

## **Ephesians 6:1–9**

### **An Economy of Honor**

Christ Community Church - Wayne Stewart

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Good morning, church. It's always such a good thing to gather in Jesus Name and the presence of the Spirit, to set our hearts and minds on Him who rules and reigns over all with perfect love and justice.

Welcome to week 13 of our Ephesians study, deep in the “so what now” portion of Paul's letter. Chapters 1-3 set the foundation of our new life, granted by grace and with the understanding that the one who granted it is nothing less than God over all, in all, through all. Starting at Chapter 4 we began to hear that this foundation is meant to be built upon and lived in—a home—not merely a monument. Pastor Kyle reminded us the last few weeks that life in Christ is supposed to look like... Christ. Humility, Gentleness, Patience. Putting off falsehood. Be kind and compassionate, forgiving as God forgave us. Living carefully, wise. Being filled with the Spirit and speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Give every effort toward unity in the Body of Christ with that as our training ground for any kind of impact outside the walls of the church.

Then Paul gets real. And it was so helpful to have Kyle and Danielle tackle the Q&A together last week. A great realtime illustration of the principles and power of mutual respect and submission in Christ. Husbands and wives. Christ and the Church. A profound mystery and very practical hope.

Much like last week, today's text again blows first-century norms up, landing them on their head and creating a new understanding of how the Gospel breathes life into human relationships, setting the stage for a bigger view of God's eternal intentions for mankind.

And His intentions—when seen clearly—are breathtaking as Ephesians 6:1-9 speaks to four groups of people and some of the most vulnerable and painful of human interactions.

Thankfully, in the most important things, the Spirit of God doesn't allow us to give up, nor simply urge us to forge a new middle-lane between any perceived or established left and right. Instead, He elevates, lifts and points above it all — a new plane, new categories; recognizing that we *do* live in this present fallen world while declaring that we *will not always* live in this present, fallen world and that a measure of the future life has already begun. Isn't that refreshing?

Paul's second letter to the church in and around Corinth urges them to:

*“...not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an*

*eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* <sup>18</sup> *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*”

## *2 Corinthians 4:16-18*

This fixation, like an ancient mariner peering through the wind and waves at a faint but unmoving star, will be especially necessary as we turn to today’s text. Please find your way to Ephesians 6:1-9 and we’ll bring it up on screen as well.

*Ephesians 6:1-9 (NIV) 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 “so 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. 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.*

Child. Father. Slave. Master. The possibility of generational wholeness and faith. The sphere of dominance and control. Parent-child dynamics. The exercise of earthly power over others and living under the earthly power of others. Some of the deepest waters we’ll tread while on this planet. If the enemy came to steal, kill, and destroy—especially at the level of matters of the soul—then there are few human dynamics prone to such harm.

We need to pray. Let’s do that and jump into what God has for us.

### **Children:**

*Ephesians 6:1-3 (NIV) 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 “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”*

Children, obey your parents. The directive is fairly clear. The motivation and protective limitation, however, is critical. *In the Lord*. One commentator put it as *“In fellowship with the Lord and obedience to Him.”*<sup>1</sup> This places a primary relationship over and inline with the parent-child dynamic. Inline, in the sense that obeying a parent could always be engaged as an act of

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<sup>1</sup> NIV Study Bible Notes

devotion to God, regardless of the relative health of the relationship and the nature of the demand. Over, when obedience to a parent would cause a child to disobey God. In Acts 5, Peter and the Apostles were directly commanded to never speak of Jesus again. While the context of adult understanding vs child reasoning is a given here, their reply is still instructive:

*“We must obey God rather than human beings!” Acts 5:29*

By the way, we handed this out as the memory verse for the two-year-olds this morning.

No one is calling for children to claim “In the Lord!” while refusing to get ready for bed. But their position of vulnerability is protected by the “over” character of the understanding “In the Lord.” We should always be looking out for them and God also tells them here that He is looking out for them.

Paul often takes us back to the Old Testament as a way to understand his writings. Here, he quotes and unpacks the fifth commandment, even as he labels it “the first commandment with a promise.” Honor entails attitudes and actions. Heart and efforts. While the overall context leads us to mainly land this directive for underage children still in their parents’ household, it’s not exclusively so.

Both Old Testament Law and New Testament teaching establish what it looks like to respect and care for parents as adult children. Families were the ancient retirement plan. Honor and obedience are linked here, and the outcome is that God is pleased and shalom—where the good intentions of God prevail with respect to life, longevity, and blessing.

**The Spirit says: obey *in the Lord*. Honor. This is right.**

**Fathers:**

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

**Exasperate or Provoke?**

The NIV use of exasperation is an interesting word-choice. The ESV and most other translators have it as “.. do not provoke your children to anger”, which sharpens both the action and response. The Greek word carries both possibilities and neither are good. In one case, a father’s place and presence leads their children to give up, feel they have no good choices. The other is more mean-spirited, heavy-handed, demeaning and small, and sets itself up to produce a tragic next-generation of the same.

Is Paul talking specifically or only to dads? Great question. Maybe the moms are already doing a great job. That’s probably the case, right? It’s clear from other places in Scripture that moms

have a critical calling and place in their kids' training and instruction (Psalm 31, Timothy's lineage, Naomi and Ruth, Mary and Jesus) so it can't be that Paul is establishing an exclusive point here, either.

What are we left with? Maybe this was a particular challenge in and around Ephesus. Could be that the pagan context<sup>2</sup> from which these dads were emerging in faith had some roadblocks specific to their place and time. A Jewish father would have at least heard that their kids were a treasure, a gift from Yahweh, a strength and a provision. Gentiles would have held a measure of lesser esteem for kids. Could be this was hard to rewire and needed Paul's pointed urging and encouragement. But also, in a more universal sense, that fathers might have a possible negative impact that moms do not; one unique to their place and calling in their kid's lives.

So, that lands with some heft. But it's not fated. Instead...

Bring them up - raise, elevate, establish, build. Let's go Midwest here and say: planting. Seeding into them and then seeding them into life.

Training and instruction: What might the Spirit be pointing us to here?

"I was formed in my mother's womb."

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

"As a dearly loved child of God..."

"When we were dead in our trespasses and sins..."

"You are a new creation creation in Christ, created for good works."

"Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And love others as yourself."

**The end-game of training and instruction is identity, not ideas.** The enduring Scriptural image of God's eternal desire to dwell among us is not a library. It's not a courtroom. It's a garden and a table. A perfectly designed place of belonging and purpose and a family feast.

Dads. What might lead to exasperation or provoke to anger? Probably both the lack of direction and the wrong kind of direction. The lack of those pillars—or their opposites—will build something bound to fall at some point.

Moms? Just keep up the good work.

How did I do? How am I doing? You'd have to ask my wife and kids. I am certain there are ways I could have done better but I hope they heard the truth of who they are and saw it lived out in a way that was something less than exasperating.

Okay - children obey your parents and honor them and fathers don't provoke your children to anger but *instead* build them up in godly training and instruction.

Those were the easy ones.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul makes it clear he is largely writing to Gentile believers in Ephesians 2:11-22.

## **Slaves and Masters:**

*Ephesians 6:5-9 (NIV) 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.*

*9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.*

And in conclusion...

Right? I mean, thanks Kyle. Did anybody notice that he handed me the two Martyr passages from Acts and the Little Scrolls, Witnesses, and Trumpets from the Revelation series?

I think you understand my trepidation here. But honestly, that's what's so amazing about God's Word. The biggest challenges reveal the biggest wonders.

Let's just lay it out there.

The directive to slaves is to obey their masters, and to obey them from the heart as they would obey Christ.

This is hard to hear. Jarring.

Really? Obedience? What they need is freedom. C'mon, Paul! You should have... and you didn't. Or, if we believe Paul to be speaking by the Spirit: C'mon, God. You should have... and you didn't.

We desperately need to level-set our remaining four verses. There is a context that helps us grapple with what is being said and what is not. Does it help to know some details, a few which might turn out to be different than you imagined or have previously understood? Maybe. But at the end of it all, it could seem like we don't want to face the reality of the situation or worse, imply that we tacitly are okay with it. Or even worse-worse: that the reach and power of God's Word is limited to time, place, or culture. That's plenty reason to be careful here.

So, first... and I am going to do this fast enough that you can't throw things. Here's some info.

1) Slavery (forced labor of some measure) was rampant - it's estimated that one in every five people in the First Century Roman Empire were slaves. That's an estimated fifty to sixty million people<sup>3</sup>.

2) Most 1st C Roman slaves entered servitude through two avenues: losing a war or not being able to repay a debt. One was involuntary, the other a mix of both. You could enter servitude to pay a debt. Courts sentenced servitude. Piracy, kidnapping, generational slavery, and other forms of human bondage existed but were not the norm.

3) Economic slaves had the opportunity to regain their freedom but this largely depended on a master's structuring of their debt repayment and the state of their bodies after potentially many years of ongoing physical labor. And economic slaves were often stuck in a cycle of poverty. Freedom could just as likely mean starving. There was no Small Business Administration, even if they had a skillset that could become an autonomous form of income.

4) Roman law considered slaves people but practically-speaking they were seen as tools rather than humans. Even slaves whose skillsets operated in the realm of household management were viewed through a largely utilitarian lens.

If you were hoping for some better datapoints, I am sorry to disappoint.

But there are two specific contextual items and then an overall Scriptural principle that help us grapple further with these verses.

First, **the term bondservant is important.**

The NIV from which I am reading and teaching today has it as slave. The ESV, the Bible in the chair racks and (available for you to take) outside Gather 1 and Gather 2 has it as "bondservant." Is this just semantics? Well, yes, but in the best sense. Because the approach of the NIV translators was idea for idea and readability; you get the "idea" of slavery or subjugation and servitude. As a word for word and more technical translation approach, the ESV renders to us "bondservant." No one is arguing that being bound to service is a good thing, but it does differentiate and localize to whom Paul is giving this directive. There is a better chance than not that the toil Paul is addressing is more in line with household servants whose term of duty was not unlimited and who had at least some reference points in Roman law code as to their treatment. That some in our past used this text to justify unending, race-based, generational ownership of other humans is beyond horrifying and a complete ignorance of the message and its setting.

Second, **Paul's directives are directed to Christian slaves or bondservants and Christian masters.**

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 102; and Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 58-59.)

Does that make it any better? Wouldn't that present an even stronger case for "Just let them go, already.. they're your brothers and sisters in Christ!"? This could even seem like spiritual manipulation if we read it with that cynical of an eye.

At her best, the Church has moved and shaped nations and cultures toward godliness and human flourishing over the course of 2000 years. And *at Her best* is when we look most like Jesus, especially when the surrounding culture looks nothing like Jesus.

So yes, he says to Christian slaves: obey your earthly masters like you would obey Christ. And in the same breath he turns to Christian masters with the more mind-blowing instructions.

Treat your slaves in the same way.

Does he mean "obey"? No, that makes no sense. So what is he getting at? The heart condition that results in an awareness of our common posture before God as master of all and the need to care for people under our influence. Does Paul think freedom could be a good thing? Yes. Maybe. We have one entire NT letter devoted to this request over a man named Onesimus. Paul urges Philemon to relieve this common brother of any debt and receive him back not as slave but as a brother. In Paul's first letter to Corinth he tells the believers:

*"... if you can gain your freedom, do so." 1 Corinthians 7:21*

Freedom for slaves is not off the table for Paul. But here in Ephesians he weighs in on the particular interpersonal dynamic over and above any systemic argument. Confrontations of systems of injustice definitely find their place throughout Scripture, but the key is they fall into times and places where God-followers have some measure of societal influence and authority. Forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection was not such a moment. The Gospel's inward change should always find itself salting and lighting the world, regardless of Believers' station or (in the very best sense) power. That's what Paul is doing here. It's really quite strategic. Maybe even a little sneaky.

### **An Economy of Honor:**

So, we have some specific instructions for each of these groups (remember, we did talk about children and fathers earlier) for how they should treat one another as co-kingdom members, regardless of their current worldly status. Is there a helpful framework pulling them together? Something we can generalize into our circumstances and interactions? I believe there is: honor.

It shows up specifically in verse 2, and only then as a cross-reference and context for the "obey your parents" command, but is infused throughout the other directives at the level of both heart and action. Children. Fathers. Slaves. Masters. The Spirit through Paul is calling us all to more than mere outward obedience and responsibilities. These are indeed matters of the heart,

awakening to the fact that God is in every people dynamic, and every people dynamic engages people—made in the image of God.

Let me pretend for a moment to be a skilled anthropologist. Remember, I'm pretending, so allow me a bit of generalization.

Throughout human history previously disengaged cultures and people groups have run into each other. When they finally meet up, by way of transportation, communication, or technological advance there tends to be two basic outcomes: isolation | domination or mutually-satisfying interaction. The latter requires a currency, or at least some means of equalizing the exchange. In Paul's directives, by the Spirit we are offered a universal currency: honor.

**Honor is God-designed humanity's basic currency. It is the standard for all human interactions.**

And Paul's instruction regarding honor is this:

**Honor where honor is due. Honor God even when it's not.**

It may be helpful to talk about three types of honor in order to bring this into our everyday experience. Intrinsic. Situational. Godward. I'll say much more about the first because it's the most challenging (and hopeful) for the purposes of our text.

**Intrinsic honor. At the level of DNA. Our very essence and origin.**

*Genesis 1:27 (NIV) ... God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

Not yet thirty verses into the Bible our very essence is unveiled. Much more than where we came from. It's all about who we are.

This proposal —that we are image bearers by nature and assignment—matters more than we might imagine. What Genesis 1:27 establishes, Psalm 8 continues:

*Psalms 8:4-9 (NIV) what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?  
5 You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:  
7 all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,*



*8 the birds in the sky,  
and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.  
9 LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Creation and coronation go hand in hand. Everyone of us born royals and likewise expected to relay the same in our dealings with one another.

Quoting Christopher Wright, Pastor and Writer Ed Stetzer notes:

*"[Intrinsic honor] forms the basis of the radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social, economic, or political status. . . . When we look at any other person, we do not see the label . . . but the image of God. We see someone created by God, addressed by God, accountable to God, loved by God, valued and evaluated by God."<sup>4</sup>*

Intrinsic honor is always possible - I can honor you because of who you are. Created in the image of God. Uniquely. Given the breath of life and a span of days from God Almighty and bearing His mutable characteristics by virtue of His design. Intended for good. Made to love, discover, support, beautify.

Situational honor is not always possible - I can honor you for your good words and actions. I am not expected to honor you for anything other.

Godward honor is the constant - I can always honor God in my words and actions. Even in the harshest or most challenging situation I am called to and capable of this. Was Paul being cruel to insinuate that the plight of enslaved brothers and sisters could be "*light and momentary troubles*"? Or was he pointing them to the only true and unending source of light in their present darkness. And maybe he was helping them see by way of purposeful over- (or under) statement that even words fail to express the glory coming for those who are in Christ.

**Honor is not just good practice, it is necessary, foundational, irreplaceable. Every other approach is in fact a non-starter.**

Paul's audience is Christian slaves, under fellow believers, or not. And Christian masters, over fellow believers, or not.

**Honor where honor is due. Honor God even when it's not.**

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 423. As quoted in Stetzer, Ed. *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (p. 305). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

The specific term bondservant and the expectations of Christians, no matter their earthly circumstances, to live kingdom-minded in all things may be helpful here, but I promised a larger Scriptural principle that might guide as we encounter other passages that seem confusing in this same way. It's this:

**The Bible does not largely provide a utopian lens for life on a broken planet earth.**

**Does that surprise you?**

Said differently, the Bible does not appear to be largely consumed with advocating for the eradication of social ill. Why? And please note I am being as careful with my word choice as I can. The Bible doesn't seem to call for and/or promise the eradication of social ill.

Think it through. Addressing, yes. Engaging, absolutely. But in the strong call of God's people to see needs and fill them, protect against abuse and work for His justice to prevail, I can not think of a passage or book that promises we can by those efforts (Spirit-empowered as they may be) remove the ravages of sin played out in human misconduct. Can you? The Prophets cry out injustice, lashing especially God's called-out people for their part in the tragedy. But where does Ezekiel's, Isaiah's, Zephaniah's, or Joel's hope lie? Having heard and repented, is humanity to forever turn the page and move on from its misdeeds? No. There will come God's solution. An inside-out and forever solution where Messiah will pay our debt, change our hearts, and set us free to live differently even as we long for the perfected and the unending that He alone will usher in with His final rule and reign. Eden was lost. It will come again, but Mankind will not recapture it.<sup>5</sup>

Theologian and Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware offers a grim but helpful word when he says:

*"...we are born into an environment where it is easy to do evil and hard to do good; easy to hurt others, and hard to heal their wounds; easy to arouse men's suspicions, and hard to win their trust. It means that we are each of us conditioned by the solidarity of the human race in its accumulated wrong-doing and wrong-thinking, and hence wrong-being. And to this accumulation of wrong we have ourselves added by our own deliberate acts of sin. The gulf grows wider and wider."<sup>6</sup>*

So that's bad news. In response, have we largely placed a human triumphalism over Scripture's pages and then get upset when bad things don't go away?

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<sup>5</sup> I didn't use this phrase because I don't want in any way to demean or belittle the struggles that persist. But, in the Scriptural worldview, societal ills are whackamole. Ever present and yet surprising. Beat them down. Beat them down again. And again. We keep at it, not because we believe we'll end it, but because it's the godly thing to do as we live out the value of all people being made in God's image and because it points the way forward to the ultimate restoration of our original state.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1995), 62.

Don't get me wrong. Quality of life, human rights, technological advancement, poverty. 21st century life is far better on the whole than any other period of recorded human history. We were designed to call every aspect of earthly living under the care and possibilities of God's heart and mind. That impulse lives deep within us, however dimmed.

But what is our aim—and expectation—Biblically-speaking? A call to eternity now, and the challenge that we are the main drivers of its appearance? We're responsible. It can and maybe should happen in our lifetime. Or a call to eternity coming and the responsibility to love in the meantime. Which one seems more like real-life to you? Which more accurately recounts and predicts the human condition?

Sometimes I fear we may have been praying "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" not with an eye to Jesus' return but with the perfection of earthly living laid on our shoulders. That is a burden far too weighty for any—or even all—of us.

You can try and approach faith as a revolutionary. The Bible largely does not. I will propose that Scripture is better than any manifesto and more caring than any other treatment or wisdom text. It neither ignores nor overpromises for this life. And it provides a vision and certainty of eternity that keeps us in peace even as it calls us to be people of peace.

### **Close:**

The all too commonplace tragedies of child-parent disconnection—children for whom respect is a non-starter and fathers whose posture only enflames— and the more powerful pressing their advantage as those who are pressed in- and exhale the toxin of ill-will tells us something we already know:

Sin wrecked this world and all who live in it.

It's like a house torn apart by natural disaster, war, or crime: nothing works right.

So, application #1:

**Stop stepping over to the wall switch and recoiling in surprise when the lights don't come on.**

Someday, yes some glorious day, the house will be demolished and rebuilt. But for now, in many ways, we need to think more like vagabonds than mansion-dwellers. More renters than owners.

Does this mean we do nothing to improve the place or make it more hospitable for others under the same roof?

No, and that's application #2:

**We are called to repair, but lack the resources and skill for full renovation.**

On Sunday 11/17 and 24—just two weeks from now—we'll see what can be done in our own front room of Ames and Story County. We'll be hosting another round of conversations and action steps designed to introduce us to vulnerabilities in our community we may not even know about. **We call this focus Local Matters.** And it may just matter more than usual this year.

Two days from now we'll take up the question of American leadership in national and international issues. While there are down ballot races, most of the focus will be beyond our city, county, and state. You may have voted already. You may take time to stand in line on election day. Either way, next Sunday it is arguable that our eyes may be turned to the not unimportant horizon beyond our zip codes. Great.

But I am saying, just like you made a plan to engage those issues, make a plan to engage those closer to home. Put it in your calendar. Attend these conversations on 11/17 and 24. Come grab a reminder card at the kiosk or get more info by going to the events page on our app or website.

The call to honor we've heard from Ephesians 6 extends to the national and international so yes, pray, vote, and shine the light of Christ into the public square, but let's not neglect maybe the best opportunity to live our faith out: right here, where God has placed us.