

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” Most of the verses in this letter are addressed to everyone in the congregation. We are in a short section of this letter where Paul is speaking to a number of different categories of people, wives, husbands, children, fathers, bondservants, and masters. The command where children are mentioned specifically is the command to obey their parents.

This does not mean that this is the only commandment that matters for children. It does not even mean that this commandment is more important for children than the other commandments are. Everything before this section is for children as much as it is for adults. Some parts of it are harder to understand and need to be explained, but it all applies to children as much as it does to adults. This verse about children obeying their parents is not the only verse that applies to you. You are to be trusting in Jesus and growing in your knowledge of God and his will and growing towards maturity in Christ. Everything in this letter applies to you except the part addressed to husbands and wives and servants and masters. But the command to obey your parents applies only to you and so you are singled out by the term “children.”

It is actually quite important that you are addressed directly. It means that Paul expected children to be in the meeting of the congregation. The Bible doesn't talk about nurseries. It's just common sense to have a nursery for the very young. But clearly, we see in this text that Paul expected children who can understand the words “Children obey your parents” to be in the gathering in which this letter would be read – which would have been some kind of worship service. When Paul wrote to the congregation he was not only thinking of adults – he was thinking of children as well. He expected them to be there to hear his words, “children obey your parents.”

This is very important because it means that he viewed children as part of the church. When he addressed his letter “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” and then said “Grace to you and peace from God our Father” – those words applied to the children as well as the adults. When he says a little later that God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” he is speaking to the whole congregation and it is clear from our text that he viewed the congregation as including the children. And, of course, that fits well with Jesus' words when he said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

This point is not that children are somehow automatically saved because they are the children of believers, but it does mean that the expectation is that the children of the congregation will generally come to Jesus through God's blessing on the Christian nurture of home and church. The point that I want you to understand is that the fact that Paul speaks directly to children means that when he was thinking of the congregation as a body of believers, he was thinking of the children sitting in the gathering as well as the adults. So the command to children to obey their parents is not the only thing that he says to the children, it is just the only thing that he says to the children and no one else.

Children are told to obey their parents. We can assume that Paul is speaking to children of all ages from the younger ones who can just understand what it means to obey their parents to the young people who are close to the time when obedience is no longer required.

Now Paul does not say anything about how obedience to this command naturally changes as children grow older. The kind of obedience expected from a five year old will look different from the kind of obedience expected from an 18 year old. As children become young people and mature, parents naturally allow them to make more decisions on their own and at some point obedience is no longer expected. Adults must still honor their parents, but that honor is no longer expressed by obedience. Usually this transition happens gradually and when a child grows up and leaves the parental home, obedience is no longer required. The Bible does not address this matter directly, but in most cases there is a natural progression as children grow up so that parents do less commanding and more discussing and advising as their children grow older. But certainly for a 16 year old or an 18 year old still living at home there is still a place for parents to require obedience in some areas and children to obey. But the Bible does not give specific instructions about the progression to the point where talk of obedience no longer seems appropriate.

But let's talk about obedience. We'll just think of the appropriate commanding of parents and obedience of children from the earliest years through childhood and through the teenage years. Paul says that children are to obey their parents. A parent may tell a 5 year old not to start a food fight at dinner, or a 10 year old to clean up his room or a 15 year old to do her homework or an 18 year old to be home at a certain time. Why does God require the child to obey their parents when these kinds of commands are given?

I'm using the word "command" here as a short way of referring to a parent telling a child what to do. The word "command" may give the impression of a military officer shouting orders. Most of the time when a parent tells a child to do something or not to do something, it should not sound like a military officer shouting orders. But I need a short way of referring to all the different ways that parents say things that children are to obey. And so I will use the word command quite often to refer to all the different ways that parents exercise authority over their children. So why does God require children to obey their parents.

The reason is that God has created us to live under authority in a number of different ways. God created the world. He created people. And he created people to submit to authority in many areas. First of all we are created to submit to God's authority. God tells us what to do in many areas. He does not tell us what to do in every single thing, but he does give us lots of rules and commands. So God gives us lots of areas where we can make our own choices. On a nice day we may choose to go outside and play in the yard or stay inside and read a book. Or we can choose who our friends at church are. When we think about the whole idea of obedience, part of the picture is that God has given us lots of areas in which we are allowed to make our own choices.

But he has also give us lots of commands that we are to obey. We must worship him. We must not tell lies. We may not take his name in vain. We must be kind and care about others. There are many things that we are

commanded to do and there are many things that we are commanded not to do. We are not allowed to do whatever we please. We must obey God. That is a very important part of life. God makes the rules and we are required to follow them. God is the ruler maker and we are rule followers. Another way of saying this is to say that we are under God's authority. He is the king and we are his subjects.

And God has also arranged things so that certain people are given the task of making rules for us – or telling us what to do in certain areas. There is the government. The government makes laws for the good of society and we are required to follow them. There are certain areas in which we are to obey our elders in the church. And part of that picture is that God has given parents the task of making rules in certain areas for their children and the children are to obey those rules.

So children obeying their parents is part of a bigger picture in which we are required to obey rules and commands in a number of areas. We are to obey God's laws. We are to obey the laws that the government makes. We are to obey our elders. And when we are children we are to obey our parents.

This is the way that God has organized the world. He made us as people who need to obey him and who need to obey other people that he has placed over us. This is how life is meant to be lived. And that is all for our good. It is good for us when we follow God's commands. It is good for us when we obey the laws of the land. It is good for us when we obey our parents when we are children. God has designed things in such a way that children are happier and safer and better off when they obey their parents. Imagine a household where children do whatever they want to do. They go to bed when they want. They eat when they want. They fight when they want. They don't help out with the chores. They play with knives. That kind of household would not be good for anyone – especially the children. God has designed things so that parents make rules and tell their children what to do and not to do in certain areas and that arrangement is better for the children and the whole household. Life does not work well when everyone does whatever they feel like doing.

In our text Paul says that children are to obey their parents in everything. That means that you don't get to decide when to obey and when not to obey. There is always the exception that if your parents tell you to sin you must obey God rather than man, but that is not likely to happen very often in a Christian family. The emphasis here is that children are always to obey their parents. You don't get to decide what rules to follow and what rules not to follow. Let's say that a parent tells a teenager to be home by 10:00 and the teenager thinks that that is way too early. You can respectfully try to change their mind, but in the end you have to obey whatever they decide. That is what the Bible means when it says that children are to obey their parents in everything. You might think that your parent is being too strict or unreasonable or whatever. But God is telling you that you are to obey in everything. You don't get to decide when to obey and when to disobey.

The text goes on to say that this pleases the Lord. This is very important. One of the things that happens when we are saved is that we want to please the Lord Jesus. Paul is speaking to children here as believers in Jesus. He includes them in the greeting to the letter saying that God's grace and peace is upon them. He includes

them in his thanksgiving for their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for the saints. And such people want to please the Lord Jesus. If we don't want to please the Lord we should not think that we are true believers. But Paul here is speaking to the children as members of the church and so he assumes that they will want to please the Lord.

That is an important part of what it means to be a Christian. Christians want to please the Lord in their lives and for children one of the key ways of doing that is by obeying their parents. This idea that children obeying their parents is pleasing to God is a great help. It's not always easy to obey your parents. Because of your sinful natures, you will be tempted to disobey and to go your own way in some areas. But here you are reminded that it is pleasing to Jesus when you obey. That is a strong motivation for obedience. Jesus died for our sins. Jesus loves us and knows what is best for us. He is our Lord which means that this command comes from him. One of the great motivations in the Christian life is pleasing the Lord. And Paul is reminding you of that here. "Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." That is the most important reason for obeying your parents. It pleases the Lord.

Now we come to what Paul says to fathers. Verse 20 is addressed to children. Verse 21 is addressed to fathers, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." It is interesting that Paul here addresses fathers and not parents. He has just told children to obey their parents, but now he turn to fathers and tells them not to provoke their children.

The text itself does not say why fathers are singled out here, but there are two likely reasons. First, fathers are the heads of their homes and so they are responsible for the way in which rules and discipline are handled in the home. The principle of the headship of husbands and fathers is reflected in these verses that deal with husbands and wives and parents and children. Fathers are the leaders in the home and so they are responsible for the way that children are dealt with in the home. So even while mothers are obviously have a lot to do with the children, God here specifically speaks to the fathers as the leaders in the home. But secondly, fathers are more likely to provoke their children than mothers are. That is not an absolute. Mothers can also provoke their children. But more often if there is a problem here it will be the father. Notice that in the previous verse Paul tells husbands not to be harsh with their wives. Within the space of a few verses Paul twice speaks to men to warn them not to be harsh or overbearing. So one of the likely reasons that Paul addresses fathers here specifically is that he knew that fathers were more likely to provoke their children than mothers are.

So what does Paul mean when he tells father not to provoke their children. The verse tells us it is treating them in such a way that they become discouraged. And the context is about children obeying their parents so Paul is speaking to fathers about how they deal with their children in the area of making and enforcing rules and in giving commands. In that context fathers are being told not to provoke their children lest they be discouraged.

The Greek word here translated “provoke” can also be translated by the words “embitter” or “make resentful.” The idea is that authority can be exercised in such a way as to provoke bitterness, resentment, and anger. The parallel passage in Ephesians 6:4 says “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” So the idea is that the whole area of rule making and rule enforcing or commanding can be done in a way that is more likely to encourage obedience or it can be done in a way that is more likely to provoke anger or frustration or bitterness or resentment.

There are lots of ways to provoke anger or resentment or bitterness. The requirements can be overbearing, or unfair, or unreasonable. And discipline can be harsh or unfair or extreme or inconsistent. This does not mean that anger and resentment can always be avoided. I doubt that there are many households in which children are never angry about rules or discipline and feel that they have been treated badly, but Paul is telling fathers here to exercise their authority and to deal with their children in a way that is less likely to provoke anger and resentment.

And he combines this idea with the idea of discouragement. In the whole area of making rules for children or telling them what to do or not to do or in administering discipline, there is a danger of discouraging children. This is a delicate area. If the rules are unreasonable or motivated by selfishness, children can become discouraged. If discipline is harsh or unfair or inconsistent it can provoke anger and resentment leading to discouragement. Children or young people can give up trying to obey or wanting to obey because the whole business seems unjust or unreasonable or arbitrary. Exercising authority so that children are not discouraged takes love and wisdom and insight.

Imagine telling an 18 year old that she must be home by 8:00 and grounding her for a month if she is 3 minutes late. Imagine losing your temper against your 10 year old because he broke a glass and slapping him in the face. These are extreme examples, but you get the idea. A child living with that kind of unreasonable rulemaking and excessive discipline will be provoked to anger and will be discouraged from being obedient.

So how can we avoid provoking our children so that they become discouraged? The first thing is to think of the whole area of encouraging obedience in the light of the gospel. How does God encourage us to obey his commands? He deals with us graciously and lovingly and wisely. He deals with us in such a way that we want to please him. He made the greatest possible sacrifice in Christ so that we might experience true and eternal blessedness. He is not selfish. His is motivated by love. His commandments are for our good. His discipline is for our good.

If we think of our rule making and commanding and discipline in the light of the gospel, the first thing is that we will encourage our children to embrace the gospel so that they know that there is forgiveness when they sin and so that they are changed to want to obey God and thus also their parents. God calls us to obedience through the gospel so that the obedience is motivated by love and by trust. We need to think of our rulemaking and commanding and disciplining in this light. Is all of this motivated by love? Can our children see

that our rulemaking and commanding and discipline is motivated by love and is it all placed in the light of the gospel – a way of forgiveness and obedience motivated by love.

And are we reflecting the fruit of the gospel in the way in which we deal with our children? One of the things that we struggle with is selfishness. How often are our rule and commands and discipline motivated by our own wants rather than the genuine wellbeing of our children? We just want peace and quiet. We are angry. We are irritable. One of the fruits of the gospel is to put others before ourselves – to sacrifice for the wellbeing of others. If we are doing that in our commanding and disciplining of our children, that will be an encouragement rather than and discouragement to them.

We also need wisdom. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” This comes close to the idea that fathers should not provoke their children in what they require of them and in how they discipline them. A soft answer rather than a harsh word. That goes a long way. Proverbs 15:4 is also close to the idea of our text. “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” A tree of life – the idea is that a gentle tongue encourages growth and flourishing. But the opposite breaks the spirit.

There is also the idea of wisdom in general. The opening verses of Proverbs give a number of words and terms that describe wisdom – insight – knowledge – understanding – all rooted in the fear of the Lord. In the area of commanding and disciplining our children we need insight and understanding that comes from deep thinking about what is the best way to deal with this child and to formulate the rules for the household. Great wisdom is needed and wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord, but comes from careful observation and thoughtfulness.

One great source of this wisdom for fathers is mothers. The text assumes that fathers are more in danger of provoking their children and discouraging them than mothers are. That suggests that mothers can be of great help to their husbands in this area. Mothers tend to be very “in tune” to their children. I speak from experience about the mother of our children and the deep insight she had and continues to have about the best way to deal with each child.

It is fascinating to me how this verse warning against provoking children and discouraging them is addressed to fathers in light of the fact that, very often at least, God has given mothers that extra sensitivity and insight into the characters of their children which is of such great value in this whole delicate area of making and enforcing rules and in exercising authority in a way that leads to flourishing rather than discouragement and rebellion. Again – this is not an absolute as if fathers are always foolish in dealing with their children and mothers have all the wisdom. But it is interesting here that Paul specifically addresses fathers when he speaks about provoking and discouraging children. I think that it is fair to say that very often mothers can be of great help to fathers in this area of not provoking and discouraging children.

And lest we as fathers and mothers become discouraged, we need to be reminded of the gospel in the light of our sins of parenting. How parenting exposes our sins! Our selfishness. Our impatience. Our negligence in training our children in the gospel. Our laziness. Our sinful anger. Parenting brings many sins to light. But there is forgiveness in Christ. Jesus has paid the penalty for all our sins and so through faith in his blood also the sins of our parenting are blotted out. And the sins of children who are trusting in Jesus. As Psalm 130:3-4 put it, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared."

So let those of us who are children seek to grow in obedience to our parents in everything for this pleases the Lord. And let those of us who are fathers not provoke our children lest they become discouraged. And let us all of us live resting in Christ in whom we are forgiven all our sins and strengthened to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.