

Strong Families, Gentle Fathers **Ephesians 6:1-4**

Good morning, Our passage this morning is found in Ephesians 6:1-4.. As you skim these verses, you'll probably find them very familiar. And you're probably thinking, "ahh, this is about child/parent relationships, that's why Kurt is preaching, he's the Next-Gen Pastor, makes sense..." Funny how that worked out, but I'm actually here this morning because Tim wants a good seat at graduation...something about his first born graduating high school today had him pressed for time...either way, I'm happy to be with you this morning.

Chapter six is a continuation of Paul's treatise on household relationships which he started in the previous chapter. At the time Paul penned this letter, there were three main relations found in the typical household: Husbands and Wives, Children and Parents, and Slaves and Masters. Paul's just come off of addressing how husbands and wives should relate to one another in Christ under the New Covenant. It makes logical sense then that he would continue this flow of thought into how children and their parents should relate to one another in the Lord as well.

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

Just as Paul did with husbands and wives, here too he addresses the subordinate members of the pair first. *Children obey your parents...* In the Greco-Roman world, the duties of children in regard to their parents included, love, honor, providing for them in old age, burying them, and venerating them after death. These duties were a core part of the Roman ideal for family relations. For a Roman citizen of the time, the highest moral duty was first to country and then to family...especially parents. Because Paul is writing to a Greco-Roman congregation, his command to children isn't a novel idea.

Hellenistic Jewish literature of the time takes a very similar stance considering children and their responsibilities. They too expected children to care for their aging parents and provide for their burials. Jewish children were also expected to honor their parents second only to the Lord Himself. So we have two different cultural lenses and nearly identical views on how children are to relate to their parents. It appears that this was a nearly universally recognized view. Parents are responsible for the life of the child, responsible for their provision and well being...it just makes intrinsic sense then that a child would be expected to, at the very least, honor, respect, and care for their parents as they age.

It's probably because of this nearly universal idea, that Paul is so brief. For the most part, Paul's command doesn't need a ton of explanation. "*Children, obey your parents.*" This word that we've translated to "*obey*" is actually the same word Paul used in the previous chapter, 5:24 "...so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." The same word Paul uses to encourage submission from wives, is the same word he uses here for obedience from children...But in our passage, he's much more forceful with this word than he was when he was speaking to the wives. In 5:24 there's a voluntary component to the submission of wives. In Chapter 6:1, the voluntary nature of this verb has been stripped. "Children" he commands them, "obey your parents."

While this was the expectation of children in nearly every culture, there are a couple of things that Paul does in the text that would make this otherwise normative command stand out. First, Paul addresses children directly. Speaking directly to the children was far from a normal practice. In fact, this is one of the few times that we see this in the New Testament at all. Paul assumes that children are present in the congregation at the reading of his letter. Very similar to how we find ourselves this morning. So kids, pay attention this morning because much of this sermon is specifically for you.

The second radical thing Paul does in the opening line of our passage this morning is to address both male and female children. This again was outside the norm. Young girls were typically sequestered from the public view until marriage, which typically took place around the age of fourteen. The fact that Paul assumes that the whole family is gathered for worship, boys

AND girls proves that he means what he says in Galatians 3:28

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

Now, Paul would have been justified in stopping his command at “*children obey your parents...*” Much of what Paul envisions in the observance of this command was already expected from many cultures of the day. But the reality of the New Covenant requires a new understanding of how the body of Christ is to relate to one another, and how the households of faith are to relate to one another as a family. So Paul adds some descriptors of what this otherwise normal expectation of obedience now looks like under the New Covenant.

“*Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*” The phrase “*in the Lord*” is attached to the verb “*obey*.” You would think that it would be attached to “*your parents*” but that isn’t the case. This means that Paul considers children as members of the covenant community alongside their parents. Now, I need to pause here because if we aren’t careful we can easily find ourselves down the rabbit hole of infant baptism. A ton of ink has flowed on the issue of paedobaptism vs credobaptism over centuries. Pastor Tim has spent a lot of time in this very pulpit addressing the issue and giving a defense for our stance. And if you’d like to revisit those sermons or hear them for the first time, you can do so on our website. This morning however, I just want to briefly touch the issue.

Paul seems to recognize that the children of Christian parents—those being raised in the Church, attending Kids Connect, participating in Amazing Bible Race, and joining their parents in the gathered assembly for worship—though not yet believers themselves, are still under the umbrella of the covenant community and life of faith. All unregenerate children—regardless of their upbringing—still need Jesus. A child raised in church who remains unrepentant will face the same eternal fate as one raised far from it. In that sense, they are no different. Yet there is a meaningful advantage for children of believing parents who are raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. These children are regularly exposed to the Word of God, the gospel is familiar to them, and they are surrounded by a community shaped by God’s truth. While this

does not guarantee salvation, it is a gracious and significant head start. These children join in singing songs of praise, witness the sacraments, and hear their meaning explained each time they observe a baptism or hear the proclamation of the Lord's death through the Supper. Though they may not yet be covenant members or professing believers, they are deeply embedded in the life of the church. As the Lord pours out His grace upon believing parents, that grace often overflows into the lives of their children. There are real blessings and spiritual advantages to being raised within the church—privileges that children outside the community of faith do not share. So, setting aside the debate over paedobaptism, we must recognize this: Paul is addressing church kids directly. Are you tracking with me? Good.

In light of that very brief detour, what I want you to see that Paul expects children to obey their parents, not because it's the cultural norm...which it was, but because they are in some sense members of the community of faith. Whether or not they are believers themselves, they should obey their parents because this is what the Lord expects.

The first reason Paul gives as to why children should obey their parents is because ultimately, this is an act of service to the Lord and it pleases God. We see this more clearly in a parallel passage found in Colossians 3:20, Paul says "*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*" As a part of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, children need to understand that obeying their parents pleases the Lord. Attaching a child's obedience to the phrase "*in the Lord*" means that the obedience of a child is an aspect of religious service done in deference to Christ Himself... Kids, when you obey your parents right away, completely, and with a good attitude, it makes God happy...and here's a secret, it'll make your parents happy too. When your mom or dad ask you to do something like unloading the dishwasher or feed the dog, and you do it right away with a good attitude, it pleases the Lord. You are serving the Lord through your obedience to your parents. You're not called to obedience for your parents sake alone, you are called to obedience because in doing so, you're serving the Lord.

Because Paul is being concise, he doesn't spell out what he assumes his readers already understand. As Pastor Tim noted regarding wives, there are rare instances when a parent may step out of line and ask a child to do something illegal, harmful, or sinful. In such cases, it is both

assumed and right that the child should not obey. Even among pagans, this principle was recognized. So it's highly unlikely that Paul is advocating for blind or unlimited obedience. Children, in general, you are called to obey your parents—but not if they ask you to do something clearly wrong or contrary to God's commands.

Now, we might assume that since Paul has already called wives to submit to their husbands, he is calling children to submit only to their fathers. But I would argue that Paul has both parents in view here. A wife's submission to her husband does not diminish her parental authority—it actually reinforces it. Yes, mom is submitted to dad, but she still stands above the children in the structure of authority. Her proximity to the head does not reduce her dignity; it affirms it. So while wives are called to submit to their husbands, they and their husbands operate as a united team. Children are called to obey and honor both parents equally.

Kids, this means that if mom says “no,” you don't go to dad hoping for a different answer—especially without telling him mom already said “no.” That's unfair to dad and dishonoring to mom. God calls you to obey both of them, not to play them against each other.

But what if mom and dad are divorced and mom no longer submits to dad's headship? What if my parents aren't believers and I come to church with my grandparents? I think Paul would tell you it doesn't matter. Your parents are still owed respect, honor, and obedience simply because they are your parents...and more specifically, because the Lord has called you to obedience whether or not your parents are in the faith.

This brings us to the second motivation for obedience that Paul gives: it is simply the right thing to do. “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*” The rightness of a child's obedience is universally recognized—by both the regenerate and the unregenerate. As mentioned earlier, even the secular cultures of Paul's day understood a child's obedience to be just and proper, rooted in a basic sense of moral obligation. After all, parents give life and provide care; the least a child can do is obey and honor them.

But Paul doesn't stop at appealing to natural law or cultural norms. He grounds this rightness in divine command. By referencing the fifth commandment, Paul connects a child's obedience directly to the revealed will of God. It is right not merely because it makes sense or

feels fair, but because the Lord Himself has commanded it. And if the one who rules all creation in goodness and righteousness gives a command, it is beyond dispute.

Yes, this command may be one of those laws written on the human heart, recognized across cultures. But for children of believing parents—those raised in the covenant community—the fact that this law comes from the Lord elevates its importance even more. When Paul sees children disregarding their parents, it signals the moral decay of the times. Therefore, children within the church should treat obedience and honor toward their parents not as optional, but as a serious and sacred responsibility.

“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.”

The obedience required of children is fairly straightforward: do what your parents ask, and do it when they ask. Listening and following through on their instruction—that’s obedience. But that doesn’t necessarily mean a child is honoring their parents. Obedience and honor are not the same thing. Honor carries more weight. It’s deeper and more demanding than simply doing what you’re told.

To further qualify what obedience looks like under the New Covenant, Paul quotes Exodus 20:12. He deliberately ties obedience to honor, and here’s why: true, heartfelt obedience—the kind that flows not just from respect for parents, but from reverence for the Lord—must involve honor. Without honor, obedience can become hollow, external, even begrudging. And obedience without honor may, in some ways, be worse than outright disobedience, because it keeps the form while denying the heart.

This is exactly what Jesus gets on to the Pharisees for. The Pharisees did what the Lord told them to do under the Law of Moses. They were great at keeping the commands of God. Even Paul says that when it came to the Law, he was spotless. But Paul eventually came to realize through the revelation of Christ Himself, that the outward obedience he was so proud of

was not enough to save him. The Pharisees kept all of the commandments and legal requirements with as much zeal as they could muster. On the outside, they looked truly obedient, but on the inside their heart was far from God. Jesus said they were like white washed tombs, pretty on the outside but full of death and decay on the inside. Jesus is far more concerned with the heart behind an action than with the mere action itself. He desires obedience that flows from love, not just outward compliance.

True obedience requires honor. For example, kids—if your parents ask you to unload the dishwasher and you do it right away, but stomp into the kitchen and slam dishes around like an angry bull, that kind of obedience doesn't really count for much. Sure, you completed the task, but you did it in a way that neither honored your parents nor pleased the Lord. Obedience that pleases God isn't just about doing what you're told—it's about how and why you do it. And that's where honor comes in.

Honor is weightier because it's a matter of the heart. Let's say you unload the dishwasher right away, smiling the whole time. The dishes are put away gently, and all the cabinet doors survive the process. On the outside, everything looks great. But if, in your heart, you're grumbling, resenting your mom, or thinking bitter thoughts the whole time, that obedience is still lacking. It may look right on the surface, but it isn't true, God-honoring obedience—because it's not done with honor.

The Lord despises lip service. Pretending to honor someone is not the same as truly honoring them. Real honor involves a heart-level respect—regarding someone, in this case parents, as worthy of esteem. Obedience without honor is empty in the eyes of the Lord. True honor flows from a heart that values and reveres, and it's this kind of heart that naturally produces genuine obedience.

Kids, when you truly honor your parents from the heart—with love and respect—obedience won't feel like a burden; it will flow from your attitude of honor.

Parents, the goal isn't to raise little foot soldiers who follow orders without question. Anyone can enforce outward obedience through authority. You could have the most outwardly well-behaved children in the world, but if their hearts don't love Jesus—if their lives aren't driven by worship—they are still lost. And in that case, you've missed the mission God has given

you in raising them. The aim is not mere behavior modification. The aim is heart transformation—shepherding your children to know, love, and follow the Lord.

We'll explore what that kind of heart-focused parenting looks like in just a moment.

For now, I want to focus on the fact that, in quoting Exodus 20:12, Paul connects honoring your father and mother to a promise. True obedience requires honor, and honor, in turn, flows from a heart that is aligned with love and respect for the Lord. Obedience motivated by honor pleases the Lord. This connection is what makes the placement of this commandment in Exodus 20 so intriguing.

Most people—rightly, I believe—divide the Ten Commandments into two sections. The first five commandments address our relationship with the Lord, while the last five focus on our relationships with one another. The first five teach us how to love the Lord, and the last five teach us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, honoring your father and mother serves as the bridge between these two halves, connecting our love for God with our love for others.

Let's see if we can make sense of this, because I believe this is how Paul understands the commandment. First and foremost, we are called to love the Lord our God. He is our Creator, the One who breathed life into us, sustains us through His common grace, and loved us so deeply that He sent His only Son to die in our place, satisfying the wrath of God on our behalf. The first five commandments are given to teach us how to love God rightly.

But honoring your father and mother is so closely tied to loving the Lord that it could almost be included in the list of how to love Him. In fact, the way we honor our parents is a reflection of how we honor God, because the family structure is a God-ordained institution meant to mirror our relationship with Him. Are you tracking with me?

This command isn't just for the kids. There isn't a person in this room who doesn't have parents, whether you've met them or not. Unless you're an AI robot with wires and motors, you have parents. They may be wonderful parents who have shown you love and guidance, or they may be difficult parents, perhaps even ones who seem to have been placed in your life to show you what not to do when you have children of your own. But the command doesn't say, "Honor

your father and mother if they deserve it” or “Honor them only if you have a good relationship with them.”

The command to obey your parents fades when you leave their care, particularly when you get married. But the command to honor your parents remains, regardless of your age or life stage. And this is a beautiful reflection of the Gospel. Just as God’s love for us is not contingent on our worthiness, our honor for our parents is not conditioned on their perfection or our relationship with them.

Let me give you three brief but powerful ways in which honoring our parents reflects the Gospel:

First, it mirrors the relationship between the Son and the Father. Jesus honored His Father perfectly through obedience—even to the point of death (Philippians 2:8). He submitted to the Father’s will out of love and trust, not obligation. When we honor our earthly parents, we imitate Christ’s relationship with His Father, which is at the heart of the gospel. It’s a visible way of reflecting the loving obedience of the Son who brings us to God.

Secondly, it displays the transforming power of grace. Because we are sinners, honoring imperfect parents doesn’t come naturally. But the gospel changes hearts. It enables us to forgive, show respect, and love even when it’s difficult—just as God loved and forgave us in Christ (Ephesians 4:32). Honoring your parents—even when they fail—shows that your life has been touched by God’s mercy.

Lastly, it points to God’s design for authority and love. The family is a foundational institution that God uses to teach us about Himself. When children honor parents, it teaches reverence for God and His authority. It also reflects how the gospel restores right order and peace in relationships (Colossians 3:20–21). In this way, honoring parents is a signpost to the good order and reconciliation that the gospel brings. In essence: Honoring our parents reflects the gospel by displaying Christ’s obedience, showcasing grace in action, and pointing to God’s redemptive order.

Now back to that promise the Lord gives and Paul makes note of concerning honoring our parents. The astute Bible reader may notice that this isn’t the first command of God that is attached to a promise. It’s not even the first command with a promise found in the Ten

Commandments. So what was Paul thinking? Scholars have debated over this for centuries, so I'll give you what I think is going through Paul's mind and let you sift through the other possibilities on your own time.

Given that obedience and honor were already well-established expectations across most cultures—and considering that Paul's audience consisted of born-again believers devoted to the Scriptures—it seems likely that Paul viewed this commandment as one of the very first principles taught to children from an early age. And what is the first question toddlers ask? They ask why...a lot. Why this? Why that? After you've given a sufficient answer to their first why, they follow it up with another why. Extrapolated further, their endless "why" questions could have you explaining quantum mechanics! So, it's only natural for a child to hear the command to honor their father and mother and then ask, "Why?".

Considering that an estimated 39% to 50% of children in that era did not survive past their tenth birthday, it's easy to see why parents would cling to this promise and earnestly pass it on to their children. So while it may not be the first commandment with a promise in a strict chronological sense, it was very likely the first one taught to them and committed to memory.

But Kurt, what about the kids who honor their parents and love the Lord who die at a young age? Wouldn't that make the promise void? The promise associated with honoring parents is a general principle, not a mechanical formula. Like many proverbs, it reflects what is typically true in God's ordered world. Honoring parents often leads to a life marked by wisdom, protection, and stability—things that tend to contribute to longer, flourishing lives. But it doesn't mean that every child who honors their parents is guaranteed to live a long life.

Originally, the commandment was given to Israel with the land of Canaan in view—"that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." It tied obedience to the blessings of staying in the Promised Land as a nation. Paul reuses the principle in Ephesians, applying it more broadly, not in terms of geography but in terms of God's general blessing on ordered family life within the church. So, the promise should be seen in a covenantal and spiritual light, not just a biological one.

Ultimately, the New Testament teaches that our hope isn't in a long earthly life, but in eternal life. Even a child who dies young while honoring their parents isn't lost to the promises

of God. In Christ, death is not the final word. A short life lived in faith and obedience still fulfills God's purposes and is precious in His sight (Psalm 116:15). While the commandment to honor your parents is linked with a promise of well-being and longevity, that promise is a general principle, not an unconditional guarantee. It reflects how God typically blesses obedience within His moral order, but in a fallen world, death and suffering still occur. The gospel assures us that God's ultimate promises are fulfilled in Christ, not just in this life, but in the life to come. Still following me? Good, Let's wrap this thing up with the final verse of our passage this morning.

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

I believe Paul is addressing fathers specifically here, but it's not a stretch to apply this to parents in general. Moms, you too are called to raise your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. It's not solely dad's responsibility—you're deeply involved in shaping your children's faith as well. Moms, you also need to be mindful not to provoke your children to anger. So, let Paul's words resonate with you as well.

For our purposes this morning, I'm going to speak directly to the men. Just as Paul addressed husbands in the previous chapter, he now gives similar instruction to fathers. Yes, dads are the head of the household, but our leadership must be marked by restraint and self-control, always aimed at the well-being of those under our authority. Just as children are called to obey and honor their parents, we, as fathers, are called to use our authority for the good of our children.

The role of husband and father as head of the household is one of the most powerful positions a person can hold. As Uncle Ben famously said in Spider-Man, "With great power comes great responsibility." While he may have been quoting Voltaire, the sentiment rings true for us today. The Lord has appointed us to love, care for, provide for, and protect those entrusted to our care as heads of our households.

Everything Tim shared last week about how husbands are to treat their wives applies equally to our relationship with our children. If our marriage and family are meant to reflect

Christ and the Church, then we must strive to mirror the goodness of God the Father in our actions. I can't stress this enough: how we reflect God's goodness in raising our children is one of the most powerful ways we shape their understanding of who God is.

Paul distills this great responsibility into two weighty commands. First, "don't provoke your children to anger." What Paul is addressing here is the kind of harsh, authoritarian parenting that breeds resentment and bitterness in children. This approach sets unreasonable expectations and enforces severe punishment when those expectations aren't met. But men, that's not how we learned Christ.

Jesus is not harsh with us; He is gentle and understanding. But don't be mistaken—being gentle and understanding does not make Christ weak. Revelation 19 paints a very different picture of His return. He will come with eyes like fire, wearing a robe dipped in blood, with a sword coming from His mouth to strike down the nations and tread the winepress of the fury of God's wrath. And depending on how you interpret Revelation 19:16, He may even have a tattoo on His thigh that says, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

Jesus isn't weak—far from it. But He is meek, and we are called to be the same, especially with our wives and children. Meekness is often described as strength under control, marked by humility, gentleness, and patience. It's not about weakness, but about using our power and authority in a way that reflects Christ's character. My girls know without a doubt—I'd take a bullet for them in a heartbeat. I'd go scorched earth to keep them safe. If it ever came down to it, I'm going down so they can go free—no questions asked. But most days, they don't need a warrior. They need a teddy bear. They need a dad who's soft with his words, present with his heart, and gentle with his actions. They need to see Jesus in me. Only then can I truly strive to fulfill Paul's second imperative: bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

So parents, how do we do this? How do we parent in such a way that our children delight in the discipline and instruction of the Lord? Let me suggest a few steps to get you started:

1.) **Show Unconditional Love:** Love your children without condition or merit. Celebrate them in their strengths, and show patience and mercy in their failures. Let your love not depend on their performance but on your unchanging commitment to them.

2.) **Provide and Protect:** Work diligently to provide for your children's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Create a home where they feel safe, cared for, and secure.

3.) **Be slow to anger and abound in steadfast love:** Practice patience in discipline and instruction. Speak with gentleness. Let your children know that even when they sin or struggle, your love for them remains steadfast.

4.) **Discipline in Love:** Discipline not to punish out of anger, but to train and correct in love. Let your correction always aim to restore and guide, not to shame or break.

5.) **Be Present and Attentive:** Be emotionally available. Put your phone down and listen to their questions, share their joys, and comfort their fears. Your presence reassures them of God's faithful presence.

6.) **Teach and Model the Word of God:** Lead them in the Scriptures. Pray with them. Talk about God during everyday moments—meals, walks, discipline, celebrations. Let them see that God is central to life.

7.) **Forgive Freely and Often:** When your children confess wrongdoing, forgive them gladly. And when you sin against them—be quick to repent and ask forgiveness. Model grace and humility.

8.) **Rejoice Over Them:** Celebrate your children—laugh with them, speak words of affirmation, express delight in who they are. This joy echoes God's delight in His children.

9.) **Point Them to Jesus:** Your ultimate goal isn't for your kids to simply admire you, but to know and trust Jesus. Use your role to show them their need for Christ, and the sufficiency of His grace.

Once again, this responsibility isn't solely on dad's shoulders. Moms, you are also encouraged to embrace these nine steps. However, men, you must take the lead in this. We cannot punt our responsibility here. While this command applies to both parents, the Lord will hold you especially accountable—not only for how you raise your children but also for how you treat your wife. Everyone of these steps can and should apply to your wife as well.

As Christians, our home is meant to reflect the heart of God. Children, you're called to obey and honor your parents, not just for order's sake, but because it pleases the Lord and brings blessing. Parents, especially fathers, we carry a sacred charge in raising our children. We're

called to lead not with domination or harshness but with humility and gentleness shaped by the Gospel. The way we love, correct, encourage, and shepherd our children should give them a glimpse of our heavenly Father's heart. It's not about perfection, it's about faithful, grace-filled presence. Let us strive, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to be the kind of parents who make it easier for our children to believe that God is good, and that His commands are life.

Let's pray.