**The Spirit-filled family**

Text: Ephesians 6:1-4

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 7:6-13; John 19:25-27; Ephesians 6:1-4

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 386, 78, 475, 127, 525

**Series:** Ephesians (#25)

**Theme:** Having written about the influence of the Holy Spirit in marriage, the Apostle Paul now focusses on the Christian home, calling children to willingly obey their parents and calling fathers to train and instruct their children in the Lord and not to provoke them to anger.

**Propositions:** Children be influenced by the Holy Spirit to listen to and to willingly obey your parents. Fathers be led by the Holy Spirit to take responsibility for the discipline and instruction of your children in the Lord with gentleness.

**Introduction**

How valuable are children to their parents and to society? How much are kids worth? If you asked that question at the time when Paul wrote to the Ephesians in the 1st century AD, the answer from many would be ‘*children are not of much value – they are quite dispensable*’. Back then children were often unwanted, abandoned, mistreated and abused. Under family law (*patria potestas****)*** a Roman father had absolute power over his children. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his fields, even in chains. He could punish them in whatever way he wished. He could even inflict the death penalty.

When a child was born, he or she was placed at his/her father’s feet, and, if the father stooped and lifted the child, that meant that he acknowledged that child and wished it to be kept. If he turned and walked away, it meant that he refused to acknowledge that small image-bearer and the child could quite literally be thrown out. Unwanted children were commonly left in the Roman forum. There they became the property of anyone who cared to pick them up. They were often collected at night by people who raised them in order to sell them as slaves or to stock the brothels of Rome.

Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978), who served as U.S. Vice President from 1965 to 1969 once said that “*the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”*

Today in developed countries there is a declining birth rate, contraception is widely available, and abortion is legal. Euthanasia may soon be legally permissible in New Zealand. The vulnerable are not safe when ungodly laws are passed and what is wrong is deemed to be right. For many people in our country, an affluent lifestyle is of much more value than a child. Some people, even within churches, try to calculate how many children they can financially afford, and the answer is usually: not many. For some, perhaps many, the answer to the question “how much are children worth” is “not much”.

It is against the dark background of broken families and the abuse of children that our text this morning presents the glorious new humanity which God creates in Christ to bear His image in ‘*true righteousness and holiness*’ (Eph 4:24). As we look in detail at the relationships and calling of children and their parents from our text, we will see that what God is teaching us all here is not completely new in the Bible, but rather continues on from what He has already said through His prophets in earlier times.

This four-verse section at the start of chapter 6, follows on from the section in the previous chapter where we see the call to ‘*look carefully how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise*’ and to ‘*be filled with the Spirit*’ (Eph 5:15). We’ve seen in the last three sermons in this series what a Spirit-filled marriage looks like, now we turn to the Spirit-filled family under two headings:

1. Children and their parents
2. Fathers and their children
3. **Children and their parents**

In our Papanui Bible study group we’ve got a list of helpful questions to ask about any passage of Scripture. One of these questions is “*what surprises are there for you?’ “how can we explain these?*” Now there is something incredible and surprising at the start of our text today, can you spot it? I’ll give you a clue, look at the first word: ‘children’. The Greek word here is a general term for children of any age in connection to their relations within their family. Here it refers to any child still living at home with his or her parents under their authority.

What is so remarkable is not what the word means, but that Paul addresses children specifically in this letter which is written to ‘*the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus*’ (1:1). Immediately you can see how differently children are viewed, as precious and of great value, by God in His Word; as opposed to the Roman culture where they were largely viewed as objects to be exploited or abandoned.

Consistently the Bible presents children as being of great worth. For example as God blessed the first man and woman, he said to them: *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”*’ (Gen 1:28a). “*Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth*” (Psalm 127:3-4). ‘*Calling to him (that is to Jesus) a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*”’ (Matt 18:2-3).

The value and place of belonging of children within the church is reflected in the of baptism of the children of a believing parent or parents. Whilst baptism certainly does not save a child, this sacrament does signify that are young ones are part of the covenant community and that they receive the blessing of growing up in a home and church environment where they are brought up in the *‘discipline and instruction of the Lord*’ (6:4).

One of the ways in which we visibly see that children belong in the church is their presence in the corporate worship service. There is great benefit for our young ones in hearing the living and active Word of God (Heb 4:12) read and preached, and seeing the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper. Then they are able to ask when they get home “*what does this mean?*” as the children of Israel would ask their parents after the celebration of Passover (Ex 13:14; Deut 6:20). When children are present in the worship service, they are able to discern what their parents deem to be important and what gives them delight. Many think of children as a distraction in corporate worship, but in the eyes of Christ they are an example to us all (Mark 10:14-15). "*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God*”.

Covenant families worshipping together are a precious blessing. A local congregation is likely to contain both regenerate children who have been born again by the Spirit (John 3:3) and children who are as yet, unregenerate.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul addresses the children in the church and writes: “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right*”. The Greek word translated ‘obey’ literally means ‘*to be under the hearing*’. It conveys the idea of listening with attentiveness and then responding willingly to what is heard by obeying, in this case the words of your own parents in the home. Children have you ever heard your parents say to you “Listen to me!”. The meaning of these words is “*listen with the intention of understanding so that you can then do what has been asked of you*”. Children, don’t be like the little boy who misbehaved and was told by his teacher to sit in the corner, which he did with grudging obedience, all the while saying to himself, “*I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!*”.

Notice that the Bible says ‘*Children, obey your parents* ***in the Lord***’. Unlike the pagan Roman law which gave absolute authority to fathers over their children, there are clear limits in the Bible. If a parent commands his or her child to do something which is against God’s law, then a child should not obey (ref. Acts 5:29). Jesus describes families where believing children are not in close relationship with their non-believing parent or parents or vice versa in these sad, but true and accurate words: “*They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother*" (Luke 12:53).

The Spirit-filled child is to willingly obey his or her parents in the Lord from a heart which desires first and foremost to follow the good commands of Christ; his or her Lord and Saviour (John 14:15). ‘This is right’ because willing obedience to parents is the will of God both for regenerate children and for those who are not, as yet, Holy Spirit filled.

Paul then reminds the children he is writing to here about the fifth commandment: “*Honour your father and mother*’ (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16). To honour is an attitude of showing high regard and respect for someone. This, as the Apostle says, is the ‘*first command with a promise*’. There is no specific blessing which is mentioned in Scripture as a result of obeying the first four of the ten commandments. However, the blessing of honouring your father and mother is ‘*that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land*’. This may sound like a guarantee of material prosperity, but remember that this promise put in Old Testament terms relating to the promised land to which God was leading His people when the ten commandments were given at Mount Sinai and then repeated just before the people left the wilderness 40 years later.

So, children, what are some of the blessings that come to you as a result of respecting and obeying your parents in the Lord?

* You learn from an early age how to be under the authority of others. This is of great benefit in life as we live our lives in the church under the oversight of the elders and in the world under the authority of the civil government.
* Your relationship with your parents will be better than if you do not honour and obey them. If your parents are godly you will understand the beauty of close relationships in Christ. If your parents are ungodly, you may learn how to trust in the Lord, even when you are in a difficult relationship with your parents.
* As a Spirit-filled child, you will see evidence in your own life of your salvation in Christ as you willingly obey your parents, even when at times they may act unwisely or unjustly towards you. It’s worth noting that disobedience to parents is a mark of the ungodly (2 Tim 3:2; Rom 1:30).

The focus of our text is honouring parents in the home, but the requirements of the 5th commandment do not cease when a child becomes an adult. We heard in a reading earlier (Mark 7:6-13) the words of Christ’s judgement against the Pharisees who avoided their responsibility to care for their aging parents (Mark 7:6-13). Contrast this to the way in which Jesus cared for his mother Mary by placing her in the care of his disciple John (John 19:25-27).

As a child, Christ willingly obeyed his human parents; as Luke accurately records for us in these words: “*And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them… And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man*” (Luke 2:51-52). Children, Jesus never asks of you something which He has not already done himself.

Children, some of you know that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you desire to willingly obey your parents, to respect and to honour them, you love Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Saviour…praise the Lord for His mercy and grace towards you! Children, some of you may not be aware, as yet, that you are filled with the Spirit and some of you may not be today. Rather than trying to figure out which ‘category’ you might be in today, just come to Jesus. Come to the One who once was perfect child, and is the perfect man. Come and admit that you have not always willingly obeyed your parents (you might have been ‘sitting down on the outside, but you were standing up on the inside!’). Come to Him and admit that you’ve not always obeyed God. He will gently forgive you, love you, and help you to grow to become more like Him, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Fathers and their children**

The value of a good education is widely recognized. Here in New Zealand, under the Education Act, all children aged 6-16 years of age must either attend a school or be educated at home. However, training children is much more than teaching an academic curriculum, it is fundamentally about forming character. Apparently, the Houston police department years ago put out a leaflet called “How to Ruin Your Children.” It was guaranteed to be 99 percent effective. In part, this is what is said:

* Give the child everything he or she wants.
* When he picks up bad words, laugh at him.
* Never give her any spiritual training. Let her wait until she’s twenty-one years old, and then let her decide for herself.
* Avoid using the word ‘wrong.’ She may develop a serious guilt complex.
* Pick up everything he leaves lying around, so he will be experienced in throwing responsibility on everybody else.

Do you know where we find the first ‘education act’ in the Bible? It is when God says of Abraham: “*For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him*." (Gen 18:19). The fulfilment of God’s covenant promises to Abraham to bless his descendants and to bless all the nations through them (Gen 12:1-3; 15:5-6) was to be realised as children were taught to ‘*keep the way of the Lord*’.

We heard the God’s compulsory education program for His people from the reading of Deuteronomy 6:5-7: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise*”.

Later in Biblical history, after the people had been led by the Lord into the promised land of Canaan, they experienced not blessing but curses. The reason for the decline and decay of the nation is there for us to learn from in Judges 2:10. “*There arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel*”. They had **not** been taught by their parents to ‘*keep the way of the Lord*’.

When Paul writes to the Ephesian Christian Fathers exhorting them to bring up their own children ‘*in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’,* he is saying something which had already been revealed in the Word of God previously.He is highlighting that fathers who are influenced by the Holy Spirit take responsibility for the education of their children in the ways of the Lord.

Mothers also have much to do with the nurture and training of their children (e.g. Prov 1:8 “*Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching*”). So, we could well substitute ‘parents’ for ‘fathers’ in our text as long as we understand that the primary responsibility for ensuring that children are brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord is with fathers, as the ‘head’ of their homes.

The Greek word translated ‘discipline’ means to ‘provide instruction with the intent of forming good patterns of behaviour’. The book of Proverbs has much to teach us regarding discipline, for example “*discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart*.” (Prov 29:17 also 1:8; 3:11; 6:23; 10:17; 12:1; 13:8; 15:5,10,32,33; 16:22; 19:20,27; 22:15; 23:15). This is what our Heavenly Father does with us in order that we grow in maturity. As the writer to the Hebrews says “*He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*” (12:10b-11).

The Greek word translated ‘instruction’ literally means to ‘put in the mind’ and implies teaching the Lord’s ways through His Word. The word ‘instruction’ also conveys the idea of correction. It is often translated ‘admonish’. This means to warn someone of behaviours or attitudes which are damaging or dangerous. The idea is that of counselling someone about avoiding or ceasing an unwise or sinful course of conduct.

This can be done gently, firmly and carefully or it can be done harshly, reactively, and angrily. That is why Paul writes a warning to fathers in our text: *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.* To provoke here is to ‘*cause to feel resentment, to make bitter, to excite to anger*’. The spirit of a child can be broken by continuous criticism, rebuke and discipline which is too strict. Such a warning to fathers would have been surprising to the culture in the 1st century Roman Empire where dad’s had so much power over their children. However, such a warning is just as necessary today. Ways to provoke, rather than wisely parent a child include favouritism, comparison, unrealistic standards, over-indulging, discouragement, lack of rewards, unfulfilled promises, not admitting mistakes, ridiculing, neglect, abusive words, sarcasm, and physical abuse.

It is significant that the ability of a man to ‘*manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive*’ (1 Tim 3:4) is one of the Biblical qualifications for an elder. In Titus 1:6 we read that an elder must be “*above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination*”. This raises the question “can a man who has unbelieving children legitimately serve in the office of elder?”

 The answer to this question hinges on what the word means which is translated ‘believers’ in some Bible versions (e.g. ESV, NAS, NIV) and ‘faithful’ in others (e.g. NKJ). Careful comparison of 1 Tim 3:4 (‘*keeping his children submissive*’) and Titus 1:6 (‘*his children are believers*’) shows that Paul is referring to the submission and obedience of an elder’s children in the home, not to their salvation. The idea that a child’s salvation is a result of the management skills of the father is contrary to the Bible’s clear teaching that salvation is God’s work alone (e.g. Eph 2:4-9).

The late James Montgomery Boice, American Reformed theologian wrote these words about the children and their parents: “*Children are their own people, and they have their own set of responsibilities both before God and others. Consequently, although they may be taught wisely and raised morally and that instruction be supported by parental example, they nevertheless sometimes do go astray, and that is not necessarily the parents’ fault. So, I say to parents: If your child has abandoned the Lord and is living a worldly life, it is not necessarily your fault. It may be, but not necessarily. Do not abandon hope. God has called many such children. Your duty is to continue to live as Christians and pray for your child regularly*”.

It may be, fathers and mothers, that there are some specific areas where you have come to realise that you have sinned against your children as you have raised them, or where you have acted unwisely to their detriment. Fathers, you may be convicted of times when you have provoked your children to anger. What should you do? Here is some pastoral advice:

1. Firstly, acknowledge any specific sins, to the Lord and then wisely to your own child or children. Much wisdom is required in this with regard to what you say and how you say it. Much will depend on the age and maturity of your child and whether or not they display evidence of saving faith.
2. Secondly, believe the gospel and do not continue to be burdened with guilt, shame or regret.
3. Thirdly, having reviewed the past, look forward in hope (1 Cor 13:7), trust the Lord, and continue to pray for your children.
4. Fourthly, commit to being influenced by the Holy Spirit so that you willingly obey the Lord in all areas of your life.

Perhaps you are someone today who is not married, but desires to be so. Perhaps you are married, but the Lord has not blessed you with children as yet and you know that it is possible that you will not be able to have children in the future. Perhaps you have suffered the death of a child or children. Perhaps your children left home some time ago and you are much less directly involved in their lives.

Whatever your situation in life today, old or young, married or single, parent or without children, this message is the same for each one of us: “*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit*” (Eph 5:15-18).

Brothers and sisters, this is the pathway of blessing for us all as beloved children of God and so we are (1 John 3:1).

AMEN.