph 6 verse 1 our Bibles address children directly.

Children are worthy recipients of Christian teaching.

The specific teaching at this point is that they obey their parents.

It's a teaching that has precedent in the OT with the fifth commandment,  
which Paul repeats in verse 2 "Honor your father and mother"

Honouring your father and mother is a little broader than obeying them,

it includes not just the action of obedience

but also the emotions of love and respect,

it includes how we talk about our parents.

And honouring our parents brings with it a reward; it's a command with a promise  
 Verse 3 "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."  
 Not hard to imagine how this promise works;  
     parents work overtime to keep their offspring safe  
     so it pays dividends for the young ones to listen.

But I'm not sure this command and promise is limited to young children.  
 John's Gospel tells us that as Jesus was dying on the cross  
 he honoured his mother by asking his disciple John to take her in.  
 No matter how old you are,  
 as long as you have parents you are called to honour them.  
 Perhaps not so much obedience as we get older, but certainly honour.

This will look different depending on our age.  
 One of the things I am planning to tell our Young Adults  
 when we study this passage at next week's 645 service  
 is for them to watch the temptation to ignore their parents;  
 that seems to me to be great temptation once young people enter adulthood.  
 But in doing so they're missing out on the promise that is attached;  
 parents are great repositories of wisdom, and wisdom is always beneficial.

Another factor is the ever-increasing age of our parents.  
 Nick Speyer has been retired for over 5 years now,  
 and he is still honouring his mother who is now aged 103!  
 As parents age us white folk can learn a lot from those in other cultures  
     who are very hospitable to their aged mum and dad.  
 It's not always possible or advisable to have elderly parents move in  
 —sometimes they need care that we are not equipped to provide—  
 but the willingness to live with extended family is admirable,  
 and, if Ephesians 6 is any indication, such willingness is very pleasing to God.

So they're the instructions for children:  
 obey as is appropriate for your age, but always honour.  
 And as he did with the husband and wife,  
 Paul is sure to say something to the other party.

As he speaks with *parents*, Paul takes a balanced approach;  
 he has something for parents to avoid and also something for them to pursue.  
 Verse 4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children;

Throughout the history of the church,  
 plenty of advice has been given regarding how to raise children,  
 some of it quite extreme.

You may have heard of John and Charles Wesley,

the English Ministers of the 1700s from whom the Methodist churches grew. Remarkable men with incredible ministries.

Their mother is also well known, Susannah Wesley, and she is sometimes put forward as a good example of Christian parenting; obviously she raised her kids right for them to be such powerful Christians!

Here is a quote from a letter she wrote where she explains her parenting method, See what you make of it:

*In order to form the minds of children, the first thing is to be done is to conquer their will. I insist on conquering the wills of children in good time, because this is the only foundation for a religious education. As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children, insures their after-wretchedness and irreligion, and what ever checks and mortifies it promotes their future happiness and piety.*

Her approach has an intense focus on a particular aspect of Christian teaching, that sin is a serious issue and affects people of all ages. Therefore, her argument goes, you need to get on top of it. Make your children obey you!

Now given what we already know of Paul's argument here in Ephesians, Susannah Wesley's approach ought to be ringing alarm bells. Remember last week, as Paul spoke about wives and husbands? He wanted people to worry about their own role, not the role of others. He takes the same approach here; he's addressed the children, and now he addresses parents asking them to consider their own actions.

And the first thing he wants Parents to do is to ensure they are not *exasperating* their children. To exasperate means to irritate or provoke to a high degree, so much so that your making the other person angry. Paul is asking parents to consider the emotions of their children, to consider what's going on the inside.

Often we miss what's going on because children aren't very skilled in telling us. It's easy to become frustrated and cross when your children are slow at getting ready in the morning. One time recently, Jas was trying to get Theo in the car and was hurrying him up when he turned and asked "Mummy do you know why I'm slow?" Jas responded "Why are you slow?" Theo said "I just like looking at things!". We had no idea! But it's very easy for us to blame him for not being co-operative, for not listening to us, when in fact there's something perfectly innocent and good that's behind his actions. Paul is asking us to look beyond a child's immediate external behaviour to consider the emotional life of the child. When parents are lacking the patience to do this, then that could cause our children to become exasperated.

Another point of view in contrast to that of Susannah Wesley

is that of an American Anglican named Leander Harding. A few years ago he wrote this book: *Reverence for the Heart of the Child*. And the title tells us what he's on about. Like the Apostle Paul, Harding suggests we think hard about what's happening on the inside. He says *There is a natural tendency on the part of adults to treat children as though their thinking is just as developed as adults' and as though their emotional life is not as intense. It is rather the case that children have a thinking process that is childlike and magical and feelings that are every bit as intense as adults. We must take these developmental realities into account and not focus on outward behaviour at the expense of inner feeling.*

And so there is a couple of practical considerations in response to what Paul says, one of which is to think hard about how and when we discipline. Discipline remains important. Basically we are seeking to imitate God himself when raising children. After all, he is the Father of us all, isn't he? And he is gracious and patient towards us, but he also disciplines us as we are told in Hebrews 12.

But in choosing when and how to discipline we must try and consider what's going on internally for our children. Christian parents often ask about smacking. Smacking can be a part of your approach to discipline, but we shouldn't be fooled into thinking that it's the magic bullet. Smacking is very good at gaining quick external compliance, but it's that emotional core which is going to have the most long term impact.

Here's Leander Harding again speaking about using harsh discipline: *Certainly these techniques can be used to gain compliance. But what is the cost of this compliance? What has this interchange done to the parent-child relationship? What has happened to the child's sense of the parents understanding and sympathy for his wishes? Where will the natural rage and anger that this experience generates go, especially if it's appearance will be met with more manipulations of the sort? What will be the price of this parental victory, five years out, fifteen years out? Most children I think will not be fooled and will become proportionately resentful.*

So I think the lesson is that harsh discipline, —exasperating discipline, anger inducing discipline— can have unintended consequences. We have to hear this grabbing on the grace of God because no parent is perfect and we inherit methods from our own parents, but maybe Paul's instruction here might mean some families need a rethink.

Paul also speaks of a positive parenting step we can take,

Don't exasperate your children he says,  
instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Lot's of positive ways we can do this:

- Making regular church attendance a priority.
- Modeling an interest in developing your own Christian faith.
- Speaking about Faith at home. Doesn't matter if you don't know the answers. Say *Great question! I don't know the answer!* And then make a project of finding out an answer together.

The space to ask questions

is particularly important for older teenagers in their spiritual development. For very young children the important thing is that they feel safe and comfortable in a church environment.

*This feels right* is what we want young children to be thinking.

For older children it's more *I think I understand this and can believe this myself*. It's important that they go through each stage.

If they suddenly stop developing their faith at age 12

then it's much harder for them to have faith as adults.

Now from one controversial topic to another: Slaves!

As I've mentioned, controversial because of what Paul doesn't say.

We want him to say

*Slavery is an abomination and it has no place among Christian people.*

But he doesn't.

Rather he gives instructions as to how to do slavery in a good way.

The historical context is important.

When we think of slavery we think of the African slave trade of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Or we might think of the human trafficking that happens today. Neither are the same as the Roman slavery that Paul knew about.

Slavery in Paul's time was becoming increasingly regulated

with slaves' rights improving throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> Century after Christ.

It was certainly possible and common for Roman slaves to gain freedom.

We know of massive emancipation events

where hundreds of thousands of slaves were released at once.

Slavery was not necessarily permanent

nor was it necessarily as horrific as examples from other periods in history.

But just because it isn't that bad doesn't mean that it's good.

We know that Paul wasn't a fan of slavery.

He labels slave trading as a sin in 1 Timothy 1:10,

He pleads with Philemon to take Onesimus back

not as a slave but as a brother.

He tells Christian slaves in 1 Corinthians to try and gain their freedom.

Paul understands that we are all of the same value before God  
 and so slavery doesn't seem to fit right with him.  
 It's these other comments that moved Christians to end slavery in other ages.

I think Paul's failure to condemn slavery more strongly  
 might just be a practical decision  
 to help slaves get in the best possible position to secure their freedom.

Certainly Paul's instructions to both slaves and masters  
 seeks to level the relationship somewhat.  
 He reminds them both that they're accountable to an even higher power.  
 To slaves he says you are slaves of Christ, so verse 7 *Serve wholeheartedly, as if  
 you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each  
 one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.*  
 It's a reminder for all of us that Jesus cares about our everyday business.  
 We serve him not only in church activities  
 but whenever we have opportunity to do good.

And to masters he says *Remember you have a Master in heaven! He treats everyone  
 the same, so slaves are worthy of the respect you'd show anyone else.*

I think the application to us today lies in how we respond when we are either  
 powerless like a slave, or when we do have power, like a master.  
 Maybe you've run afoul of the local council or the body corporate or your  
 landlord with their refusal to let you use your residence as you wish.  
 That's one example when we might feel are powerless,  
 but how would you act if it were Jesus who refused your request?  
 With grace and humility I would hope.

And if you do have power, how is it that you are exercising it?  
 I hope with the same restraint that Jesus exhibits towards us,  
 imperfect creatures that we are.

I think this issue of how we use power  
 is the theme that unifies this whole section on household instructions.  
 Husbands have power, Parents have power, Masters have power,  
 with each being encouraged to keep that power in check.

In a sense, Paul was an early incarnation of Spiderman!  
 Spiderman is known for a particular proverb,  
 actually it comes from his Uncle Ben, but some of you may know it:  
*With great power comes great responsibility.* Paul would agree!  
 So use your power fairly and wisely and for the good of others,  
 just as Jesus uses his power with you.