

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Family Values”  
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July 26, 2015

Ephesians 6:1-4, Exodus 20:1-17

Absolute authority. That is what fathers in the Roman Empire had, absolute authority over their children. And they had it from the moment a child was born until the father themselves died. They had it at the birth of their children. When a child was born the child would be laid at the feet of its father and if the father picked up the child it lived. If the father did not pick up the child then the child would either be sold to be raised as a slave or simply left to die. When a child was still a child, the father could, and often did sell them into slavery, especially when times were tough. When a child reached adulthood the father still ruled their lives. A parent directed who they would marry, what they would do and where they lived. If the adult child did not obey, they could be disinherited and be without family and all alone in the world. Though some fathers were kind and caring, most were not, seeing their children as mere means of production and not human beings to be cherished.

We might imagine then the shock and awe of the content of Paul’s letter when it was read by the community; a community made up of men and women who had been raised with the tradition of absolute fatherly authority. It would have blown their minds. It would have blown their minds first because it said that those who followed Jesus Christ were to completely rethink parent-child and child-parent relationships. They were to discard all of the traditional Roman values and replace them with those of the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. They were, in other words, to rethink their family values.

This transformed way of thinking about relationships meant first rethinking child-parent relationships. While on the surface nothing appeared to have changed, after all Paul writes, children still have to obey their parents as children, and then as adult children they still have to honor their parents, the reasons for obeying and honoring had radically changed. For Roman children and adults, the primary reason for obedience was fear. There was fear of punishment. There was fear of being sold into slavery. There was even fear of being disowned and left penniless. There was also custom. One obeyed because that was what good Romans did. To not obey parents was to bring down the wrath of society upon one’s head. Now however one was to obey and honor “in the Lord.” In other words children were to obey because it was a way of showing the love of Christ to parents. What we need to remember is that Paul’s comments here are based on the opening verses of Chapter 5, where he writes, “...live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us...” Children are to obey as a means of giving of their love to their parents.

The second half of this child-parent relationship is intended for adult children. We are to honor our parents for the same reason that our children are to obey us. We are to show honor because by so doing we are showing the love of God in Jesus Christ toward those who gave us life and reared us. We do so as well so that, as the Ten Commandments puts it, it may be well with us. What this means is that when children show honor to their parents it reminds everyone that the value of us does not diminish as we

grow older, but that we are valued in and for who we are. Such a recognition creates a society in which life is valued, and so it will go well with that community. .

The transformed way of thinking about relationships meant a second rethinking of parent-child relationships. At this point Paul addresses fathers. And he does so because, as we noted a moment ago, it was fathers who held absolute authority and the power of life and death over their children. And his directions to fathers were ones that completely changed how fathers related to their children. To understand this though I want to go back to my sermon from last week because it will help to understand what Paul is saying here. Last week we talked about the fact that Paul instructed the Ephesians to live in such a way as to move away from those things such as anger, malice and slander, which were intended to diminish and destroy others, towards a life which encouraged and built up others with actions such as forgiveness, kindness and compassion. In a sense this was the direction in which they were to walk. I offer that reminder because that is what Paul is telling fathers that they are to help their children do. Often when people read verse 4 they want to break it up and talk about not making children angry and then about instructing them in the Lord. But I think we ought to view that as a single concept; that fathers are to help set their children on the same path that they, the parents, are to walk. And that is a path away from harming and toward helping others.

Finally a note I do not believe we ought to miss is that Paul uses the word children. This is remarkable because in the Roman world it was only boys who were trained. It was only boys with whom fathers were to concern themselves. Here Paul makes it clear that fathers are to nurture both their sons and their daughters.

As someone who has been both a child and a parent, I realize just how difficult this all is to do. I say this for a couple of reasons. First if you Google how to make children obey, you will get nineteen million hits...so maybe it's a problem. But it is a problem in the most basic sense because as human beings we want to be in charge; we want to be in control. From the moment we turn two and learn the word "no" we engage in a struggle over who is really in charge. And so parents have to find the right balance of discipline, love and nurture that encourages without crushing; creates independence without callousness; shares our faith without forcing it upon someone. It is never easy, and in fact is one of the most difficult things in the world...hence Paul writing about it 2,000 years ago, and millions of websites and articles today. But it is possible. I know that it is possible because I know you. I see in so many of you the ability to obey and honor parents and as parents to nurture your children.

The challenge then for all of us is finding the balance; the balance as loving parents and respectful children. So that is what I would challenge you to do this week, to ask yourselves, how am I balancing my independence with my obligations to children and parents.