

The Book of Ephesians

Lesson 12: Children, Parents, and Servants -- Ephesians 6:1-9

There is a quiet truth about the Christian life that we are tempted to forget: most of it is lived in ordinary places. We imagine that faith is proved on some grand stage, in a dramatic moment of witness or sacrifice. But Paul knows better. Having lifted our eyes to the heavenly places and the eternal purposes of God, he now brings us all the way down to the kitchen table, the family room, and the workplace. This is where the gospel is actually tested, in how a child obeys, how a parent corrects, how a worker labors when no one is watching.

Paul is still unfolding what it means to be filled with the Spirit and to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. He has spoken to wives and husbands; now he speaks to children and parents, and then to servants and masters. In every case the same thread runs through: our most ordinary relationships are to be lived before the face of Christ. Children obey in the Lord. Fathers nurture in the Lord. Servants work as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

Notice that Paul does not only command the ones under authority; he turns and speaks just as firmly to those who hold authority. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening. Authority in the kingdom of God is never a license to crush those beneath us. The father who exasperates his children and the master who rules by threat have both forgotten the most important fact in the room: they themselves have a Master in heaven, and He shows no partiality.

That is the great leveling truth at the heart of this passage. The child and the parent, the servant and the master, all stand on the same ground before God. Whatever good anyone does, Paul says, he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a servant or free. The One who watches the workplace is not the boss but the Lord. The One who sees the home is not the neighbor but the Father. And so the most ordinary acts of obedience, patience, diligence, and kindness become, in His sight, genuine acts of worship.

Group Discussion: Paul addresses both those under authority and those who hold it, and he reminds everyone that they answer to the same Master in heaven who shows no partiality. How does remembering that we all stand on equal ground before God change the way we handle the authority we have and the authority we are under?

Personal Reflection: Paul says our ordinary obedience, parenting, and work are done as to the Lord. In which of your daily roles, as a child, parent, worker, or person under authority, do you most often forget that Christ is watching, and how would remembering Him change the way you act there?

Read Ephesians 6:1-9

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Colossians 3:20–4:1, the parallel instructions to children, parents, servants, and masters; Exodus 20:12, honor your father and mother, the commandment Paul cites; Deuteronomy 6:6–7, parents diligently teaching God's words to their children; Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, the equal standing of all in Christ, neither slave nor free; Philemon, Paul appealing for a runaway servant to be received as a beloved brother.