

One in Family

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[0 : 00] I would like to turn to Ephesians 5. If you are visiting with us, we are in our morning worship. We are going through the book of Ephesians section by section. We are coming towards the end of the study. We will do so by the end of the semester before the summer really comes in. We are going to look today at the section on children and parents in chapter 6. It is on your bulletin sheet. Chapter 6 of Ephesians verses 1 to 4.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Honor 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.

If you have not been with us, you may be coming into this rather cold. We have been looking at the practical outworkings and implications that Paul gives to the church in Ephesus following on for the great, wonderful theological truths that he is sharing. The theme of the whole book going back to chapter 1 verse 10 is God's purposes in Christ, which is to unite all things together, you and in heaven and on earth, through the name and the person of Jesus Christ. Unity is what Christ has come to do, to bring together what sin and what the evil one is desiring to always rip apart, to separate us from our God, to separate us from one another, to bring in division and trouble and heartache. Through Jesus Christ and through the cross of Jesus Christ, we have this great hope of transformational unity and that we reflect that unity in our relationship with Jesus personally and being friends with

God through Christ but also together as a community and that we love one another with a trinitarian love that reflects the grace and the love of Christ to us. That should, as we have seen over the last number of weeks, affect every department of our lives, every area of our lives, every relationship that we are in, should be affected by our understanding as Christians of the cross and what Jesus has done for us and how grace has changed and transforms us. So in many ways, the injunction is always, the encouragement is always, is never to leave the Gospel just at the door when we leave the church, that we don't just come and are affected by and come under the sound of the Gospel in church and then when we leave the church and when we cross the threshold and when this preacher says, amen, we can just forget it all until we gather again because the Gospel is to be for us, transformation at every level in our workplace, in our marriage, in our homes, in our studies, in everything that we do. And we see here that Paul passes this truth of unity and of the Lordship of Jesus Christ onto families and onto children. Children are part of God's family and we know and we recognise and we appreciate that. Just because we have a special time for them teaching when they get taught kind of more maybe at their own level, doesn't mean that because they go out, they're not part of the church or we're glad to get rid of them. We hope that they're very much part of everything that we do and we encourage them as their own special little people within our family and God has a message for them.

God teaches them and as a community, as you know, in the congregation when we baptise a child, then the parents take vows on behalf of the children to bring them up in the instruction and the admonition and the discipline of the Lord and as a congregation we do also.

[4 : 17] We pray and take vows to look after, to pray for, to love and to cherish the children that are part of this community, part of this family. So we have God's word here for children and we also have God's word for parents and if you're not a parent, that's fine because you're all children. We've all been children and some of us are still children, some of us are more children than others but we're all children and even if we think ourselves as adults and we've passed the child stage and we're not parents, the message is still for us because it is about how we treat one another as a family, as a community and how we deal with the children as part of this community that we have

vowed to love and to look after. So what's God's word for children? Your children obey your parents and 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. So God's saying to the children, you're made a certain way. You've been made by God and you've been made for God and He wants children to listen to what God has to say and we're reminding them and teaching our children that there is a God and that there is more to life than simply this world and we're teaching them that there is a God from whom we have become estranged because of sin. We teach them all of that because we also teach them about Jesus Christ and about reconciliation and we teach them that God therefore through Jesus has a message for them and that Jesus we teach them is their God and Christ is their Saviour and Lord and example. Now I'm saying that because I think there's a danger in parenting for us to be simply moralistic. It's hugely important to teach the truth of God's word and the truth of God's model and God's pattern for living within the context of the cross, within the context of the centrality of the cross and with the context of recognizing the need for

Jesus in bringing up our, in living for God and living in the love of God and in the grace and dependence on God. It's terribly easy to simply teach the Bible as a moralistic code in a restrictive, graceless way. It can become that and we have to beware that we don't just teach our children moralism. We're teaching them always in the shadow of the cross in a relational way that Jesus is to be obeyed and followed because he's Lord and Saviour and because God is our Father for whom Christ has opened the way for us to enjoy friendship and fellowship with. It's hugely important to keep that perspective in mind when we're teaching our children because otherwise they may simply see what we say as a recitation of laws. Now it is law but it's grace law and it's grace law in relationship with the grace Saviour, Jesus Christ who redeems us, who enables us to fulfill the law and who enables us to love him. And of course within that Jesus himself is our great example of loving, humble, joyful obedience to his Father, clearly without sin obviously. But the example of the perfect child, both to his earthly parents and also to his heavenly Father, Jesus must be central in all we teach our children, in all we say to our children, in all, in the perspective and the balance and the direction in which we tell them and moral, morally teach them it must be in the context of Jesus Christ and the gospel and the wonder of the cross and the forgiveness of the cross. And within that therefore we are to teach our children and say to them that God wants them to obey their parents. Children obey their parents.

Last week we looked at, Neil looked at wives and husbands and there's a stronger word that's used here for parents, for children to parents. God is Creator. Your parents, you're born of both of your parents who are created by God and there's sense in which in God's order they have delegated authority and responsibility over you as a child. And this, I'll say a little bit more about this later, but this is primarily about parents bringing up children to the age of them becoming adults, although I think as a broader application as well.

But it's primarily this recognition that there's a stage in life when our parents have God given authority and great responsibility to bring up their children, recognizing who God is and with that authority and with that grace filled responsibility towards them, they are grown up. They have experienced a lot. They have hopefully matured and learned a great deal and there is this sense in which God's *Simplicitor* asks children to obey their parents.

Parents need Jesus as well within that as we'll see, but this command to obey your parents is linked back to the great moral law of God in the Old Testament where they are told to honour and respect. And honour or respect your mother and father. This is the first commandment with a promise. So it's built into the second table of the law which is the way we act towards one another, following on from our recognition of God having his rightful place as we see through Jesus Christ. This is God's norm. I'm not going to spend time today on exceptions to that. There will be exceptions to that when people are asked to do, obey their parents in illegality or if it is surrounded by violence or abuse or a denial of God. But as a norm, this is God's pattern for society. And it's simply stated, *Simplicitor*, obey your parents for this is right. This is right. It is God's law, certainly and clearly. But [11:29] I think if we looked around us throughout the world, throughout the centuries, throughout the cultures and generations and throughout societies, it is part of natural law also that generally speaking, it's natural as well as spiritual law. It's the core of any civil society and of any culture that the foundation for that is society functioning as a degree of respect and obedience to those in authority here primarily, obviously within the family unit and that moves out into society also. And the significant thing about this for us is that recognizing the role of obedience and authority within

the family structure, it develops from the ground up, it develops a community morality that is inbuilt into humanity and built into children. It's from the heart out. And so you have within God's structures and within God's way a sense of right and wrong being built into children that keeps them and guides them and is a foundation for them for the rest of their lives. Now when that model is abandoned, as is the case to a greater or lesser degree in the western civilization which we live, for that solid exclusive development and recognition of truth being revealed and being fed into the lives and hearts of our children, when that is abandoned, we find that we are left with a society where morality is fluid and it's not necessarily instilled from the very beginning. And there's a huge vacuum and that vacuum is often then when it's not filled at a parental level and a child level is filled by political ideology and is filled by a majority ethic and increasingly in the society in which we live by legislative control so that right and wrong is being determined from the top down rather from the heart and the child up. So we live in a more legislative society than has ever been the case. There are more rules and regulations than we've ever seen and society has to regulate and rule for everything because the natural sense of right and wrong isn't being, and I'm speaking in generalities of course, isn't being inculcated from an early age into the lives of children there is. So much fluidity at that level, it's very difficult and of course absolute truth is rubbish and denied in the society in which we live so it's very difficult to do so. So we see this rightness, this goodness of what God has ordered that we teach our children and that teaching is to be, as we'll say it a little bit later, I just want to say at this point it's not to be oppressive, it's never to be subservient teaching and it's never to be indoctrination. I'll say a little bit more about that when it comes to parents but there is a caricature of that in the society in which I live which kind of suggests that you oppress and you bear down and you don't give children freedom and it's hugely indoctrinating. That's not the model that we have here and that's not the model of scripture. So it's right and it's obedience, children have been your parents and I think to broaden it, as I said I would briefly, it's a lifelong responsibility and it's a life enhancing recognition. It speaks of general authority I think or at least implies

submission to general authorities to those who are over us politically and in terms of moral guidance in the police or whatever that we have that sense of responsibility but taking it back into a personal responsibility as children, now you're all children here, all of you still, some of you will as grown-ups still have parents and these parents are getting older and freer and they're becoming sometimes more like children again because of dementia or because of many different issues that happen through the ravages of old age.

We're to honour them. We're not to shove them into a corner, we're not to abuse them, we're not to ignore them, we have a great duty. They gave so much, sacrificed so much and as children it's so easy for us to grow up and spread our wings and find our independence and say well we don't need our parents anymore and yet we owe so much to them and we have such a duty, a privilege, an honour, a graceful desire we hope to look after and care for our older people. Now that to me will be a huge example of the outworking of grace in a Christian community that we love and respect and we honour and we listen to and we care for and we support and we help the older members of our congregation and our parents, wherever they may be. It is a lifelong responsibility. And of course it's also a command here that's linked with a promise. This is the first commandment with a promise that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. It's because a lot of difficulty for a lot of commentators and a lot of people as they've read this, it's linked to the Old Testament, there's a conflation of two different passages dealing with the commands and it was linked to the promise made to Israel as a nation, as a theocratic nation that they would inherit the land and it would be blessing. That whole Old Testament correlation between obedience and blessing is given here and spoken of here. It's broadened, it isn't connected so much to the land. Obviously in the New Testament there's still that connection to the land.

And I think it's a general promise that's given here and a general principle that blessing follows obedience. It's a general principle that if we, as believers with grace and in the recognition that we need grace and can't do it on our own, as we follow the maker's instructions, as is the case with Ikea furniture, it goes better. It doesn't fall apart. If we follow the instructions we're given, it tends to not fall apart when we need to use it. Because sometimes what we do is we look at it and we put it together and then we've realized we haven't followed the maker's instructions and the doors are on upside down or back to front and it only opens in the way, which isn't very good if you're going to hang up your clothes in there. So we sometimes learn from our experiences to follow the maker's instructions. And now that is obviously, you can only take that example so far, but the same level,

scriptures clearly reflect the sense of blessing following obedience by grace to God. It speaks of what will make for stable society. It speaks of helping us to avoid many of the pitfalls of sinful behavior that will break and destroy us. And I don't think it's an absolute personal promise that every obedient child will have a blessed and long life because we see practical examples where that hasn't been the case. God is sovereign.

We live in a broken and sinful world. But there is also within that a genuine fulfillment, not only in general terms in this life, but also eternally there is this great wellbeing, this great life to the full and this great hope of inheriting the heavens, the new heavens and the new earth as believers in Christ. It is linked always with promise. Okay, so that is God's word for children. Briefly, what is God's word here for parents? Fathers do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Why does Paul here to say fathers? I think there's some reasons for that. Part of it is because he is speaking within the context of the submission and role and division of roles between men and women in marriage. And he goes on to speak about children and recognizing the headship role of the father, spiritual leadership as Neil was speaking about last week. And I think within that the recognition that probably fathers tend to fail in this area greatly. And in the context of the society in which the Ephesians were living, the Roman society, fathers were very much regarded as autocratic who had the right to punish, enslave, sell and dispose of their children at will. So it's very much bringing grace into a radical transformation of the cultural model of fatherhood as it existed in that time. But I think it is perfectly legitimate to broaden it to parents following the command of being to honor the father and mother in this passage. But primarily it's firstly negative, don't provoke your children to anger. The NIV has done, which I like, don't exasperate your children or could be translated, don't goad them to resentment, which is what is being said here. And I think the outworking authority here is very similar to what Neil spoke about last week, it's power to rather than power over. It's not recognizing responsibility, it's power over children, but really power to bless and to do them good and to recognize responsibilities. The danger, as parents, as sinful parents as we are, is to frustrate our children, is to be unjust with them. Children know, you know, there is a sense that they have a natural searching out for justice and right and wrong.

[22 : 42] And if we are unjust, they will say, well, why are you doing this? Don't discipline them in anger when we have not got control of our own tempers. How can we discipline them for lack of control over theirs? So recognize that temptation, because believe you me, it will happen as parents, if you aren't already, you will find wells of temptation and temper that you never thought you had, or if you thought you had, you thought you'd go learn by the Holy Spirit to control. Don't be unkind, don't exploit them, don't manipulate them, don't crush them. Don't put undue pressure on ambitious parents on your children to achieve so that they are uncomfortable and exasperated and frustrated and not allowing them to be children. Allow your children to be children. They're not little big people. They're not little adults. They haven't developed and matured and learned all the things that you have. And so let them be children. Let them be immature. Let them run around because they're children. Don't set for them an unattainable standard that you never reached. And yet you expect them to reach because you want them to be the perfect offspring that you can show to other people. Don't be inconsistent, don't be distant, don't be irrational, don't be absent. Fathers, don't be absent. Children are passing so quickly. They grow up so quickly.

Don't be absent and use the excuse of working hard to provide for them as a reason for being absent. They want you there. They want to see you. They want to know you and love you and wrestle with you and play with you because they're children. So don't exasperate them. And it's so easy for us to exasperate them. But also positively do example and educate them into Christ. That's what we're to do. Educate and example them into Christ. Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And we saw that great example of that from Deuteronomy 11 where there's this great sense in which they're walking with or around the children. They're telling them about the Lord. They're instructing and disciplining and speaking to them all the time. And that great word there, bring them up is just the word for nurturing. Caring lovingly, feeding them, protecting them, loving them greatly. That is the great word, nurturing, bringing them up. Exempling to them Christ.

That's what fathers and mothers are to do. They're the example Christ to their children. And their personal faith and their marriage as husband and wife, as mum and dad. Because remember, you are as mum and dad, the first example that they will see of relational grace.

And remember that they see you as you are, what's in all. And they see exactly what you're like behind closed doors. And they will see inconsistency. Dad is so different and appropriate from in the home. Mum is so different when she meets her Christian friends from when she's putting me to bed. And inconsistency. Something that shows that there's a public dimension to your faith that is cast aside when the door is closed. So we go out of church and we forget about grace, but we go into the home and we put on a different persona.

[26 : 24] May that not be the cases we nurture them in faith. We are similarly to develop their character so that they blossom as individuals, giving them the freedom which they so badly need and also the parameters that they can't live without. Children, despite what modern philosophical thinking will tell us, children like parameters. Children like to know what they can and what they can't do. Now of course, of course as we say that isn't about barriers all the time, but children do need and love to know the security with which they can live within the family. And allowing them to develop and changing these parameters as they grow.

Now we live in a really difficult society, I think, to bring up children. And we can't be their conscience. We can teach their conscience, we can educate their conscience, we can mould their conscience, we can pray for their conscience, but we can't be their conscience. Our task is to set them free. That's what we're doing. It's the hardest thing of all. Our task is to move children towards independence in terms of adulthood so that they can make decisions and they can stand on their own, but not spiritual independence, stand in reliance on Jesus Christ Himself. Remember that. And that is a really difficult thing to do. As parents, sometimes we want to just keep them. We want to protect them so much so that they never learn and never get hurt and never grow. And we want always to be the decision maker in their life, even when they're 47. Man, it doesn't work. It shouldn't work. We should be pushing them towards standing on their own two feet, preparing them for adulthood. Now that takes great time and that takes great wisdom. And it takes many tears and it takes great forgiveness because we're failed and we're fallen as parents. And our children need to know that. Nurture and education. Nurture and education, discipline and instruction of the Lord. Hugely important that we are instructing our children. We don't bring up our children as morally neutral and say, well, we'll just kind of let them live, less a fair kind of way. And then when they're big, they can make their choice about right and wrong. No, we don't do that in any other area of life. We don't say to kids, just you cross the road any old way you want and if you get hit, well, you'll learn about next thing, not to get hit. We teach our children about when to cross and what to do. And we do it morally with the gospel because it's true and because it's good and because it's transformed our lives and because it's the way to life and life eternal. Now that must, that teaching and education of truth must never be coercive or indoctrinating. We're not doing that. Genuine education, genuine teaching of our children, good teaching is to be grace filled and is to encourage questions and encourage openness and encourage failure and allow failure to happen and allow the atmosphere in the home to allow for that because we're all failures and we need forgiveness and grace.

And so there's this great sense in which it is challenging and teaching but with great freedom and with great openness and with great desire to answer the children ask the most amazing questions. And if you don't know anything about the gospel, you will be exposed as a Christian parent by your children's deep questions about life and death. They're not interested sometimes in candy and sweets. Kids can be really interested in the deepest issues of life. They can be afraid to close their eyes at night because they're scared of dying.

And we need to not just brush these questions aside, ah, whatever, you're okay, you're healthy and fit, we need to speak with them and we need to engage them and we need to teach them and answer their questions and if we don't know the answer, just tell them we don't know and go and find out the answer. And if there isn't an answer, just tell them, well, we will never know, just believe my faith because sometimes that is required and discipline them lovingly, give them these parameters, teach them right and wrong, recognize that there are consequences for how we behave and sometimes these consequences require punishment. Lovingly, this is hurting me more than it's hurting you. Kids never believe that and sometimes it's not true. Sometimes we enjoy it in our sinfulness. But let's not do that. Let's be very careful and let's punish them and discipline them in great love and recognition of the need for parameters. Don't just distract them with something else so that they never learn the difference between right and wrong. Now that, of course, will take a huge amount of time to teach them the scripture, to teach them the stories, but to teach them not

just the stories because sometimes kids then grow up thinking that the Bible is just about stories about floods and about, you know, walls falling down, which of course, I think we've probably gone the other way and we don't tell them the stories enough now. But it's stories with a purpose, part of God's redemptive plan that leads us to the cross and teach them about the morality and the ethics and the gospel as well, hugely important, worship with them at home. Open the Bible and I think it's a dying culture within the church to have worship at home. Apply the Bible. Don't just read the Bible and close it and then go, okay, we're going with life. We've done it. There's difficult bits that we've read the Bible together with them. Try and explain it. Try and apply it. They have to apply the truth of scripture to the morass of challenges that they face, particularly, say, with the likes of social media and how to deal with that. We can't reinvent these things. We need to give them the parameters and the morality and the inner knowledge to deal with the temptations of social media and what that can bring into their brains and into their hearts and into their homes that we can't police all the time. And if we do try and police it, it will be a disaster. Pray with them about these things. Teach them about these things. Take them to God's house, God's house, God. Take them to where we gather together and worship and take them and allow them to meet other friends at Kids Church and then take them again to Evening Church. So they learn to be part of the community as we worship throughout the day and teach them that habit. Sometimes it's not all going to be fun. Sometimes there is duty and there is right and wrong and it is a battle. We need, can't always give children just Christianity's hey ho. It's brilliant. It's fun. Jesus loves you and the evidence wonderful because it is a battle and it is a struggle and the Bible talks about persevering and the Bible says that we've got an enemy of our soul and the Bible makes clear to us what's the difference. And so we need to do that for our children. And very, very briefly as we finish, can I remind you as a congregation that we are a family together. Okay, it's not just for parents and for children. It's for all of us. Children will have and will continue to have a special place in this congregation. They need your time. They need your patience.

[34 : 11] They need your effort. They're not a nuisance. They're not just getting under your feet and in the way. They are little people. They are individuals. We love them. We pray for them. We baptize them. They have names. If you can, I know it's difficult. We've wonderfully blessed with having eight women in the congregation who are expecting children next week while and we've had many in this last year and the last number of years. It's difficult to keep up sometimes with the children and their names, but do try and work out the names. And remember them. They're not just things. They're people with names who are loved by their parents greatly and loved by us. So and you have the great advantage over them that they don't have over you. You've been there. You've been a child. You've grown up. You know what it's like. They don't. It's all just a big mystery and a big excitement to them. For us, we've been there and we know what it's like. And many of you will probably know what it was like to be in church as a child and some of you will have really miserable memories of what it was like to be in church. You couldn't wait to get away from it. So bear that in mind with the children here and with the way we think about children and church ourselves, invest in them. And do, can I ask you as we close, support parents at this crucial time.

It's not about favoritism. It's not about our emphasis. It's simply, you know, we're not to resent them or to ignore them or to avoid them or to go on to our little non-parent group or our big non-parent group and socialize with them. Remember them. Remember the stress that they may well be under. And we've all got stress, but sometimes parental stress will be added to all the other stress, a lack of sleep, the discipline and the parenting issues, the struggles, the exhaustion, the feeling of great inadequacy that as parents we have, help them, pray for them, plead with them, encourage them. Think of if they're slightly older kids, maybe or maybe even if they're very young babies, think of offering to babysit for them once in a while so they can go out and have a meal together and have some adult chat, which they may not have had for two years as they talk about nappies and everything else that goes with it. So it's about the practical outworking of grace that transforms what we are so that we don't simply think about ourselves in our lives, but that we are united. That's the whole, the glorious depth of the theology of this passage, of this book speaks wonderfully practically into our lives as this passage reminds us. So let us be people who take our grace filled Christianity into our parenting and into our love for our children and our parents. Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord, help us to do this and forgive us because so often we fail and we feel sometimes that there are years that the locus of eating that we don't think we can get back. We often feel that there are

times that we would love to change as parents things and start again. We rejoice, we can even feel that as Christians that we want to start our Christian lives again. It doesn't happen and yet you don't hold it against us. You know as you understand as you simply ask us to be confessing our needs and coming to you afresh every day to be able to honour our parents, to be able to obey our parents, to be able to love our children and to nurture them and to teach them the right way and to be able to do it in a congregational context also with the families and individuals that are there. Lord, we pray that you would bless our children, we love them and we're so grateful for them. We recognise what a special privilege they are and what a precious bundle they are, each of them. We ask you to pray that we would constantly pray for them, plead for them and plead that all that we do, nothing would cause us stumbling but nothing would cause them to turn away from you. Jesus' own strong words about that, better a millstone be thrown around our neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea than cause one of these little ones to stumble. May that not be the case with us. May we have great love and honour for our parents and obedience to them as children growing up and then as adults for them as they grow older, give us great honour and respect and care for them in time. Be with them when they struggle with ill health and when they struggle with the fear of losing their minds and losing their bodily functions and losing their abilities and losing their friends. Lord, remind us of all of these things and remind us of your purposes for a new heavens and a new earth where none of these failures and brokenness and tears will be evident but which in Christ we will know as a place of joy and fulfilment and perfection. Enable us to live towards that and live in the light of your glorious grace and forgiveness. In Jesus Christ's name we ask these things. Amen.