

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: Children, Parents, and Servants

Ephesians 6:1-9

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

In this passage Paul continues the household teaching that flows from being filled with the Spirit and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. The teacher should help the class see the unifying theme: every ordinary relationship, child to parent, parent to child, worker to master, master to worker, is to be lived before the lordship of Christ. The Christian life is not proved mainly in dramatic moments but in the faithfulness of daily roles, and this is where genuine spiritual formation happens.

Two doctrinal notes deserve attention. First, when Paul cites honor your father and mother as the first commandment with a promise, he draws on the Ten Commandments. The teacher can use this to clarify how Christians relate to the Old Testament law: we are not under the Old Covenant as a binding system, for it was fulfilled and set aside in Christ (as Lesson 4 showed), yet its moral substance is repeatedly reaffirmed under the New Covenant. Paul does not bind the Old Law on Christians; he restates a moral principle now carried forward in Christ. Second, the passage addresses servants and masters within the institution of ancient slavery. The teacher should handle this carefully: Paul is not endorsing slavery but Christianizing the relationships within a society where it existed, insisting on the dignity of the servant, the accountability of the master, and the equal standing of both before an impartial God. These gospel seeds, the equal worth of all in Christ and the single heavenly Master over all, ultimately undermine the very institution (see Philemon and Galatians 3:28).

Formationally, the aim is to dignify ordinary obedience and ordinary work as service to Christ, and to humble all who hold authority by reminding them of their own Master in heaven. The teacher should lead children and adult children to honor their parents, parents to nurture rather than provoke, workers to labor as to the Lord, and any who lead to do so without harshness. The great leveling truth, that God shows no partiality and repays the good each one does, frees the overlooked and warns the powerful.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 through 3 Paul tells children to obey their parents in the Lord and to honor their father and mother, calling this the first commandment with a promise. What is the difference between obeying and honoring, and what is the promise attached to this command?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul tells children to obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right, and then to honor your father and mother (vv. 1–2). Obedience and honor are related but distinct. Obedience is doing what parents say; honor is a deeper attitude of respect, esteem, and care. Obedience belongs especially to childhood years; honor is lifelong.

Note the qualifier in the Lord and the words for this is right. Children's obedience is framed within their relationship to Christ and grounded in what is right by God's design. It is not absolute (a child should not obey a parent who commands sin), but within its proper sphere it is the God-ordained order of the home.

Paul calls this the first commandment with a promise, citing the fifth of the Ten Commandments. Here the teacher can clarify how Christians relate to the Old Testament. Paul is not placing believers back under the Old Covenant, which was fulfilled and set aside in Christ. Rather, he reaffirms a timeless moral principle that the New Covenant carries forward. The command to honor parents was never merely Jewish ceremony; it reflects God's abiding will, now restated for Christians.

The promise is that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. In its original setting this pointed to long life and blessing in the promised land; as a general principle it remains true that honoring parents and the order God designed tends toward a stable, blessed life. It is a wise and good way to live.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience and honor distinguished; honor as lifelong
- Children's obedience framed in the Lord and limited by God's higher law
- How Christians relate to the Old Law: not bound by the Old Covenant, yet its moral substance reaffirmed in Christ
- The promise of blessing attached to honoring parents

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between obeying and honoring parents?
- How can we cite an Old Testament command without placing ourselves under the Old Covenant?
- What is the promise attached to this command, and how should we understand it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Honoring parents is a lifelong calling that takes different forms as we grow, including how adult children treat aging parents. How are you doing at honoring your parents in this season of life, whatever your age, and where could you grow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes honor personal and lifelong. Since honor outlasts childhood obedience, it applies to every student, including adult children whose parents are aging or whose relationships with parents are complicated.

Help students consider what honor looks like in their season: a young child's obedience, a teenager's respect, an adult child's care for aging parents, gratitude, attention, provision, patience. Honor does not require agreement on everything, but it does require respect and care.

Be sensitive to those with difficult or absent parents. Honor in such cases may be costly and complex, but the call to treat parents with the respect their position carries remains, even where the relationship is strained. Encourage one concrete act of honor this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honor as a lifelong calling in changing forms
- Adult children caring for aging parents
- Honor amid difficult or strained relationships
- Concrete acts of respect, care, and gratitude

Discussion Prompts

- How are you doing at honoring your parents in this season of life?
- What does honor look like for you now, at your age?
- What is one concrete way you could honor a parent this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 4 Paul tells fathers not to provoke their children to anger but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. What two dangers does Paul guard against here, and what does it look like to raise children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul turns to fathers (and by extension parents): do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (v. 4). He guards against two opposite dangers.

The first danger is provoking children to anger, exasperating them through harshness, constant criticism, unfairness, favoritism, or impossible demands. Authority can wound. Paul warns parents that their manner, not only their rules, matters, and that they can embitter a child by how they lead.

The second danger, implied by the positive command, is neglect, failing to bring children up at all in the things of God. The remedy is discipline and instruction of the Lord: loving correction and positive teaching, both centered on the Lord. Parents are to shape character and to teach the faith, patiently and consistently.

Help parents in the class feel the balance. Godly parenting is neither harsh authoritarianism that provokes nor passive permissiveness that neglects, but a warm, firm, God-centered nurture that disciplines in love and instructs in truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Provoking children to anger through harshness as a real danger
- Neglect of spiritual nurture as the opposite danger
- Discipline and instruction of the Lord as loving correction and teaching
- Godly parenting as warm, firm, and God-centered

Discussion Prompts

- What two dangers does Paul guard against in verse 4?
- How can a parent's manner, not just their rules, provoke a child?
- What does raising children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord look like?

Question 4

Student Question:

Whether or not you are a parent, you influence the young people and the people around you. Where might you be provoking or discouraging others rather than nurturing them, and what would patient, godly encouragement look like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question widens the application beyond parents, since every believer influences others, younger believers, students, employees, anyone under their influence. The principles of not provoking and of nurturing apply broadly.

Help students examine where they may be discouraging rather than building up, through harsh words, impatience, constant criticism, or unrealistic expectations. We can provoke and dishearten people without intending to.

Encourage the positive alternative: patient, godly encouragement that calls out the best in others and points them to the Lord. Ask each person to identify one relationship where they could trade discouragement for nurture.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Influence over others beyond formal parenting
- Discouraging others through harshness and criticism
- Patient, godly encouragement as the alternative
- Building up rather than disheartening those under our influence

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be provoking or discouraging others rather than nurturing them?
- What does patient, godly encouragement look like?
- Which relationship could you handle with more nurture this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 5 through 7 Paul tells servants to obey their earthly masters as they would obey Christ, doing the will of God from the heart and not merely for the sake of being seen. What transforms ordinary work and duty when it is done as service to Christ rather than only to people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul addresses servants (bondservants in the ancient world) with a remarkable reframing of work: obey your earthly masters with sincerity, as you would Christ, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart (vv. 5–6). The principles apply directly to all who work under others today.

The transformation is in the audience. The worker is to labor as to Christ, recognizing that the Lord Himself is the true one being served. This lifts even menial or unappreciated work into the realm of worship and obedience to God.

Paul contrasts this with eye-service and people-pleasing, working hard only when watched, performing for human approval. The servant of Christ works with integrity whether or not anyone sees, because Someone always does. The heart, not merely the hands, is engaged: doing the will of God from the heart.

Help the class grasp how dignifying this is. There is no secular and sacred divide for the Christian; ordinary work, done from the heart as to the Lord, is genuine service to God. This both ennoble humble labor and raises the standard of our effort.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Work reframed as service to Christ, the true Master
- The dignity of ordinary labor done as to the Lord
- Integrity versus eye-service and people-pleasing
- The heart engaged, not merely the hands

Discussion Prompts

- What changes when work is done as service to Christ rather than only to people?
- What is the difference between eye-service and serving from the heart?
- How does this erase the divide between secular and sacred work?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul contrasts genuine service with eye-service that only performs when watched. Where do you tend to work or serve mainly for human approval, and how would working as to the Lord change your effort and attitude?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the heart of work personal. Most of us are tempted to give our best effort mainly when it will be noticed or rewarded by people, and to coast when no one is watching. Paul calls this people-pleasing and sets a different standard.

Help students locate where they work for human approval: at a job, in volunteer service, even in ministry, where applause and recognition can quietly become the motive. The test is how we work when no one will know.

Working as to the Lord changes both effort and attitude. It raises the quality of hidden work and frees us from the anxiety of constantly seeking human praise. The Lord sees, and that is enough. Encourage one area to be re-offered to Christ this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Working for human approval versus for the Lord
- Integrity in unseen and unrewarded work
- Freedom from the anxiety of seeking praise
- Re-offering our work to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you tend to work mainly for human approval?
- How do you work differently when no one is watching?
- How would working as to the Lord change your effort and attitude?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 8 says that whatever good anyone does, he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a servant or free. What does this teach about how God sees and rewards our work and conduct, and how is that different from the way the world keeps score?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 8 grounds Christian work in a promise: knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a servant or free. God sees every good deed and will repay it. Nothing done for Him is wasted or forgotten.

This is a profound comfort, especially to those whose faithful work goes unrecognized. The servant whose master never thanks him, the worker overlooked for the promotion, the quiet saint whose labors no one notices, all have a Master in heaven who sees and will reward.

Note the phrase whether servant or free. God's reward is not based on social status or position. He repays the good itself, not the rank of the one who did it. This levels all human distinctions; the lowest servant and the freest citizen stand on the same ground before God.

Contrast this with how the world keeps score, by visibility, productivity, status, and applause. God's accounting is different: He sees the heart and the hidden good, and He repays what people overlook. Help the class rest their motivation here.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God seeing and rewarding every good deed
- Comfort for those whose faithful work is unnoticed
- Reward based on the good done, not on status
- God's accounting versus the world's scorekeeping

Discussion Prompts

- What does verse 8 teach about how God sees and rewards our work?
- How is God's way of keeping score different from the world's?
- How does this promise speak to overlooked, faithful work?

Question 8

Student Question:

It is easy to grow discouraged when our faithful efforts go unnoticed or unrewarded by people. How does the promise that the Lord Himself sees and repays the good we do change the way you face thankless or hidden work?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the promise of verse 8 to the discouragement of thankless work. Much of the good we do is hidden, unappreciated, or taken for granted, and over time that can erode our motivation and breed resentment.

Help students bring such work to mind: the unseen service at home, the faithful job no one praises, the kindness that is never returned. The temptation is to grow weary or to stop, since no one seems to notice.

The promise that the Lord Himself sees and repays reframes all of it. We are not finally working for human thanks but for the approval and reward of God, who misses nothing. This frees us to keep doing good without growing weary (Galatians 6:9). Encourage perseverance in a specific area of hidden faithfulness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discouragement in thankless, hidden work
- Resentment when good goes unnoticed
- The Lord's seeing and repaying as the true motive
- Perseverance in doing good without growing weary

Discussion Prompts

- Where do your faithful efforts seem to go unnoticed or unrewarded?
- How does the promise that the Lord sees and repays change that?
- Where do you most need to keep doing good without growing weary?

Question 9

Student Question:

In verses 5 through 9 Paul places both servants and masters under the same Master in heaven, who shows no partiality, and he tells masters to stop threatening and to treat their servants well. What does this teach about the lordship of Christ over all of life and the equal standing of every person before God, and how do these gospel truths transform earthly relationships of authority?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal center of the lesson, and the teacher should handle it thoughtfully. Paul tells masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with Him (v. 9). In a single verse Paul levels the ground between the most powerful and the least powerful person in the household.

The first great truth is the lordship of Christ over all of life. Both servant and master serve the same heavenly Master. The master is not the final authority; he is himself a servant of Christ, accountable for how he treats those under him. This means there is no area of life, work,

authority, home, that lies outside Christ's lordship. The Christian master must lead as one who will answer to God.

The second great truth is the impartiality of God and the equal standing of every person before Him. There is no partiality with Him. God does not regard the master as more valuable than the servant. In Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11); all are one, equally precious, equally accountable. This was a revolutionary truth in a world built on rigid hierarchy.

Here the teacher should address the matter of slavery honestly. Paul is not endorsing or commanding slavery; he is speaking into a society where it was deeply entrenched and instructing believers caught within it how to live as Christians. But notice what the gospel does: it insists on the full dignity of the servant as a person who serves Christ, it holds the master accountable to a higher Master, it forbids harsh threatening, and it declares slave and free equal before God. These are precisely the truths that, taken seriously, undermine slavery itself. In the letter to Philemon, Paul asks a master to receive his runaway servant no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. The gospel sowed the seeds that would in time overturn the institution.

Bring it home to the present. The same truths transform every modern relationship of authority, employer and employee, leader and follower. Those in authority are warned against harshness and reminded that they answer to God; those under authority are dignified as servants of Christ; and all are leveled by the impartial gaze of the One who shows no favoritism. The gospel does not merely regulate authority; it humanizes and transforms it under the lordship of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The lordship of Christ over every relationship, including work and authority
- Masters accountable to their own Master in heaven
- The impartiality of God and the equal standing of all in Christ (Galatians 3:28)
- Paul regulating, not endorsing, slavery, and sowing the seeds of its end (Philemon)
- The dignity of the servant and the accountability of the powerful
- The transformation of modern authority relationships under Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that master and servant share the same Master in heaven?
- How do the gospel truths here undermine slavery rather than endorse it?
- How should the lordship of Christ and God's impartiality shape authority today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Paul calls everyone, whatever their station, to live and work as to the Lord. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one ordinary relationship or duty you will begin to handle differently as service to Christ.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the whole passage under one banner: all of life, in every role and station, is to be lived as to the Lord. Children, parents, servants, and masters alike are called to act before the face of Christ, who sees all and shows no partiality.

Press for a personal response. Ask each student to name one way this passage is forming them, perhaps a renewed commitment to honor parents, a gentler way of leading, a new integrity at work, or freedom from working for human praise.

Then ask for one ordinary relationship or duty they will begin to handle differently as service to Christ. The power of this passage is that it transforms the ordinary; invite them to choose one ordinary place and offer it to the Lord.

Close by reminding the class that this is where real spiritual formation happens, not mainly on grand stages but in the faithful handling of daily roles. The kitchen, the workplace, and the family room are the proving grounds of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All of life lived as to the Lord
- Spiritual formation in ordinary roles
- Offering one ordinary relationship or duty to Christ
- The daily places as the proving ground of the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to shape you this week?
- Which ordinary relationship or duty will you handle differently as service to Christ?
- Why is faithfulness in ordinary roles so important to spiritual growth?