

HOME AND WORK

Ephesians 6: 1-9

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Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

In the Home

God cares about how we live. If we know him and love him, we should be different from other people. And two of the places where the difference has to show are the home and the place of work.

God made the world as a place of order, not chaos. Everything has a right way of working. People were made in the beginning to love and care for each other, first in the family and then in the wider community. But something went badly wrong. We call this 'sin'. Sin makes us demand things for ourselves. It makes us look at someone else's face, or at the gifts they have, or at their personality and hate them because we want to be like them, and it isn't fair. Sin makes families argue and shout at each other. It makes husbands and wives cruel to each other. It makes people say harsh things. It makes people at work spread bad reports about each other and devise clever plans so that they can have the power and position that they want.

It wasn't meant to be like this. When someone becomes a Christian, their whole way of thinking is changed. What they want to do most is to please God. And the good news is that God gives them the power to do this. His Holy Spirit lives in them.

Now what God wants his people to do is to show the world how things were meant to be. Their marriages should be different. Their homes should be different. They should behave differently in the places they work. Previously we thought about marriage. Today we will think about life at home and at work.

'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right'. When you are a small child, you don't understand some of the dangers around you. You could fall down the stairs, walk into a road, or eat something which is poisonous. You must do what your parents tell you. You

think you must have everything you want – now. You have to learn to wait and to think about other people. There are thousands of things you have to learn about the world and your place in it. Your parents teach you, guide you, and protect you. You must respect them and do as they say. Of course, as you get older, they will – or they should – explain why they are telling you to do or not to do something.

Why should you obey them? It is because ‘it is right’. It is the way things were meant to be. When it doesn’t happen, everything goes wrong. Have you seen a family where a young boy or girl is in charge, and shouts and screams to get their own way? That can’t be right.

But there is another reason. God tells us all – not just children – to honour our father and mother. To honour is to respect them, to listen to them, to try to please them. And God doesn’t just tell us to do that – he gives us a promise. If we do what he says, things will go well for us. When he gave this command long ago, his people were travelling through a desert to a wonderful country he was giving them to live in. If they honoured their parents, they would live there for a long time. That was the best thing they could imagine. And even today, it is true that the man or woman, the boy or girl, who honours his or her parents, will live a happier life than those who don’t. God knows the best pattern of life for you, the one that works out best.

Lastly, Paul is very fair. He remembers to tell the parents – and particularly the father – what they should be like. He tells fathers what they should do, and what they shouldn’t do.

‘Fathers, do not exasperate your children’. Sometimes fathers – and mothers! – can be unfair to their children. Imagine a two-year-old being punished for finding some tablets that have been left around. He doesn’t know that they are dangerous! It is Mum’s or Dad’s fault for leaving them there. Or think of an older brother and sister. The sister gets all the praise; even when she does something wrong, everyone smiles at her. The brother can’t do anything right. He’s always told off for what he hasn’t done, or hasn’t done well. When he thinks his parents will be pleased with him, they don’t say anything at all. So he gets discouraged. He thinks ‘Why bother?’ And Mum and Dad are storing up trouble for him and for themselves later.

So what should parents do? ‘Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord’. Every home needs discipline. Children need to know what they can and can’t do. They need to know that their parents keep them on the right path because they love them, because they want them to grow up into mature people who can make wise decisions in life. But there is more than this. The stories and the teaching that can make children wise are found in the Bible. It isn’t enough to come to church once a week to learn. Day in and day out, children need to be taught the way of the Lord, and it is the parents’ task to do this. There are lots of resources that can help, but in the end it is the time and the will to do this as a family that matters. Listen to these words from the Old Testament:

‘Talk about [these commandments] when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up’. (Deuteronomy 6:7)

And that is God’s prescription for a happy family life!

IN THE WORKPLACE

‘Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ’. Why talk about slaves and masters? Well, some of you probably often feel that that is how it is at work! I once saw a cartoon showing some slaves rowing a galley, with the caption, ‘It’s not such a bad job – I used to be a teacher!’ And some slaves in ancient times were treated well, and worked as teachers, doctors and so on. But basically the slave belonged to the master, and the master could treat him or her as he liked. If he liked his work, he could give him his freedom. If he didn’t, he could kill him.

But when slaves and masters became Christians, everything changed, and Paul is concerned here to draw out the differences that being a Christian should make. Following the pattern we have begun to recognise, he begins with the slaves, or we should say ‘employees’.

We are so used to people complaining in the workplace that we may miss how radical these commands are. When a Christian at work sees his boss – and when I say ‘he’ and ‘his’ I mean both men and women – he sees the Lord Jesus too. It doesn’t matter whether his boss is the most fair-minded person you could imagine or an aggressive bully – he is to work and carry out instructions in the same way. How? It is ‘with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ’. Paul explains this further: ‘Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart’. These are really searching instructions. When do you work your hardest? When your manager is nearby, or when your review is about to come up? What if he is away on a course, or even on the golf course? Do you slacken off? We are to show our sincerity by being consistently hard-working.

It is hard to work in this way, of course, when some people are trying to get away with doing as little as they can, or taking work time to send messages or check things on the Internet, or complaining about the manager or their absent colleagues or the workload. Only by constantly reminding yourself that the Lord himself is the one you are really working for, can you do it. And Paul encourages us with the wonderful words of verse 8: ‘You know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free’.

Let these words sink into you and become part of the way you think. Nothing good you ever do is wasted. Nothing is overlooked. Jesus said once that a glass of water given for his sake would be rewarded. It may be true that no-one seems to appreciate the work you do. Even worse, you may face unfair criticism or have rumours spread about you and be misrepresented with no opportunity to present the truth. But what ultimately matters is that God knows, and he will openly reward you for your faithful work.

Finally, the same truths apply to masters, to bosses and managers, to anyone with responsibility for others. Masters in the ancient world who became Christians had to show that they were different. They were to treat their slaves with respect, because beyond the slaves they could see was the Lord they could not see. If you have a position of responsibility today, the same applies to you. Threatening, harshness, manipulating and bullying, showing favouritism –all these things are not an option for a Christian who wants to please the Lord.

Now I know that there are a lot of very tricky issues that we have to deal with as marriage partners, in the home and at work, which I can't begin to deal with here. But let's all commit ourselves, if we are Christians, to following these guidelines and trying with all our hearts to please the Lord in every part of our lives.