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Faithful Families in the Family of Faith
Ephesians 5:15 – 6:4

It's Mother's Day—that day each year when we all stop to pay tribute to those women who have loved and nurtured us, and for us fathers to honor the mothers of our children.

Although mothers have been held in honor throughout history, here in America it was only about a century ago that a special day honoring mothers began to be observed. It was a school teacher, who knew so well the importance of good mothers, who led the drive to honor mothers in her church. The idea caught on! So to all the mothers we say, "Happy Mother's Day!"

Mother's Day makes us think about family, doesn't it? Family is a wonderful gift from God to humanity. He intends it to provide us with companionship, nurture, and security.

But the family is under attack in our world. Sometimes the attacks are outright, sometimes they're subtle. Our culture used to undergird family, but now many aspects of it militate against strong families, sometimes even under the guise of being "family-oriented activities." Marriages often fail, parents often shirk their responsibilities toward their children in various ways, and many children are neglected and/or abused. More often than not, TV and movies portray families in ways that contribute to this downward spiral of destruction and disintegration.

And yet, despite all this, virtually every human society still has *some form of family* as its basic social unit. Family still exists, and often thrives!

Now no family is perfect; after all, families are made up of people, and no human being is perfect. But there's simply no substitute for family. Most emotional problems stem from some problem within people's family—either the part they're born into or the one they've formed (or not formed). We all need the structure, the security, and the nurture of the family, and the absence of the family creates problems that have to be dealt with. Some deal with these problems successfully, others never do.

This morning, I want to talk with you about family from the Christian perspective—about what it means to be "Faithful Families in the Family of Faith." In our text, Ephesians 5:15 – 6:4, Paul instructed his readers about how Christians should live in their family relationships within the larger household. We can learn a lot from what he said. Follow along with me as we read

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^{5:15} Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord

Jesus Christ.

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

^{6:1} Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

A little background . . .

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, “household codes” that laid out the responsibilities of each member of the household were not uncommon. A household in the ancient world didn’t just consist of what we would consider today “family”; it was more like the estate of the head of the family—the family members, the slaves, and the possessions. Often these households were in effect family businesses, economic entities. These codes were given among pagans and Jews alike to guide the management of the household. Each member of the household had his or her place and role to fulfill. And the patriarch of the family had absolute power, which he often wielded ruthlessly.¹

In this passage, Paul gives a “household code,” but he has given it a distinctly Christian twist. What the pagans and Jews meant as a guide for the chain of command in the household business, Paul redefines in terms of what God has done in Christ and what that means for the way his people are to live, especially within our families.

Now in times past—really up through the 1950s—Christians usually read this passage and simply took it as a blueprint for family relationships where the husband was “head of the house.”

Of course, family structures have varied from age to age, and what we would call *extended family* has usually loomed much larger than it usually does in our day. But no matter what structures have been considered important, what we call the *nuclear family*—husband, wife, and children—has always been the central component of the family. For a variety of reasons, there have always been families where that structure wasn’t intact. Maybe the husband or wife or even a child has died. Maybe the couple were never able to have children. Maybe there’s been a divorce or abandonment. Or maybe there was never a marriage, but there were children. Paul wrote assuming a complete household, including slaves.

¹ Talbert, Charles H., *Ephesians and Colossians in Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 136-139; also Bonnie Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 138-144.

Since the middle of the 20th century, some Christians have continued to read this passage as a blueprint for traditional family relationships. Other Christians, influenced by the movement toward equality for women, have been very uncomfortable with the language Paul was using here. The whole idea of *submission* grates on their nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. They shut down and close their ears once they hear, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord” (5:22).² They’re like one dear lady in the church we served in the early 1980s who often argued with Paul about this.

I think that either of these readings misses Paul’s point entirely!

So what was Paul saying?

Long before the women’s liberation movement of the 20th century, husbands and wives often struggled over the issue of who was “the boss.” You could see it in some of the old TV sitcoms like “I Love Lucy,” where both Lucy and Ricky were always finagling and conniving to get their own way.

I heard a story one time about a young couple—it sounds like they could have been Ralph and Alice Kramden from the old “Honeymooners” TV show. The husband sits his wife down and says, “Now I want you to understand something. In this marriage, I am *the boss*, and you are *nothing*. Do you hear that? I am the boss, and you are nothing.” And just to make sure she gets it, he says with more emphasis, “*I am the boss, and you are nothing!*” And she says, “So what! You’re *the boss of nothing!*”

A lot of couples worry about “Who’s the boss?” When they do, they’ve completely missed what Paul is talking about here. From the Christian perspective, neither is the boss, but Christ is Lord!

You see, Paul redefines the whole thing! Whereas the pagans and Jews were worried about the chain of command, Paul is more concerned with helping believers living in the social structures of that cultural setting live out their faith in those relationships, whether it was husbands and wives, parents and children, or masters and slaves!

If you look at the broader passage carefully, you can see what I’m talking about. Our English translations obscure it a little bit, but in the Greek, this passage is really a continuation of the thought unit that Paul starts in 5:15. There he calls on his readers to walk carefully as wise people rather than unwise (5:15), and to make the most of the time and opportunities that come their way (5:16). He tells them not to be foolish, but to “understand what the Lord’s will is” (5:17). Rather than getting drunk on wine, they are to “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18), and that filling will lead to certain things (the grammatical structure in the Greek shows that these things that follow depend on or result from being filled with the Spirit). What are those things? One is *worship* “with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs,” singing and “making music in your heart to the Lord” (5:19). A second is continual *thanksgiving* to God through Christ for everything (5:20). And the third is mutual *submission*—“submitting yourselves to one another in reverence of Christ.”³

In the earliest manuscripts of this letter, the word for submit does not appear in v. 22. Continuing the thought of v. 21, Paul simply says, “Wives, to your husbands as to the Lord . . .” In other words, in this societal structure, wives were to yield to their husbands as a way of living out their submission to Christ. They were to put their husbands’ interests and well-being above

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

³ My translation.

their own, relating to them with the mind of Christ, as Paul describes it in Philippians 2:3-11. This was not something they were to be forced into; it was to be by their own choice, so that they willingly submitted themselves.

And how were the husbands to live out their faith in this cultural setting? Rather than wielding the power that the culture gave him in his household to satisfy his own designs or desires or whims, the husband was to love his wife “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” Though the culture gave him rule over his household, Paul says he was to lead as Christ leads, not as a boss or a tyrant, but as a servant-leader, putting his wife’s interest and welfare above his own (5:25-30).

Don’t miss what Paul was doing here, now. As he used this image of Christ and his relationship with the church in these instructions, he was *not* saying that the relationship between Christ and the church is like the relationship between a husband and wife. No! He was doing the exact opposite! He was saying that in *that* cultural setting, or in *any* cultural setting, Christ’s relationship with his church is the model for the relationship between husbands and wives! From that perspective, it’s not about who’s the boss, but about the *spiritual welfare* of the family.

When Paul turns to the relationship between children and parents, he again redefines things in terms of living out the Christian life in family relationships. Children are to obey their parents in the Lord not because of fear or force, but because “this is right” (6:1). It’s right because it’s God’s intention, one of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and mother” (6:2; Exodus 20:12). It has a reward, because the commandment promises long life. Obviously, if the parent is ordering the child to do something immoral, he or she is not under obligation. But this obedience is “in the Lord” (6:1)—it’s a matter of living out their obedience to Christ.

Again, in that cultural setting, fathers could order their children according to their whim, and obedience was expected, even of adult children still in the household. But Paul instructs Christian fathers not to exasperate their children or provoke them to a deep-seated anger or resentment. Rather than ruling their children with a rod of iron, they should “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (6:4).

Paul went on to complete these household instructions by talking about the relationship between masters and slaves in 6:5-9. But again, it’s a matter of living out the Christian life in these relationships, with slaves serving well and with respect as though they were serving the Lord, and masters treating their slaves well and with respect, knowing that they both have the same Master.

Being a faithful family today . . .

Now from Paul’s instructions we can see that *to be a faithful family means to live out our commitment to Christ in our family relationships*, whatever cultural setting and societal structures we may find ourselves in. Whether our families are intact or someone is missing, whether the roles are more traditional or non-traditional, what Paul is talking about here determines whether we are living faithfully as families.

With what Paul has said here in Ephesians in mind, I want to offer a few brief observations . . .

First, *there is no such thing as a perfect family*. That is an entity that simply does not exist! As I said earlier, families are made up of people, and no human being is perfect except our Lord Jesus Christ! In this fallen world, we all have our foibles and failures. But this ideal of a perfect family haunts us. Our deep yearning for it often brings disappointment, heartache, and

sometimes even depression and despair. Maybe what we need to do is to strive to put into practice what Paul is talking about here, and accept one another in Christ with love and forgiveness and forbearance.

Second, *living out the Christian life within our families touches every area of family life*. It makes husbands and wives always put each others' needs and interests ahead of our own. It makes the *spiritual formation* of our children a top priority. It shapes our *attitudes* and *how we treat each other*. It raises our *care and concern* to a whole new level, and deepens our *support* for one another. And the reason is that we are living in the kind of love that God has for us, and we are "submitting to one another in reverence of Christ."

Let me say a word about parenting here. Parenting, and especially Christian parenting, is not for the faint of heart. We have to understand that parents must be *parents*, not buddies! Sometimes it involves making hard calls that our children won't like, but will later appreciate. Sometimes that's difficult for us. But the kind of parental love the Bible calls for is willing to be tough for the child's *ultimate* good. Children need to know the limits and boundaries, and have them lovingly, firmly, and consistently enforced *for their good!*

There's one other thing. *Families need the family of faith in order to live faithfully*. As believers in Christ, we're all *God's family*. We are to love and support one another, pray for one another, and be there for one another. Family and church are to be sacred partners in the spiritual formation of our children. When our families go through the milestones and the heartaches of life, we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). We are the *family of faith*, God's family, Jesus' "brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).

May our families be *faithful families in the family of faith!*

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