

Ephesians 6:1-9¹

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.*

This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed above and the notes given below.

b. Children and parents ([6:1-4](#))

Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. ²“Honor your father and mother.” This is the first commandment with a promise: ³If you honor your father and mother, “things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth.”

⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.

Notes

[6:1](#)

Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord.—The NLT’s rendering of the literal “obey your parents in the Lord” captures the meaning well.

[6:3](#)

If you honor your father and mother, “things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth.”—The Greek text does not repeat the command “honor your father and mother” but has only “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

[6:4](#)

do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them.—The Greek text has simply “do not make your children angry.” Paul implicitly acknowledged that there is a place for discipline of children. However, the fathers were to make it a practice not to provoke their children lest they become discouraged ([Col 3:21](#)). It is very possible that the irritation caused by nagging and demeaning fathers in everyday life may in turn cause children to become angry, frustrated, and ultimately discouraged because they are unable to please their fathers.

1. Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 16: Ephesians-2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 120-125.

Commentary

The second of the three pairs in the household code is concerned with children and parents. The broader context of these four verses includes the injunction to live wisely by understanding the will of the Lord and by being filled by the Spirit ([5:15-18](#)) so that a proper harmony between children and parents can be achieved. There are similarities to other parts of the household code. First, the subordinate partner is addressed first, then the ruling partner. Second, each of those addressed are ultimately answerable to the Lord and not to the other partner. Third, the form is the same for each: The party is addressed, the imperative is stated, amplification is given, and the motivation is presented.

Paul addresses the children in [6:1-3](#), then the fathers in [6:4](#). Children are to obey both parents in the Lord ([6:1](#)), in spite of the fact that only the father is addressed in [6:4](#). It is difficult to ascertain from the Greek what the prepositional phrase “in the Lord” modifies. It could modify “parents,” giving the sense that children are to obey parents who are “in the Lord,” that is, parents who are believers. However, most likely it modifies the verb “to obey” thus emphasizing the children’s obedience to the Lord, exhibited here by obedience to their parents. This is substantiated in the parallel passage in [Colossians 3:20](#) where children are enjoined to “obey parents with respect to all things, for this is pleasing in the Lord” (my translation). Therefore, the prepositional phrase does not define the limits of obedience but rather shows the spirit in which the obedience is practiced. As mentioned in the notes above, the NLT’s rendering “obey your parents because you belong to the Lord” captures this sense well. The verb “to obey” is active, demonstrating children’s responsibility as free moral agents to carry out this instruction before God. Most likely Paul was addressing those who were still home as dependent children, yet old enough to understand the instruction themselves.

To support this injunction for children to obey their parents, Paul cited the Old Testament ([6:2-3](#)). The exhortation for children to honor their fathers and mothers is most likely from [Exodus 20:12](#) or possibly [Deuteronomy 5:16](#), the fifth commandment in the Decalogue. The parenthetical clause following this command, which states that this is the first commandment with promise, presents some difficulty. How can this fifth commandment of the Decalogue be the first commandment with promise when the second commandment has a promise attached to it—namely, punishment for those who hate God but steadfast love for those who love God ([Exod 20:4-6](#); [Deut 5:8-10](#))? There are five interpretations that attempt to solve this dilemma: (1) This fifth commandment is the first one of the second table of the Decalogue that deals with human relationships; the first four commandments deal with a person’s relationship to God. The problem with this view is that there is no general agreement as to which commandments belong to the first table and which belong to the second table (Schnackenburg 1991:261-262). (2) Since children are addressed, it is the first commandment to be learned by children (Abbott 1897:177). But the text does not say that this is the first commandment for children but the first commandment with a promise. Also, the first, not the fifth, commandment is the more important to learn first. (3) The adjective “first” does not refer to numerical order, rather to degree of difficulty (Dibelius 1953:95). According to rabbinic tradition, two commandments promise prolonged life if obeyed: The “easiest commandment” states that when one comes across a bird’s nest, one is to keep the young bird and let the mother go ([Deut 22:6-7](#)) and the “most difficult or weighty commandment” is the fifth commandment ([Exod 20:12](#)). But this interpretation seems foreign to the present context. (4) The adjective “first” refers to first in importance (Hendriksen 1967:260; Best 1998:567). However, Jesus made it clear that the greatest and “first” commandment is to love God and the second is to love your neighbor ([Matt 22:36-40](#); [Mark 12:28-31](#)). Nonetheless, proponents of this view would counter by saying that this is the most important command with a promise. (5) The fifth commandment is the first commandment with a specific promise because the promises with the second commandment ([Exod 20:5-6](#)) are of a general nature applicable to all the commandments (Lincoln 1990:404; O’Brien 1999:443). Furthermore, it is suggested that these promises are referring to a “jealous God,” who punishes and rewards, rather than relating specifically to the second commandment “you shall not make a graven image.” One problem with this view is that it would render the fifth commandment not only the first with a promise but the

only one with a promise. In conclusion, views 4 and 5 appear to be the most plausible, and of these, view 5 is perhaps the best. The objection against the last view, that it would be the only one with promise, can be countered by the fact that the Ten Commandments serve as an introductory summary of the whole law, which contains many commandments with promises.

The promise for those who honor their fathers and mothers is that “things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth” (6:3). This promise of well-being and longevity of life is not clearly defined, and there are no clear examples in the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament does offer some clues. In that context, children who dishonored parents by striking or cursing them were to be put to death (Exod 21:15, 17), and a son who persistently disobeyed his parents was to be stoned (Deut 21:18-21). Conversely then, when parents were honored, children were not punished by death and could expect physical well-being and longevity of life. “Well-being” or “full of blessing” is vague, but, again from the Old Testament context, could refer to stability and discipline necessary to function well within the family and society. Therefore, as a general rule, honor/obedience fosters self-discipline, which in turn brings stability, longevity, and well-being; dishonor/disobedience promotes lack of discipline that in turn brings instability, a shortened life, and a lack of well-being. When applying this to New Testament times, one cannot spiritualize this as a reference to eternal life, but the same principle as in Old Testament times applies—namely, that honoring/obeying father and mother will culminate in well-being and a long life on earth.

Keeping to his pattern, Paul secondly addresses those with authority: the fathers (6:4). Fathers represent the governmental head of the family on whom rests the responsibility of child discipline. Paul gave both the negative and positive exhortations. In Paul’s day the father, according to Roman law, had absolute control over his family. This power was called *patria potestas* and often was used ruthlessly. However, Paul’s instructions to fathers present a new perspective on the treatment of their children. Fathers are warned not to make a practice of provoking their children to anger. Such conduct is not conducive to a friendly and loving atmosphere within the home. In contrast, fathers are to bring them up in the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord or is prescribed by the Lord. The word *paideia* [^{TG} <G3809>, ^{ZG} 4082] reflects training or “discipline.” The second word *nouthesia* [^{TG} <G3559>, ^{ZG} 3804] is similar in meaning and is used of admonition and warning. It may well be that the first word refers to education with an emphasis on activity and discipline, and the second word refers to education with an emphasis on verbal communication of either encouragement or reproof. All is to be done “in the Lord,” that is, Christ, who is their Lord. In other words, the father’s training and admonition is not to be man-centered, as it was in Hellenism, nor centered around the law, as in the rabbinics, but rather Christ-centered training and admonition that is approved by the Lord. When set in the larger context, fathers must be filled by the Spirit (5:18), who enables them to restrain from provoking their children to anger and gives them the wisdom and ability to train and instruct them. The present imperative emphasizes the continuous action of their responsibility.

c. Servants and masters (6:5-9)

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. ⁶Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. ⁷Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. ⁸Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free.

⁹Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Don’t threaten them; remember, you both have the same Master in heaven, and he has no favorites.

Notes

[6:5](#)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear.—The NLT’s translation serves well the literal rendering of the Greek text: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.”

Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ.—This is a good translation of “in singleness of your heart as to Christ.”

[6:7](#)

Work with enthusiasm.—The literal wording is “serving with goodwill.” “Goodwill” is a better choice than “enthusiasm” because one can show enthusiasm without actually having goodwill.

[6:9](#)

treat your slaves in the same way.—As slaves are to serve with integrity, dedication, and goodwill, so also masters must treat them in the same way.

Commentary

The third of the three pairs in the household code is concerned with slaves and masters, again keeping in mind the broader context of these verses, that is, believers who are to walk in wisdom by understanding the will of the Lord and who are to be filled by the Holy Spirit ([5:15-18](#)). With these principles in mind, a harmonious relationship between slaves and masters could be fostered. Once more, there are similarities with the previous two pairs in the household code. First, the subordinate partner is addressed. Second, each of those addressed are ultimately answerable to the Lord. Finally, the form is the same: The party is addressed, the imperative is stated, amplification is given, and the motivation is presented.

Before examining this portion, it must be pointed out that the slavery practiced in Paul’s time had little in common with that which was once practiced in the United States. It was not imposed upon people of one ethnicity. Rather, as regards the Jews, it was practiced in the manner laid out in the Old Testament (cf. [Exod 21:2-11](#); [Lev 25:39-55](#); [Deut 15:12-18](#)). In Paul’s day the Romans considered slaves to be human beings, in contrast to the Greeks, who considered them property. In Roman society a free person could sell himself or herself into slavery in order to pay off a debt but later could regain freedom. Slaves not only could regain freedom but could even become Roman citizens—a status held by only the elite of society. Nevertheless, the life of a slave depended on the master. Although there were good masters, there was also much cruel treatment as well.

Though Paul did not advocate the abolition of slavery, neither did he encourage slavery. There were many evils occurring in the secular world during his time; however, his primary mission was not to rail against them but to present the one who had triumphed over them by his act of redemption. Also, speaking speculatively, if he promoted the abolition of slavery, undoubtedly many slaves might have become Christians for the wrong reason. Christianity does not promise a release from the present circumstances but gives one power to endure those circumstances. Though Paul did not promote the abolition of the institution of slavery, he did instruct believers to avoid becoming slaves ([1 Cor 7:23](#)) and, in fact, enjoined those slaves who are able to gain freedom to do so ([1 Cor 7:21](#)).

Paul's exhortation is directed first toward the slaves (6:5-8). The specific exhortation of obedience to their masters is in 6:5a. How this was to be carried out is explained in 6:5b-7, and the rationale for obedience is mentioned in 6:8. Unlike the Stoics, who usually addressed only their social peers, Paul directly addressed Christian slaves (cf. also Col 3:22-25). Apparently slaves were a part of the church at Ephesus, where they heard the message directly.

Slaves were to obey their earthly masters with reverential fear or respect (6:5b). This fear is further described by *tromos* [^{TG} <G5156>, ^{ZG} 5571] meaning a “trembling” or “quivering” fear, which seems to denote outward manifestation, fear so great that it cannot be concealed. Furthermore, slaves were to obey wholeheartedly or completely just like they would obey Christ, their heavenly master. Undoubtedly, this was not always easy to carry out. There may have been times when unbelieving masters would not let them fellowship with other Christians. Also, tension between a Christian master and a Christian slave was a possibility, since the slave knew that—in the eyes of God—they were equal. Regardless, slaves were to obey their masters as they would obey their heavenly master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, obedience was not to be practiced only when their masters were watching but rather they were to do the will of God wholeheartedly at all times (6:6). As obedient slaves of Christ, then, they were ultimately doing God's will, the emphasis being on wholeheartedly pleasing God rather than people. This is further amplified by “as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (6:7). Hence, though ostensibly slaves were carrying out the orders of earthly masters, the attitude of goodwill that was to accompany their service was to please their heavenly Lord and not their faulty earthly masters. This frame of mind helped to prevent resentment toward their masters. Obedience with integrity and a proper attitude would ultimately be rewarded by their heavenly master, even when reward from earthly masters was not forthcoming (6:8). Ultimate reward is to be realized in the future, most likely at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), where rewards will be given fairly to all, whether slaves or free men, based on righteous standards and not on the whim of an earthly master.

Paul next instructed the masters, using positive and negative arguments (6:9). He exhorted them to “treat your slaves in the same way” meaning exhibit integrity, dedication, and goodwill toward their slaves as they do to the Lord. This is in keeping with Colossians 4:1, where Paul exhorted masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly. Masters were not to intimidate slaves, as was often the custom, with threats of beatings, sexual harassment of female slaves, or threats to sell male slaves (thereby severing them from their families), for example. Christian masters were instructed to treat their slaves differently because they were accountable to their master in heaven, who was also their slaves' master and who is impartial in his judgments. Paul warned them not to use their power wrongly. Instead, he reminded them, as he had the slaves, that they would be judged by the same master with no regard to social status.

Most societies today no longer tolerate or condone slavery (though, deplorably, it does still exist in some places). This altered social context, however, does not render this passage irrelevant to believers today since this passage may be applied in a broader sense to employer-employee relationships in the present time. Primarily, Christian employees should serve their employers (believing or unbelieving) with fear, diligence, integrity, and goodwill. Christian employers should deal with their employees (believing or unbelieving) with integrity and goodwill, and without threats. Both Christian employees and Christian employers need also to realize that they have a heavenly master to whom they are accountable for their attitudes and conduct. Furthermore, the behavior of both parties should be a testimony to the unbelievers with whom they work.

In conclusion, the instructions given in the household code are God's formula for the wise walk of wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters. Each of these groups of people must be filled by the Spirit in order to consistently carry out the exhortations given. Many of these verses emphasize selflessness, which results in harmony—one evidence of the Spirit's work.

The Complete Biblical Library

Ephesians 6:1-9²

6:1. The fact that children are addressed directly indicates they must have been a part of local churches and attended public worship services. Children are told to "obey" their "parents." The qualifier "in the Lord" shows that God does not want children to do wrong just because their parents command them to do so. Paul was describing the ideal Christian family where parents had dedicated themselves to the Lord, and were bringing up their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" ([verse 4](#)). Both Old and New Testaments condemn disobedience to parents ([Proverbs 30:17](#); [Romans 1:30](#); [2 Timothy 3:2](#)).

6:2. The apostle reinforced his imperative by quoting the fifth commandment of the Decalogue ([Exodus 20:12](#); [Deuteronomy 5:16](#)). A puzzling statement is added calling it "the first commandment with promise." Some commentators take this to mean the first commandment of the second table of the Decalogue, if indeed there were two tables. The Jews, however, normally divided the Ten Commandments into two groups of five each. Other Bible scholars take the adjective "first" (*prōtē*) to mean "primary" or "chief." Still others understand the term "commandment" to refer to all the divine commandments, not just the ones recorded in the Decalogue. The third idea seems more consistent with the manner in which Jesus prioritized commandments ([Matthew 22:37-40](#); [Mark 12:28-31](#)).

6:3. This verse contains the promise. It is a quotation of [Deuteronomy 5:16](#) and expresses the fact that obedience to God's laws will bring God's blessings. In the context of the statement in Deuteronomy, many commandments were given to Israel. Obedience to these commandments would benefit in many ways, including the matter of enjoying longer life. Although many of the specific commandments given to Israel were not transferred into the New Testament, the basic philosophy behind them was.

6:4. [Verse 4](#) warns fathers against nagging their children to the point where they feel helpless to achieve parental expectations. This certainly was a revolutionary concept in a society where the father's authority was absolute. Actually the Greek term for "father" (*pater*) sometimes was used to mean "parent" ([Hebrews 11:23](#)), so Paul may have been addressing both parents. Parents who constantly goad their children may cause them to fall into a state of perpetual resentment. Instead, parents should train and instruct their children.

The first term, "nurture" (*paideia*), is the word from which we derive *pedagogy*. It can refer to discipline but normally contains a broad meaning of "education," the entire training and instruction of the young. The second term, "admonition" (*nouthesia*), is a narrower term, referring to training by word or instruction.

6:5. Most writers estimate that approximately 60 million people, or one-third of the population of the Roman Empire, were slaves at that time. Paul carefully encouraged these slaves who had become followers of Christ to obey their masters (*kurioi*) as they would obey Christ. In other words, they should not use their Christian freedom for an excuse not to render faithful service. While it may be stretching the passage too far, it is easy to make some comparisons between these statements about slave-master relationships and employee-employer relationships today. Christians should feel more obligated to do a good job.

2. Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library – Galatians-Philemon*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 164-169.

6:6. Whatever Christians do, they should do for the glory of God. While it may be important to want to impress the ones for whom they work, it is much more important to realize that Jesus is always cognizant of what they are doing. There is a definite connection between the responsibility to do a good day's work and the will of God. Paul had defined the Christian work ethic in [2 Thessalonians 3:6-15](#). Christians can bring reproach on the name of Christ by stealing time; some witness for the Lord when they are being paid to work. Paul made it clear to these Christian slaves that faithful service would be a testimony to their masters. Some of their masters were also Christians, but no doubt many of them were not.

6:7. These words may seem almost unfair when one considers that Paul was addressing people who were owned by other people. Slaves had no real rights of their own, which from a purely human viewpoint might seem justification enough to encourage them to shirk their responsibilities or at least not to put too much effort into them. Instead, they are advised to serve "with good will" or "wholeheartedly." While it is not certain why the inspired writer kept emphasizing the matter of serving as "to the Lord," it may have been because some of these slaves were having trouble with their own attitudes and therefore not being good Christian examples to their masters.

6:8. The bottom line is the fact that a Christian's ultimate reward will come from the Lord, so service must be rendered as unto Him. At the judgment seat of Christ ([1 Corinthians 3](#)) all believers will stand on the same level. There will be no slave-master, employee-employer distinctions when we stand in His presence. Christians should realize that He is the only One who knows whether what a person does is truly a "good thing." A master or an employer may have the wrong attitude about certain things and may not credit the slave or employee properly because of that improper attitude. There need be no fear of that happening with Christ. His motives are always good and right. More than that, He knows exactly what each believer's motives are, and He will judge rightly.

6:9. Masters are warned to treat their slaves fairly, realizing their own ultimate responsibility and accountability to their own Master in heaven. Obviously, some of the Ephesian Christians were slave owners. In the light of the fact that slaves of that day normally had no rights, Paul's language was very revolutionary. The brief letter to Philemon shows how concerned Paul was for Christian slaves of the day. Even though neither he, nor the Early Church in general, spoke out forcefully against slavery, one should not get the impression that they favored it. In [1 Timothy 1:9, 10](#) Paul placed "menstealers" or "slave traders" (NIV) in some very bad company. He wrote, "We also know that law is made not for good men, but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine" (NIV).

While this teaching about slavery may not seem very radical to the modern individual, it certainly was for Paul's day. No doubt this teaching helped mankind eventually to see the unscripturalness of slavery. It was not until later that Christianity made a concerted effort against this evil, but New Testament teachings laid much of the groundwork for later actions. Certainly no one can charge the apostle Paul with being in favor of slavery. Thank God for the progress we have made in this matter. There is still a long way to go.