



ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

Ephesians 6:1-4 & Luke 2:41-52

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[1] Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. [2] "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), [3] "that it may go well with you and that you may live long on the earth." [4] Parents, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4)

Every new church starts out with big dreams and great expectations, and ours was no exception. We believed that the sky was the limit for how God would transform Washington through our congregation. But I remember one particular time, about five years in, when a couple in the church had gone out of town and left their kids with us overnight, and their toddler had gotten sick, and he threw up in his bed all night long. Elise and I were up all night. And around the fifth or sixth time of stripping the dirty sheets off his bed again, and putting him in the bathtub again, and disinfecting everything again, I was thinking, "What has happened to us? How in the world did we get here?"

If you've been with us from the beginning of this sermon series, or if you've ever read Ephesians, you'll remember the breathtaking vistas of the introductory chapters. Paul began with God's great plan to redeem the whole cosmos, a plan centering on King Jesus, whose victory over principalities and powers brought reconciliation between tribes and nations, rescuing the church from slavery and giving us an eternal inheritance in the family of God. Beholding the grandeur of God's plan, Paul couldn't help but burst into prayer, asking God to open the eyes of our hearts so that we too might see the majestic panorama of what King Jesus has accomplished.

So what's happened to us? How did we get here? Did we take a wrong turn? How did we go from breathtaking vistas to family dynamics?

The truth is that **the Christian life is lived in the mundane.** Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, is redeeming our world brick by brick, email by email, one diaper change at a time. This is great news, because it means that you didn't take a wrong turn, and the little things really do matter. God is at work in and through our daily lives.

Our chief inspiration for life in the mundane is the Lord Jesus himself. His cosmic victory over the principalities and powers began with shocking humility, not on a palace throne, but in a dusty manger. Redemption began in the mundane, with the incarnation, and continued step by step, person by person, town by town, through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Now we, the followers of Jesus, are walking the same path in our humble, incarnational, daily responsibilities. It's through our own mundane lives that God's great work of redemption continues.

It's very much like a pointillist painting, which under the magnifying glass looks completely abstract, with all its bright colorful dots. But take away the magnifying glass, step back, and look at the whole painting, and all the dots of color blend together to make a recognizable portrait. In the same way, it's often hard for us to see the bigger picture as we serve the Lord in the mundane. Years of humble, faithful service at home, or at work, or in the community may not seem like it matters. But if only we could only step back and see our dots beside all the others, we would see the Kingdom come in all its grandeur, as we hear in Paul's prayers and vision at the beginning of Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9 is often called the "household code" section. It describes three sets of relationships within the typical Greco-Roman household: first wives and husbands, second children and parents, third servants and masters. This is one of at least seven instances of early Christian household codes recorded prior to 200 AD. From an historical perspective, seven is a big number. For us to have so many examples shows that the early church prioritized Christian living in the mundane.

These Christian household codes were revolutionary. As you read them, they might not strike you as such, but they were in two important ways.

First, unlike pagan or Jewish household codes of the time, the Christian household codes broke new ground by elevating the status of everyone, affirming the essential human dignity of all persons in the house. All people were to be regarded as having equal worth before God. Women and men, children and parents, servants and masters were all images of God and welcome as members of the body. The very fact that Paul addressed children in Eph 6:1 is evidence that he regarded them as members rather than as by-standers. Some contemporary churches won't allow children to be baptized and share in the Lord's Supper until they're eighteen years old, but in Ephesus, kids didn't have to wait to become real Christians. Paul regarded them as members of God's family.

Secondly, because everyone in the house was valuable to God, everyone served the Lord in their various roles. Read Ephesians 5:21-6:9, and notice how Christ-centered Paul's instructions were. As he addressed wives, then husbands, then children, then parents, then servants, then masters, all of these individuals were spokes in a wheel with Jesus as the central axis. For Christians, every relationship is mediated through Christ. So:

5:22. Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord.*

5:25. Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church*

6:1. Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*

6:4. Fathers, ...bring them up in the discipline and instruction *of the Lord.*

6:5. Servants, obey your earthly masters *as you would Christ.*

6:9. Masters, do the same to them, ...knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

The Christ-centeredness of Paul's instructions only makes sense if 1) all of us are God's image bearers, and 2) the Christian life is lived in the mundane. If you're the daughter of the housekeeper in a Greco-Roman household, your days are numbered. You're less than worthless,

because you take up space and consume valuable resources. But in Christ, you're just as valuable as the *Pater Familias*, because not only are you an Image of God, you're also his agent. The little chores that you do are somehow, in God's mysterious economy, ushering his glorious kingdom into the world.

The same holds true for all of us. No matter your current place in society, whether you're the President or you're unemployed, you're an Image of God. So, as Paul writes elsewhere, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17). The Lord is present in every interaction, every relationship. Whether you lead or follow, teach or learn, serve or are served—whatever you do, you do it unto the Lord.

INSTRUCTIONS TO CHILDREN

Now let's have a closer look at Paul's instructions to children. In Ephesians 6:1, Paul says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." This is *Christian* counsel. By instructing children to obey their parents in the Lord, Paul defines Christian boundaries for obedience. So kids, if mom and dad tell you to lie about your age at the ticket counter, you don't have to do it. When your parents require an obedience that is disobedient to Christ, your first loyalty is to the Lord. He's your ultimate authority. Obey your parents only to the extent that their instructions align with Christ.

On the other hand, you mustn't use your Christian faith as an excuse to get out of honoring and serving your parents. Under normal circumstances, most of what parents ask of their kids is neutral, and what's important is that kids obey their parents, because, as Paul says, "this is right." It's right when you obey mom and dad, and it's wrong when you don't. Why? Because King Jesus has appointed them to be his representatives in your life. And even though you can't find Bible verses that tell you to make your bed or comb your hair or take out the trash, you can find plenty of verses that tell you to obey your parents. So clean your room *in the Lord*. Comb your hair *in the Lord*. Take out the trash *in the Lord*. By obeying your parents, you bring honor and glory to the Lord who has entrusted you to them.

In 6:2-3, Paul grounds his instruction in the Ten Commandments, by quoting from them "Honor your father and mother. This is the first commandment with a promise, namely, that it may go well with you and you may live long on the earth." Do you want to live a good, long life? Then honor your parents. Not because in so doing you will rack up bonus points with God, and then be able to redeem them for extra lives later on. Rather, Paul is pointing us to The Promise (with a capital P)—the kingdom come, when God makes all things new, and we live forever under his perfect Fatherhood. All of the Ten Commandments point through the Promised Land to the Consummation, when God's redemption of the whole cosmos is completed, and all of our relationships will be purely loving, without any hint of evil. As Christians, God invites us to live in the present moment in ways that anticipate the Consummation. One of the ways we can do so is to honor our parents, by treating them as we would treat the Lord Jesus himself. In so doing, we get a foretaste of eternal life.

Of course, all of us are somebody's children, no matter how old we may be, and there are probably ways for us still to honor them. At the very least, you can still thank God for them and affirm them in some way. By honoring them, you can glimpse a picture of the good life that is to come in God's Kingdom.

INSTRUCTIONS TO PARENTS

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul turns his attention to both moms and dads. The sentence begins with the Greek word for "father" in the plural, which a Greek speaker would have heard as referring to both genders rather than only male parents. So a better reading of this verse is "*Parents*, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." And while this has special relevance to biological mothers and fathers, it's also important for everyone in the church, as we all share responsibility for the children of the church.

There are so many ways parents can provoke their children to anger, beyond the obvious tragedies of neglect and abuse:

- We can play favorites, dividing the family by pitting one child against another.
- We can be too strict, riding our kids too hard, with unreasonable expectations.
- We can baby them, and overprotect them, and always give them whatever they want as a reward for their tantrums.
- We can infuriate them through our own inconsistency or hypocrisy or immaturity.
- We can crush them through resentment, because of their encroachment on our time and resources, and their exposure of our own selfishness.

Given the different temperaments of parents and children, there's probably an infinite number of ways for a parent to drive his or her kids crazy. If you're a parent, why not find some way of getting some real-time feedback, to find out what impact you're having on your kids? Ask your spouse, friends at church, your kids. Are they being provoked to anger, or to love and good deeds?

Instead of provoking children to anger, Paul says that parents should bring kids up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Again, by saying it this way, Paul defines *Christian* boundaries for parenting. There's nothing wrong with making a lot of money, so that you can leave it all to your kids. There's nothing wrong with putting them in the very best schools. There's nothing wrong with taking them on adventures all over the world. But there's nothing more valuable or important that parents can give their children than a Christian spiritual compass. Family wealth may wax and wane, but when you pass along your faith to your kids, there's a flywheel effect that builds momentum with every generation. God loves to bless families in this way. That's why he often speaks of his fleeting wrath, but his mercy extending to a thousand generations. Your faith, passed on to your children, and their children, and their children, for the life of the world. What better gift could we pass along to our kids and grandchildren?

What that means in the mundane then is a choice: to labor day and night to raise children up as fellow believers. They must become followers and worshippers too, just like you. So you cultivate

faith at every level, head, heart and hands, through discipline and instruction.

C.S. Lewis wisely said, “If the home is to be a means of grace it must be a place of rules... the alternative to rule is not freedom but the unconstitutional (and often unconscious) tyranny of the most selfish member.” (The Sermon and the Lunch) Good rules establish healthy boundaries, within which you learn to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Rules are the safe fences for the playground. Show me a home without any rules and I’ll show you a place where there’s only nervous laughter and never true joy.

On the other hand, remember that you’re not alone. It’s not just parent and child in a vacuum. Our children actually belong to the Lord, but he drops them off with us for a few years, so that we might rub off on them. Elise and I do this when we travel. We don’t put our kids in a kennel, but we leave them with friends or relatives who know the Lord, whose faith we want our kids to experience. Likewise, God is not kenneling children at my house. He wants my wife and I to rub off on them. We are to shape them before God reclaims them. So we give them what we can, and we also pray regularly that the Lord in his grace will patch all the cracks.

The fringe benefit to parenting in the Lord is that eventually you’ll discover that God is sanctifying you. In helping a child to know and follow the Lord, you are also converting yourself more and more into the image of Christ. So as with husbands and wives, so also with parents and children. The aim is total, corporate maturity in Christ. Through godly parenting the whole lot of us ends up being presented to Christ all glorious, without stain or blemish.

For this reason, let me challenge you to serve in one way or another in ministering to children or youth. Here at Rez, we never have enough volunteers, so we need you. But it’s also for your benefit—you need the kids, too. As you stoop down to try to share the Lord with them, you’re following Jesus in the incarnation, humbling yourself in love. In so doing, you end up looking more and more like him too.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we believe that the mundane isn’t trivial. Rather, every brick, every email, every diaper change has eternal significance. But to see it, we need a sacramental imagination. We need our eyes to be opened to the transcendent reality behind the mundane.

At the end of the sci-fi thriller *The Matrix*, Neo’s eyes were opened such that he was finally able to see through the code, to distinguish between what’s digital and what’s real. At that point he was able to fly through the matrix, to bend around bullets, and escape from the agents. Neo could see what was really happening, and it made all the difference.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning spoke of seeing the transcendent in this way:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries

And daub their natural faces unaware...
(Aurora Leigh)

Paul prayed for the eyes of our hearts to be enlightened, so that we might comprehend God's glory and power. He wanted for us to have a sacramental imagination, so that wherever we see husbands and wives, we see Christ and the church. Wherever we see fathers and sons, we see the Father and the Son. Wherever see bread and wine, we see the precious body and blood of Christ. And in every relationship we have, no matter who it is, that we engage every person in the Lord.

The story of Jesus as a boy at the temple brings together what Paul says to both parents and children, and also shows us Jesus' sacramental imagination. Luke tells us (2:41) that Mary and Joseph took Jesus from Nazareth to Jerusalem every year for the Passover feast. (They were bringing Jesus up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.) Then after that particular Passover when Jesus was 12, Mary and Joseph left with the larger group of pilgrims, but Jesus remained behind (2:43). After a day's journey, they realized that Jesus wasn't with them, so they turned around and went back to Jerusalem to find him. After three days of searching, they found Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions (2:46). Once they found him and told him to come home, even though he had been learning in the Temple, Jesus obeyed his parents, just as the Ten Commandments said.

But most important is the exchange between them when they found him. Mary (2:48) was hurt and frustrated, and asked why Jesus had treated them this way. In response, Jesus said (2:49), "Didn't you know that I would be in my Father's House?" (2:49) Jesus was seeing the transcendent reality behind the mundane, beyond simply his relationship with his dad, to his relationship with his Heavenly Father. What could Mary and Joseph say to that? It's what every parent should be working and praying and watching for, of earth crammed with heaven and the sacramental imagination breaking through.

Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, that our faith may be as sight as we behold your glory in the mundane.