

**Ephesians: Living in Sync with Reality**  
**Part 14: Spirit Filled Family and Work**

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**Ephesians 6:1-9**

**The Kingdom Culture Among the Cultures**

David Foster Wallace has a little parable:

Two fish were swimming along and came upon another: “hey boys, how’s the water?” he asks. As the two swim past, one turns to the other and says, “what in the world is water?”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a parable about culture and the ways in which culture is made up of the parts of life often invisible to us. In Ephesians 6:1-9, we deal with issues of culture and from our vantage point may find that Paul’s treatment of children and slavery doesn’t go far enough.

But we’ll find that Paul’s call to be filled with the Spirit and submit to one another is revolutionary—both in his context and ours.

**Spirit Filled Family**

**a. Children to Parents**

Our culture is animated by a profound lack of trust in *authority*.<sup>2</sup> Institutions like church, state and school have lost trust culturally, and parents are in the crosshairs too. Naïve psychological perspectives have us blame all our faults on our parents.

In Ephesians 6:1 Paul tells children to obey their parents and he quotes the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12 as motivation.

Central to this command is the idea that parents deserve ‘honor’. Darrell Johnson comments that the Hebrew for honor means ‘to regard as heavy’ or ‘to consider as weighty’. He writes:

“We are to recognize the load parents carry.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the job of parents to protect, provide for and instruct children. Children are to recognize that as their role and give them trust and obedience.

When my son was born, within three days I called my mom and wept—thanking her for all she carried for me and how she did it being inadequately equipped for the role. I could only do that

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water”

<sup>2</sup> See David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*.

<sup>3</sup> Darrel Johnson, *Ephesians*, pg. 370.

because it's only now I understand how heavy the burden is and how ill equipped we all really are.

Kids, hug your mom and dad.

As adults, we may can recognize the weight our parents carried by being gracious towards them and generous towards their decisions. Not suppressing hurt, but not laying blame either.

Paul says the 'promise' with this commandment is 'long life on the earth'. This, in the context of the fifth commandment, is about long life in the promised land. What it means is that where family goes so society goes.

Of course, God's will does supersede the will of our parents. As we grow into our own families through adulthood, we 'leave and cleave'. This command also assumes that parents will take the responsibility seriously, situations of abuse and neglect require healthy boundaries and help.

#### **b. Parents to Children**

Paul speaks to fathers next, though the command would relate just as well to all parents. But he chooses fathers because it is both subversive and necessary. It was subversive because fathers could do what they wanted to their kids—killing them at birth, selling them into slavery or even disciplining them to death as children.

But it is also necessary, fathers often forget the importance of the role they play in family life. Two commands are given for this role—do not exasperate and teach and instruct.

“Do not exasperate” is a reminder to consider the feelings of our children. How is the way we are teaching and disciplining affecting them?

The other role is to be present in instruction. Nancy Pearcey has written on male issues in *The Toxic War on Masculinity*. Her conclusion regarding the problems with bad male behavior in our culture boil down to this:

"The most important long-term solution to toxic male behavior...is to strengthen men's commitment to fatherhood."<sup>4</sup>

He quoted research from the US suggests that 63% of youth suicides, 90% of homeless and runaway kids, 85% who display behavioural disorders, 71% of high school dropouts and 85% of youth in prison were raised without a father figure in the home.

Fatherhood, not in the literal sense but in the figurative, could be a definition for masculinity. Jon Tyson defines masculinity this way:

“[Masculinity is] ...the joyful pursuit of sacrificial responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, 192-193

<sup>5</sup> Jon Tyson in the Aggressive Life Podcast with Brian Tome

Again, mothers are included in this command, but for some reason fathers often need the reminder more.

If your family is complicated remember, in Christ family is more than those who share your home or your blood. Lean on the body of Christ.

Children, be filled with the spirit and submit to your parents.

Parents, be filled with the spirit and submit to your children.

## **Spirit Filled Work**

### **a. Slaves to Masters**

Paul's comments to slaves in Ephesians 6:5-8 do not go far enough for most modern ears. We would expect someone to, in this situation, denounce slavery outright. Why doesn't Paul do that?

At least one possible reason is the historical context of this letter. Christians were beginning to be perceived as a real threat to Greco-Roman order and Paul is in prison in Rome. If Paul starts a revolution, his friends are possibly put in the crosshairs.

Some scholars suggest that these 'household codes' (Ephesians 5:21-6:9) are actually written by Paul as an apologetic to the Romans reading over his shoulder. On the face of it, he maintains Roman household order, but subversively he undermines the anthropology and theology underneath that system.

But further, to help us understand why Paul would encourage slaves to serve their masters, we can explore how we approach injustice. An inadequate overview of theology and philosophy offers three options:

#### *1. I'll Fly Away*

- a. Life is a test for a future with God. Just do good and you get your good later, don't get too involved in the world. A truncated and escapist evangelical distortion.

#### *2. The Violent Bear It Away*

- a. Force the ways of God into the world and enforce them with violence. Certain approaches to Islam, and sadly some of Christian history, demonstrate this.

#### *3. Let It Go*

- a. Acceptance of what is evil in the world leads to transcending it. Buddhism and certain Stoic philosophies can tend this way.

But in announcing the Kingdom of God, Jesus' message supersedes and transforms all three perspectives and does all three at once.

1. The Kingdom is *Coming*
  - a. The promise of Jesus' return motivates us to participate in the world assured of our victory.
2. The Kingdom is *Here*
  - a. Resisting and challenging the brokenness of the world empowered by the Holy Spirit. This resistance is usually peaceful.
3. The Kingdom *Within Us*
  - a. Suffering is an opportunity to grow and 'carry our cross.' While we may challenge injustice in the world, there is a sense in which we also accept our circumstances as a place God can meet us.

Paul encourages enslaved people to serve their masters 'just as you would obey Christ.' He can do this and does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23, because Christian freedom is an internal reality irrespective of outer circumstances. Again, not to say we don't resist and fight for freedom for others now.

How might all this look?

The story of Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis—a black social activist and a klu klux klan member—retold in the play 'Best of Enemies' gives us an amazing example. Ann and C.P. were bitter rivals in the public battle for desegregation of schools. Ann won C.P. over with her Christian kindness, leading to desegregation in Durham and a lifelong friendship. She served Jesus in the face of her enemy.

What might this mean in our lives?

For some of us, our work situations may feel demeaning. We may even, through issues of justice, feel trapped in dire situations. Remember Paul's words in Colossians:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." – **Colossians 3:23-24**

#### **b. Masters to Slaves**

Ephesians 6:9 turns to masters and encourages them to treat those in service to them 'in the same way.'

One pastor was doing ministry in the Philippines, a culture that still has live-in servants, and read Ephesians 6:9. A woman cried out:

'If you let this text loose, you'll change our way of life!'

This text was radical and still is. But to hear it better, one other detail needs to be understood. First Century slavery was not nineteenth-century American slavery. It was not racially motivated, but rather part of warfare or economically motivated. Manumission, the purchase of one's own freedom, was always a possibility.

Also, the experience of the enslaved depended entirely upon the master.

So, when Paul tells masters that they are no better than their slaves, that both have a 'Master' in heaven. This is radical. And it solves the problem on two fronts. It maintains the institution in a way that pleases Rome, while still addressing the issues that would affect those enslaved.

And, in the book of Philemon, we see Paul work this out pastorally. Paul encourages a runaway enslaved person to return to his master, but with a letter from Paul in which Paul says:

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”

– **Philemon 1:15-16**

For us, it is important to remember the Father does not play favourites. In many ways that are less than subtle, our world still holds onto ideas of class. An incorrect belief those who are wealthy have higher status.

Workers, be filled with the Spirit and submit to your masters.

Masters, be filled with the Spirit and submit to your workers.

## Discussion Questions:

### Open Up:

Read **Ephesians 6:1-9**, what do you wish Paul would have written? What is hard to hear from this text for our culture?

### Dig In:

#### Ephesians 6:1-4

- *Family*
  - What is the connection between the health of society and the flourishing of the family?
  - This text recalls our own parents, considering the weight they had to carry for you, what do you feel the Spirit telling you to do in recognition of this weight?

#### Ephesians 6:5-9

- *Work/Slavery*
  - Compare Ephesians 6:5-9, 1 Corinthians 7:21-23, Philemon 1:15-16 and this text, how is Paul approaching this issue in different contexts?
  - What are some places where our society 'plays favourites'? What might it look like to resist this tendency?
  - When you consider your own responsibilities—either as a subordinate or in leadership—what do you feel this text calling you towards?

### Prayer:

Pray for those who are still actually enslaved in our modern world. Pray that God would open avenues to justice.