

# The Witness of Christian Children and Their Parents

Eph 6:1-4 (text)

25 October 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

## Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

No doubt, there are many families (parents & children) who are, by their actions, living witnesses of Christ's self-sacrificial love and righteousness.

Yes, there may be *many*, but I will forever remember one family – that of a Reformed Baptist pastor and his wife – who, in God's grace, did this particularly well.

Some of you might know them – Stephen & Cathy Turner who home-schooled their seven children at their rural property in an idyllic setting north of Auckland.

And, for more than ten years, I had the privilege of teaching one subject to five of their seven children!

Every time I came to their house I was blessed by their warm & friendly hospitality. No sooner had I sat down to tutor a child, or they would bring me a cuppa – not just the cup with tea/coffee in it, but a tray with at least three things on it: a cuppa, one biscuit or piece of chocolate in a little saucer, and one cut-flower from their garden (mostly a rose) to finish off the decoration!

Well, the same warmth, friendliness and love with which that tray was brought to me, was also beaming out from Stephen & Cathy's relationship. Their marriage was one filled with joy, happiness and teamwork as I often saw them sitting together at the kitchen table or on the deck or in his study planning together their family life or discussing church matters!

A similar joy, happiness, and unity was seen in the way they raised, nurtured and trained their children in the ways of the Lord.

Each of the seven children was seen to be special, loved and cared for – but not without discipline, for stern words and strict actions of parental authority went hand-in-hand with their love & laughter!

Yes, if you wanted to see loving discipline (or disciplining love), you had to go visit those Turners!

And here is the amazing thing: those seven home-schooled children *obeyed* their parents – and not grudgingly so, but in humble & joyful obedience – the way those children also received my instruction!

And each time when my session with them was over, and I said goodbye – either Cathy or Stephen (if he was not too busy in his study), and several of the children would walk me to my car, making me feel like royalty and thanking me heartily for the hour's tuition!

Then, as my car zoomed away, I would always see them in my rear mirror still waving goodbye! So, every time I left that godly, happy, well-running home, I would say to myself: "Pieter, this is heaven on earth!" "From the oldest to the youngest, this family lives out the self-sacrificial love & righteousness of Christ!" "This family has a heartfelt commitment to Christ!"

Now, here's the point: For the onlooker – and there were many, because many congregation members used to enter that home – that family was an enormous witness for Christ!

My brother & sister,

Families (parents & children) whose lives-in-action are witnessing for Christ – well, *that's what our text is all about!*

You see, in the days of the Apostle Paul, the Christian faith was new. Christians' every move was watched with great suspicion! And just as the Apostle *Peter* exhorted *his* congregation members to live Christ-like lives to *by their action* win unbelievers over for Christ, so did *Paul*.

In this regard, remember the last three sermons we had from 1 Peter 2 & 3, in which Peter urged 1) Christian *non-citizens* and 2) Christian *slaves*, and 3) oppressed Christian *wives* to, for the sake of Christ, submit to their authorities, masters, and husbands.

Well, this time, it's the Apostle *Paul's* turn to exhort Christian *children and parents* to, with their godly living, be witnesses for Christ!

Our sermon has two points:

- Children
- Parents

### Children (1-3)

Most of Paul's first readers (just like Peter's) were Christians who had come out of a pagan background!

Yes, most of them were not Jews, but from a mixture of Greek, Roman, and other pagan people – people who used to worship idols & gods invented by man's imaginations; yes, people who knew little or nothing about the only true God!

But then, through God's grace, those people believed Paul's word about Jesus of Nazareth – that Jesus was the Son of God who came to save us from our sins!

Yes, most of Paul's first readers were Christians who came from a pagan background.

So, now, Paul tells those people's children, who were sitting with their parents in the church of Ephesus (and in the church of Colossae)<sup>1</sup> to *obey* their parents!

However, look, here is now a very important thing:

You see, those children already knew that they had to obey their parents!

How come?

Well, because in the first-century Greek-and-Roman world, it was *normal* that children should obey their parents!

All of society expected it! Yes, even pagan parents (and all of society) trained children that way! If children did not obey and respect their parents, there were consequences, like severe beating – even execution!<sup>2</sup>

So, here's now a question: If the children in the church of Ephesus – children who had come with their parents out of paganism – already knew they should obey and honour their parents, why then did Paul so strongly command them to do it?

Well, because, now that those families had become Christians, the *reason* for those children to obey & honour their parents, had changed!

You see, before, those children obeyed & honoured their parents because the *parents and all of society forced them* to do that!

But now (in v.1), Paul urges those children to obey their parents *in the Lord!*

What does “obey in the Lord” mean?

Well, it means that, now that those children know the Lord Jesus Christ, they will *out of love & reverence for Jesus (without anxious fear)*, obey their parents!

See the difference?

Verses 1-3 want children to obey their parents not because mum & dad and the whole world threaten them, but because those children have been moved in their hearts by what Jesus has done for them!

Wainui children, do you love & reverence Jesus? Then, let's do what He loves!

You see, in Colossians (in chapter 3:20), which Paul wrote at the same time as our text, Paul tells children to obey their parents, “*because this is well-pleasing to the Lord!*”<sup>3</sup> (Col 3:20).

“Christian children, obey your parents because that's what Jesus loves!!”

Children, see? See how it is not just mum and dad (or all adults) who got it in their minds that you should obey them? No, see how it is God who has made human beings and who knows human beings inside-out regarding what's best for them – yes, *God* who sent His Son to die for you – it is *He* for whom it is pleasing that you obey your mum & dad!

And so, do you say you love Jesus? Well, come and obey your parents!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Col 3:20 ***Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.***

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. under footnote 15

<sup>3</sup> τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν Ἐν κυρίῳ

<sup>4</sup> On this concept, cf. e.g. Eph 5:21, “...***be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.***”

Here's another question: Why has Paul (also Peter) told wives to *submit* to their husbands,<sup>5</sup> but he tells children to *obey* their parents?<sup>6</sup>

Well, is it not true that adults who love Christ will *willingly submit* to one another,<sup>7</sup> but because children are still getting trained in the things of life, they must not just submit, but *obey*?

Look is this not clear from v.4 where Paul says to fathers that they must bring their children up "***in the training and instruction of the Lord***"?<sup>8</sup>

See? It's because children are still being trained and instructed in the Lord that they should not merely *submit* but *obey* – that is vitally important!

Should children obey their parents *in all things*?<sup>9</sup>

Yes, but not if your parents were to ever expect/demand that you go against God!

Which parent ever told their child to do something evil?

Well, the Bible tells us that King Herod's wife, Herodias, gave her daughter a real evil instruction – i.e. to ask King Herod to kill John the Baptist and to let his head be brought to her on a platter!

And the girl obeyed her evil mother!

Surely no *Christian* parent will tell his/her child to do such an evil thing, but I still remember how, when I was in my first high-school year and walking home from school one afternoon after rugby practice – an in my school's colours, a family of rival school in town suddenly stopped their car right next to me. Then the dad ordered his two big sons to come assault me! Then he laughed as they were laying their fists into me! Now, although those people were certainly not committed Christians, if you would ask *them*, they would tell you they *were* Christian. After all, in those days in South Africa, there were many people who were Christian only in name!

Sad!

But *Christian* children will *obey God* more than they will an ungodly parent!

That's why Paul says (in v.1), "...***obey your parents in the Lord!***"<sup>10</sup>

See? See how it's for the Gospel's sake that Paul commanded those new Christian children to obey their parents!?

Whereas the pagan children obeyed complaining, Paul wanted Christian children to stand out by obeying with joy!

Wainui children (at least all school-aged children), what would your friends say if they were to come to your house?

Will they hear how you moan behind your mum & dad's back? Or will they see/hear you joyfully obey mum & dad's instructions?

You know, I have seen how some children can be so nice to other people – they always talk in an angelic voice to people who are at church or to school teachers! But boy (!), when they're at home their total body language changes and their tone of voice changes from that of an angel to that of a complainer!

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eph 5:22 ***Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord*** (a verse which is preceded by v.21, "***...be subject to one another in the fear of Christ***" whose verb goes over into v.22).

Also cf. 1 Pt 3:1-2 "***In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, <sup>2</sup>as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior***" (NASB).

<sup>6</sup> Paul also tells slaves to *obey* their masters (Eph 6:5), whereas Peter tells slaves to *submit* to their masters (1 Pt 2:18).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Eph 5:21, "***...be subject to one another in the fear of Christ***" (NASB).

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Eph 6:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>9</sup> See what Paul writes in Col 3:20 ***Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord*** (NASB).

<sup>10</sup> Which means, obeying your parents not like the pagan children with sour face and in fear of punishment or because you *have* to, but obeying your parents because you love the Lord who is pleased when children obey their parents (Cf. Col 3:20 ***Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord***).

Christian children who are not suffering from an illness should not be like that!

Well, that's *obeying* your parents!

But v.2 says a child must also *honour* his father & mother!

So, why should a child also *honour* his father & mother?

Well, v.2 gives the answer: Because *God commanded it!* It's a commandment of first importance! *God* (not just mum & dad) wants you to honour them and to give weight to their words and to their person! Indeed, God wants children to respect/reverence mum & dad!<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this is the Fifth Commandment out of Ten (Ex 20:12 & Dt 5:15)!

And this is the only commandment to which God has added a promise!

Here is that promise: "...*that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.*"<sup>12</sup>

What does that mean? Does it mean that all children who honour their parents will live up to a hundred years of age?

No!

Remember, God gave this commandment & its promise firstly to Ancient Israel, before they even entered the Promised Land!

And in many other places in the Old Testament God had promised that if Israel would reverence Him, then He would bless them in the land which He was about to give to them. However, if they would not reverence and serve Him, then, one of the things He would do, is that He would send other nations to come remove them from that promised land!

Now, here is the crunch – you see, if children would not obey their parents who are teaching them the ways of God, then such children will of course end up not serving the Lord, and then God will do what He has promised – to make Israel's days in that Promised Land few in number!

However, if Israel's children would honour their parents, then God would let them stay (He would prolong their days) in the land He promised to give to them!

And, in a way, we see the same thing with children today. If children honour their Christian parents by obeying them so that such children then become & remain God-fearing, then such children do receive a blessed life from God, whether their life be long or short!

What age should the child be who obeys and honours his parents?

Well a child who *obeys* his/her parents, is a child who is still being trained for life (as v. 4 indicates).

But that does not mean that an adult child who now lives independently from his parents don't have to obey good advice from his parents!

And how old is the child who *honours* his mother & father?

Well, the command to honour your father & mother is for children of all ages! A child should honour his/her parents for as long as the parents live!

Granted, in our culture, our elderly parents can go live in a care home. But many care homes have a lot to be desired. Even if our parents are in a good care home, honouring them will mean that we do not stay out of their sight, but visiting them as often as we can!

Well, our text wants Christian children of all ages to, because of Christ, obey and honour their parents so that the world may see and desire what/whom we have – Christ, our Lord!

#### Parents (4)

My brother & sister, we have said before that many of Paul's first readers were Christians who had come out of the pagan world.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Leviticus 19:3 *Every one of you shall reverence his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am the Lord your God* (NASB; emphasis mine).

<sup>12</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ex 20:12). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

What was family life like in that pagan world?

Well, there would certainly have been pagan families in which parents and children showed love to one another.

However, from at least three Greek authors of the times of the Apostles, we learn that, in the ancient pagan world, fathers almost had unlimited power. Children were by law regarded as their father's property. And so, pagan children's status was, at least on paper, only a little better than that of slaves. You see, a father could decide whether a new-born child would be raised or just left to die.<sup>13</sup> Then, not only was the father the one who had to give permission for his children to marry; no, he also decided whom they could marry. The father could even also force his married child to divorce!<sup>14</sup> Fathers could and did sell their children, especially girls, into slavery. They could punish them as harshly as they wished, work them hard, or even put them to death.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, some of Paul's first readers were new Christians who had come out of the pagan world. And so, Eph 6:4 would certainly have been a great eye-opener for them: "**Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...**"<sup>16</sup>

Now, it is not just Christians *with pagan background* who should heed this command! No, for you see, sadly even some fathers – and indeed, also some mothers<sup>17</sup> – who have grown up in the Christian faith need to hear this word! After all, they too are not without sin! Yes, even some Christian fathers & mothers have provoked their children to anger!

In what way?

Well, here are a few examples (for there are certainly many more):<sup>18</sup>

- Of course, a sure and sad way to provoke a child to anger is by sheer **neglect** by parents who are either too busy or have become so embittered towards their child that

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians* (pp. 319–333). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Garland (ibid:246 and 246 fn. 14)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Snodgrass (ibid) for his comments on Eph 6:4. Also cf. the following words on Col 3:20-21 from the commentary of Garland, David E. 1998. *Colossians* (In: Muck, Terry gen. ed. *The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan. p.246) who writes, "A slave in one of Dio Chrysostom's works responds to the taunts of a freedman: 'Perhaps you do not know that in many states which have exceedingly good laws, fathers... may even imprison or sell them [their sons]; and they have power even more terrible than any of these; for they actually are allowed to put their sons to death without any trial or even without bringing any accusations at all against them.'"

Here are also some words written by a Greek philosopher who was about 50 years younger than the Apostle Paul – a man by the name of Epictetus. He writes that it was a son's duty "to treat everything that was his own as belonging to his father; to be obedient to him in all things; never to speak ill of him to anyone else; nor to say or do anything that will harm him..." (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.10.7).

And here are a few words written by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c.60 – c.7 BC): "The law-giver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains, and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death; and this even though the son were engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, and though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth" (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.26.4; also cf. Garland, ibid:246-247)

<sup>16</sup> NASB, ESV

<sup>17</sup> By the way, although the Greek word used here in our text, *patéres* (πατέρες), means "fathers," at times it was also used with the meaning "parents." Cf. e.g. "1. **the immediate biological ancestor, parent** Ⓐ male, *father*... Ⓑ male and female together as parents *οἱ πατέρες parents*..." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 786). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>18</sup> One more is, over-protection. The fathers and mothers are so fearful that harm may befall their darlings that they fence them in from every direction: 'Do not do this and do not do that. Do not go here and do not go there,' until this process of pampering has removed healthy opportunities of risk-taking so necessary for the child's physical, moral, and spiritual development (For more on this, cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. *Exposition of Ephesians*. (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. *New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books. p.261f.)

they are no longer spending time with (nor talk with) him/her – like King David who for one whole year did not make an effort to go see Absalom his son!<sup>19</sup> Neglect!

- **Favouritism:** Apart from killing a child’s spirit, favouritism could provoke him/her to anger. The Bible has shown us what bitterness followed when Isaac favoured Esau and Rebekah favoured Jacob!<sup>20</sup>
- **Belittling & discouragement:** The child says, “Dad, I’m going to study hard and become a doctor” (or perhaps a lawyer, teacher, or mechanic). Then the dad answers: “You might as well forget about that.” “That will never happen!” – Belittling/discouragement!
- Then, there’s **overly harsh punishment** and **bitter words** or **outright physical cruelty** by a father whose anger has gone out of control. He no longer disciplines with love, but is in the habit of throwing his weight around and to make use of his superior strength. At times it may even be that *what* he says is still good, but the *way* he says it is scolding and inflicting severe physical punishment. He needs counselling! You see, just as we have said under point 1 regarding children, so is it sadly true that some parents are so different at home compared to when they are with their children in the public eye. But Christians should have only one persona! If that’s not so, then we are no longer living in truth<sup>21</sup> – then we have not yet reached maturity in Christ. In this regard, let us remember what Christ once said to a loveless Pharisee: “...**he who has been forgiven little loves little.**”<sup>22</sup> My brother & sister, *I hope not*, but could it perhaps be that one/some of us loves little, because he/she has not yet personally grasped/tasted the abundant forgiveness of Christ?

***Fathers (Parents), do not provoke your children to anger...!***

Well, having warned against provoking a child to anger, we must also remember that parents could swing too far to the other side – by idolising their child or wrongfully indulging in him/her. I love how someone has said it, “Children are not the goal in life, but a context for living out life in Christ.” “The *family* is the primary place for discipleship.”<sup>23</sup>

See? Is that not why v.4 says that, instead of parents provoking their child to anger, they should “**raise them (nurture, rear them tenderly) in the discipline and instruction of the Lord!**”?

What does “in the Lord” mean?

Well, first of all, it means that the *parents* will be in the Lord – that they will have received Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord! And that, in Christ-like self-sacrificial love (and with the obedience that Christ showed to His Father),<sup>24</sup> the parents will train their children in righteous living – righteous living motivated by thankfulness to God for His great love for us!

Dear parents, and dear children, the reason why Paul wrote the words of our text is that parents’ and children’s love for our Lord Jesus will so shine in our families that we will be blessed

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. 2 Sam 14:13, 14 & 28-30 *The woman said, “Why then have you devised a thing like this against the people of God? When the king says this, does he not convict himself, for the king has not brought back his banished son? <sup>14</sup> Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him”.... <sup>28</sup> Absalom lived two years in Jerusalem without seeing the king’s face. <sup>29</sup> Then Absalom sent for Joab in order to send him to the king, but Joab refused to come to him. So he sent a second time, but he refused to come. <sup>30</sup> Then he said to his servants, “Look, Joab’s field is next to mine, and he has barley there. Go and set it on fire.” So Absalom’s servants set the field on fire (NIV84).*

<sup>20</sup> For the parents’ partiality, cf. Gen 25:28 *Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob* (NIV84).

<sup>21</sup> My slight adaptation of the words of Snodgrass (ibid)

<sup>22</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Lk 7:47). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>23</sup> Snodgrass (ibid)

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Heb 5:7 *During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*

witnesses to onlookers (to our unbelieving friends and workmates) of Christ's self-sacrificial love and righteousness! When people see our family lives they should go, "Wow! I/We want to be like you! How did you become this wonderful family!?"

Then, when they've been blown away by our *action*, we'll give them *words* – the Word of God; yes, the Gospel!

(AMEN 3,099 words excluding footnotes)