

Children, Parents, & the Gospel

Good to see you guys. If you have your bibles with you, go ahead and turn with me to Ephesians 6. I missed you guys last Sunday—and I really thought you guys missed me too until I tuned into the podcast to hear you guys booing me relentlessly. So thanks for that—really warmed my heart. If you're new around here, we really love to show our affection for one another in really sarcastic ways—it's our love language really.

But after you guys all boo'ed me, Jeff talked about husbands and wives. He covered the passage in the bible that I'd say is the one most likely to get stuff thrown at you—because it includes the part about wives submitting to their husbands. I was happy to hear that none of you guys threw anything at Jeff, so way to go on that. But at the beginning of last week's teaching, Jeff mentioned that really, that command is a part of a bigger instruction given to *everybody* in the Ephesian church—**that they all should “submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.”** That's the overarching, big-picture command: *all of us* who are followers of Jesus are called to “submit to one another,” and then after that, we're given all kinds of *specific* ways that we are to *go about* that depending on what and who we are. For wives, that will look one particular way. For husbands, that will look another way.

And so today, Paul is going to talk specifically about how all of that applies to the relationship between parent and child. What should a healthy, Jesus-y dynamic look like between a mom or dad and their kid? That's where he's headed today.

So let's take a look, starting ch. 6, v. 1:

*[1] Children, **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] “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”*

So he starts off talking to children in the Ephesian church. And just for us to know, the word for “children” here refers to children *still living in their parents' household*. We might use a word like “minors” or “dependents.” In this passage, Paul doesn't really have in mind *adult* children—that relationship dynamic looks a little different. But to children still living under their parents' roof, he says “*obey your parents.*”

But he doesn't just come up with that—he gets it from the Old Testament. The reason verses 2 and 3 are probably in quotes in your bible is because they are a reference to the Ten Commandments. There, it says that children should “honor their parents.” He also highlights that this commandment, about “honoring your father and mother” is the first commandment that has a *guarantee* attached to it. It says that if you obey your parents, the simple truth is that it will go better for you than if you chose not to.

So a little about me personally. I have fantastic parents. They're not perfect—no parents are—but overall I have fantastic, loving parents. And they kind of have always been that way, as far back as I can remember. But somewhere around late middle school, early high school, *I* made a decision that a lot of middle-schoolers and high-schoolers make—the decision to start being stupid. I don't think any kids that age would actually use that *exact* terminology to describe it, but that's exactly what it is. I started trying out alcohol, started being really dumb in relationships with girls—all sorts of things along those lines. And

here's what started to happen as a result to my relationship with my parents—things got tense. Tension started rising. Lying and sneaking around started happening. Anger and yelling started happening. And my relationship with my parents went quickly from very chill to the opposite of chill. And that's usually what happens when we start railing against the good intentions of our parents. Paul realizes that's how it often works. So he says instead of doing that, *honor your parents by obeying them*.

Now, I also know that with commands like “obey your parents,” many of us start to get uncomfortable. People start to ask, *but isn't this dangerous? What if the parent is abusive, sinful, controlling, selfish?* And that's a valid pushback. It's a pushback Paul is very aware of. In fact, he writes this passage in many ways to *address* that pushback, and he even addresses it briefly here in this first verse. Paul actually anticipates that *some* parents will not be great parents. And that's why he says children should obey their parents, “*in the Lord*.” “In the Lord” could be translated “*within* the Lord” or “as long as it is *in keeping with the Lord*.” That's a very important caveat. **When a parent is being abusive or being led by sinful tendencies, that would be *outside* of the Lord, outside of what God wants for them. So Paul isn't implying that kids should silently suffer under abusive, sinful or harmful behavior.** Not at all. But he is saying that *when* a parent's wishes are consistent with what God wants for his people, that their children should obey them.

But for some of us, our pushback to the idea of obedience goes a little deeper than that. **For some of us, it's not just that we don't think children should have to obey sinful or abusive parents—it's just that we don't like the idea of obedience *in general*.** For most modern Americans, and I'll say especially people my age and younger, when we hear words like “obey,” we start to break out in hives a little. It just isn't a word we like very much. It feels cold. Condescending. Or maybe even dangerous. And part of that is because of what it implies. The word “obey” implies *authority*. And *there's* a word we probably like even less.

And to be honest, I get the sentiment. Most of us have a very long list of examples of *bad* authority. Authority being used and abused to cause tremendous damage. I bet some of us even have very personal examples, even very painful ones, of corrupt authority being used as a weapon against *us*. So it's understandable why we might be a little skeptical of authority in general. But here's the challenge —**we have to develop the ability to reject *bad* authority, without rejecting authority *itself*.** One reason for that is that Jesus talks *positively* about authority. In Matthew 28, he says “all *authority* on heaven and on earth [that's a good bit of authority] has been given to *me*.” So if you have a problem with authority, you may not like Jesus very much.

But further than that, just logically speaking, **the world has to have *some* authority in order to function.** Authority is actually required to have a functional society. *Laws* are a type of authority. *Time* is a type of authority. And even *interpersonal* authority. If you're getting bad service at a restaurant, who do you ask to talk to? *A manager*—someone in authority who can do something about it. If someone runs into your car or steals your stuff, who do you call? The police—a person in *authority*, because they can do something about it. **The right kind of authority, believe it or not, actually exists for our good.**

And that's what Paul is getting at in this passage when it comes to *parental* authority. Good *parental* authority actually *benefits* the children who are under it. By telling children to obey and honor their parents, Paul *is acknowledging* that parents are in a position of authority. So the question we need to answer together today is actually *what is parental authority for?* What was it meant to accomplish? From

what I've observed, there are three popular ways of answering this question: two wrong ones, and one correct one from our passage. Let's take one at a time.

...ruling and reigning.

The first common answer given to *what is authority for* is that authority is for ruling and reigning. That the purpose of authority, is authority *itself*. This is what I would call the Frank Underwood, House of Cards model of authority. It also happens to be the specific misunderstanding Paul is confronting in this passage in regards to parenting. Here's how he does it, look at v. 4:

*[4] Fathers, **do not provoke your children to anger**, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

"Do not," Paul says, "use your authority to *provoke your children to anger*." A little cultural background might be helpful here. **In Roman households—the culture to which Paul is writing—the father of the family had *absolute*—and we would say *extremely unhealthy*—authority over his family.** Textual critic William Barclay describes it this way:

*A Roman father had **absolute power** over his family. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his fields even in chains, he could take the law into his own hands—for the law was in his own hands—and punish as he liked. He could **even inflict the death penalty on his child**.*

That last part isn't an exaggeration. In much of Roman culture around this time, a father killing his son or daughter was *legal*. They just assumed, I guess, that if a father did something like that, he had a good reason for doing it. So knowing all that, **you can start to imagine the type of fear-driven environment present in most of the households Paul is writing to.** You can imagine the type of terrifying power differential present between a father and his children. The type of emotional, verbal, and most likely physical abuse that would've existed almost entirely unhindered. **And into that type of environment, Paul writes "fathers, do not provoke your children to anger."** So, not just "don't *kill* your children" (which some of them apparently did), not just "don't *abuse* your children" (which *most* of them probably did), but "don't even provoke them to anger." Don't even *intimidate* them. Don't make them walk in fear around you. Don't play emotional games with them. And don't do things that unnecessarily make them angry." That, to Paul's audience, would've been a provocative, controversial statement.

So what kind of thing does Paul have in mind here? What does "provoking your kid to anger" look like? Here's a description of it from commentator Andrew Lincoln—not Walking Dead Andrew Lincoln, but a different one:

What Paul's ruling out here is excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs and sensitivities.

I think that helps us understand what Paul is warning against. Those are all things that would be considered "provoking children to anger." **Today, we would probably refer to this brand of parenting**

as something like “authoritarian” parenting. Paul, knowing that type of authoritarian parenting was the default tendency of many fathers in Roman households.

And that’s still the tendency of many parents today. I’m sure for some of you in the room, you read that list of things from Andrew Lincoln, and you were like “yeah, those things pretty much sum up my entire childhood.” For many of you, “fear” and “provoking” would very accurately describe the type of environment your parent or parents created in your childhood home. Or maybe as we read that, the Holy Spirit was even convicting you of some ways that you’ve created that type of environment as a parent yourself, whether overtly or in more subtle ways.

Here’s one *subtle* way I think *ruling and reigning* shows up in me: when Whit asks me why I won’t let him do something, I’ll often respond with “because I said so.” Now, parents in the room, I wouldn’t *dare* take that phrase away from you. Never. There are times where that is a completely acceptable response. But here’s what I’ve started to try to ask myself when I use that phrase: what *is* my reason for telling him not to do that? Do I *have* a reason? Is there a legitimate reason, for his good or the good of those around him, that I said “don’t do that?” That doesn’t mean I *owe* that reason or explanation *to him*—he’s a two year old. But if I am truly using my authority well as a parent, I should *have* a reason. It shouldn’t just be that I’m throwing my authority around for the sake of having authority. Just for the sake of *ruling* and *reigning*. Because that’s not what parental authority is for.

But while ruling and reigning was by far the way most people misused parental authority *back then*, it’s definitely not the only way people misuse it today. Today, many people approach authority from the *other* end of the spectrum, that...

...insulating and appeasing.

Some parents, often as a direct reaction to authoritarian parenting, go the *other* route with it. These parents see authority as existing to *insulate* and *appease*. ***Insulate* meaning they see it as their job to ensure that nothing negative or adverse happens to their child.** This is leads many baby product manufacturers to use *parental fear* as their primary marketing strategy. If you’re not a parent, you would be *shocked* at how often the sales pitch at a Buy Buy Baby store is, almost verbatim, “I mean you don’t want your baby to be *unsafe*, do you? Yeah, I didn’t think so. You better go ahead and get the \$700 stroller then instead of the \$400 one.” “You don’t want your kid to die in a car crash, do you? Yeah, you need to go ahead and get the *newest* model carseat then.” To which I wanted to respond, “Y’ALL ARE STILL SELLING CARSEATS THAT KILL KIDS? THAT’S A YOU PROBLEM.” Baby product manufacturers *know* that this is an inclination of a lot of parents, to the point that they eagerly build their sales tactics around it.

And listen—please hear my heart here. By no means do I mean to communicate that it is wrong to want to protect your kid. Not at all. Protection is a very natural and God-given instinct of a parent. But there is a difference between *protection* and *insulation*. ***Protecting your kid means making wise and safe decisions that benefit them. Insulating your kid is when you start to operate as if you’re the one in control of their universe.*** And listen—that’s not something you’re capable of.

One of the hardest things as a parent is realizing that some things are are utterly and completely out of your control. I have a friend who has two daughters, two years apart. He’d tell you that he raised them

exactly the same. Thought about parenting the same with them, did all the same things, acted the same way towards them growing up—all of that. And what kills him, *tears him up emotionally* to this day is that one of them is a very successful doctor in California and one of them is an addict and has been in and out of drug rehab facilities for her entire adult life. And he legitimately doesn't know what he did differently. Here's the difficult reality: **you cannot control how your kids turn out.** You can protect your kids, but you cannot create a universe where nothing adverse ever happens to them. That's the bad news.

But here's the good news: God has not given you that job. **We serve a God who can use those adverse scenarios for their good.** God is able to take things that we would prefer to protect our kids from altogether, and use them to grow them, challenge them, transform them. I think of the story of Joseph in the bible. His dad not only couldn't protect him from the world, he couldn't even protect him from Joseph's own *brothers*. They pushed him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and told their dad he was dead. And then, years and years later, Joseph looks at his brothers is able to say "you meant all this for evil, but God intended it for good." So listen, look for ways to protect your kids, for sure—but lay your head down to rest at night knowing that even the things you can't protect your kids from, God can use for their good.

But the other variation of this is that many people see it as their primary job to *appease* their kid. In general, **living to appease your kid means that everything else in your life starts taking a backseat to your kid's needs and preferences.** Time with other followers of Jesus can't really happen anymore, because it's just not compatible with your child's schedule. Intentional time with your spouse can't really happen anymore, because time spent intentionally with them is time you can't be directly meeting your kid's needs. Your own emotional and mental health becomes a non-factor to you, because all of your time and energy needs to go into what's best for your kid. Listen, *obviously* our kids' needs should be *important* for us. And listen, I'll even say that especially for those first few months of having a child, they kind of *have to* become the *most important* thing. And, there will be seasons where things happen and they need to become the priority for that *season*. **But as an ongoing pattern, as the norm of your life, you can't put your kids in a place where they take precedence over every other valuable thing in your life. That's not parenting your child—that's actually a lot closer to worshipping your child.** That's not good for you, and it's also not good for your child. So we shouldn't live primarily to appease our kid either.

So, to sum up, some people think that authority is given for the purpose of ruling and reigning. Some people think that authority is given for the purpose of insulating and appeasing. But here's what I want you to see: **when Paul talks about parenting, he doesn't talk primarily about either of those.** His language is substantially different. Look back at the second half of v. 4 with me. **The purpose of parenting according to Paul is to:**

...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Paul says that parental authority is given to parents for the purpose of "bringing our kids up." So a parent's job isn't to rule and reign with an iron fist, and it's also not to insulate their child and do whatever it takes to make their child happy. A parent's job is to "bring their kid up."

Put another way, **your primary job as a parent is to get your kid ready to be an adult.** That's your job. Now, maybe that sounds incredibly simplistic to you, but it's actually an incredibly helpful concept when it comes to making decisions as a parent. Because if that *is* your primary job, that means there are a few things that *aren't*. For instance, **it means your primary job *isn't* to just make them behave.** Hopefully, they *are learning* how to behave well, because that's part of being an adult. But their "behaving" is not the *end goal*—it's to learn how to be an adult. It is not a win to have a well-behaved kid if it means that that kid is completely unequipped to understand and deal with their emotions. **It also means your primary job *isn't* to make your kid happy.** A happy kid is a great thing—but *it isn't your primary goal.* And in fact, there are going to be times in their adult life where things will happen to them that will make them the opposite of happy—and your job as a parent is to get them ready for *those* moments too. It also means **your primary job *isn't* to protect them from every possible negative scenario that could happen to them.** As an adult, they're gonna have to encounter plenty of adverse scenarios. If you never allow them to experience those now, they're not going to know *how* to handle those as an adult.

One quote I've heard that I think sums this idea up well is that **the goal of parenting is to "prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child."** Your job as a parent is not to prepare the entire world to be ready for your kid to be in it. Your job is to prepare your *child* for the *world*.

And Paul says that means you use your authority for two things primarily. So lastly and correctly, from the second half of v. 4, parental authority *is* for...

....disciplining & instructing.

These two are where the money's at. **This is the bible's answer to *what parental authority is for.*** First, *discipline*. Part of getting your kid ready for the world is you have to let them experience some consequences of their actions. Which means we can't neglect to *discipline* our children. Now, I personally think there is a wide range of what faithful biblical discipline can look like. I don't think it *has* to look like physical discipline. I know some folks may disagree with that, so feel free to come talk to me afterwards if you want. But the idea is that in *some way*, kids have to experience consequences of their actions. **And if they don't—there is no limit to the amount of hurt they may end up unleashing on other people in the world as a result.**

Most importantly as followers of Jesus, we discipline because it's a reflection of God's character as *our* Father. In Hebrews 12, it talks about how part of God's love for *us* as *his* kids is that he disciplines us. He allows us to experience consequences of our actions. And it says that that discipline never seems pleasant when it happens. **Your kids are never going to like discipline—that doesn't mean it's a bad thing.** Because discipline at its best is *purposeful*. It's always *forming us into something, growing us, maturing us*. And so just like God disciplines us, we are called to discipline our children.

In general, a helpful guideline I've heard of in regards to discipline is to **make the consequences as natural as possible.** In other words, when you can, the consequence should be *related* to what they did wrong. So if they threw a ball at another kid's face, a consequence could be that they don't get to play with that ball for some amount of time. If they didn't eat their dinner, they don't get to eat dessert. In general, that type of discipline is more helpful and does a better job teaching them what not to do than *disconnected* discipline—where the consequence has *nothing* to do with what they did. If you tell your kid

they have to sweep the kitchen for an hour because they hit somebody with a ball, it's gonna be harder for them to make that connection in their mind. (Plus, you may not want to make something a negative consequence if you ever want them to see it as a responsibility of theirs in the future—just to be strictly strategic about it.) **But however you choose to go about it, discipline of some sort is necessary to raise a healthy, functioning human being.** Discipline is *important*.

But discipline by itself is also *incomplete*. And here's why: discipline is *reactive*. To help your kid grow up into a fully functional human being, though, we also need to be *proactive*. **Parenting isn't just responding when your kids do something wrong—you also need to teach them how to do things right.** This is what *instruction* is. **You need to teach your kids how to go about life, even when they're not doing anything wrong.**

One of the most powerful forms of “instructing,” I think, is *modeling what a life lived with Jesus looks like*. Parents: your kids are looking to you as a primary picture of what it means to love and follow Jesus. If you act as if Jesus is meaningful to your life. If you act as if following Jesus has daily, tangible, everyday implications on how you go about life, over time your kids are gonna pick up on that. If you act as if he has things to say about your attitude and your words and your relationships, they're going to notice that eventually. So let me ask you, *what would your kid conclude about the importance of Jesus from the way you live?* Would they conclude that time in the Scriptures and in prayer is important? Would they conclude that you prioritize time with other followers of Jesus? Would they conclude that Jesus has an impact on how you open up your home to people that don't follow Jesus? Now, obviously when kids are super young they're not going to pick up on all that. But you better believe they will as they get older. And I'll say this—they probably pick up on more of it now than you realize they do. As they observe your life, would they conclude “mommy and daddy think following Jesus is important?”

Now, I know for a lot of us, those questions probably just make us want to hang our head in shame a little. I know a lot of us feel like we're already failing, and that just seems to confirm it. But into that let me just tell you one part of parenting that we often forget about: modeling *repentance* in front of our kids. **As a parent, every bit as important as the things you do right, is how you respond when you do things wrong.** When you respond to them harshly in anger—once you cool down, go to the kid your responded to that way and say “Daddy or Mommy got angry and said something to you they shouldn't have. Will you forgive me for doing that?” When your kid witnessed a fight between you and the other parent in the household, let them see you apologize for it later. Let them witness it. That's every bit as powerful as the rest.

Now, I know a lot of us are thinking, *won't that undermine my authority as a parent?* Won't that make them cast doubt on other things I do too as a result? And just to be clear: it might. It really might. It might create other things you have to address. But compare that to the alternative for just a second. The alternative is that your kid *grows up thinking what it means to be an adult is to never own up to your mistakes*. Or worse, that being an adult means saying or doing awful things and never apologizing for them. I'd argue that it's worth the risk to model repentance in front of your kid.

And if you're willing to do that, I'll tell you what's likely to happen. **You're likely to raise a kid, who no matter what, feels comfortable repenting around you too.** Because they know you're a safe person to do that with. They've seen you repent, so they know it's safe for them to do that with you. I had a dozen stories I wanted to tell you guys to illustrate that, but then just this past year, I heard one that did a

better job of it than I ever could. I want to play you a video, as we close this morning, of Ruth Graham—a daughter of the late preacher Billy Graham. In this video, the interaction she had with her dad is one of the best pictures of gospel parenting I've ever heard of. Take a look...

Gets me every time. You want to know what the *ultimate* goal of parenting is? *That*. Listen, as we've already said. You can do every single thing right as a parent, and it doesn't guarantee anything about how your kids will turn out. And God hasn't given you that job. You can't ensure your kids turn out any particular way. But here's what you can do: you can be a *safe place for your kid to be broken*. You can create an environment where, whatever happens to them, they can come and talk to you about it. That's something you can always be as a parent. And the ability to do that comes from understanding that *God* is a safe person to be broken around. That through the death and resurrection of his son, he opens his arms wide to us as his kids, and says come and talk to me no matter what. And by knowing that, we can open our arms wide to our kids as well.

Let's pray.