# Ephesians

Ephesians 5: 21-6:9

## Introduction

This is the third section of this letter concerning our behaviour as ‘children of light’ which flows out of all that God has done for us and his establishment of us in his church. These passages are known as ‘the household codes’ because they deal with the practical issues of how we should relate to one another at home and at work.

These are not the only household codes in ancient literature. Others, such as Aristotle, similarly wrote household codes with respect to wives, children and slaves. However, the content of the other household codes was directed entirely at the male householder and instructed him how to govern his household. In contrast, Paul lays out responsibilities for all involved. Indeed, he begins this whole section by telling everyone involved that there needs to be mutual submission to one another (5:21), out of reverence for Christ. He concludes these instructions by telling everyone that ultimately we are all in submission to Jesus and therefore need to behave as if that is the case (6:9).

As we read these passages, some of the perspectives espoused by them seem to clash with our modern mindset. Some have suggested that Paul is endorsing the suppression of women and condoning slavery, however, to approach these passages with this mindset is to take them completely out of the cultural context in which they were written and to misunderstand them.

## Slavery

Let’s deal with slavery first. In the ancient world, slavery was as natural as it is unnatural today. People became slaves as a result of conquest (if another countries army defeated your army, you could end up a slave of the conquering people) or of economic necessity (if you fell on hard times, you could sell yourself as a salve). The lot of slaves was not all bad. They were fed, and housed, looked after when they were ill and often given responsibility within a household. That does not mean that there was not some mistreatment and, at the end of the day, they were not free. However, we should not have in mind images of 18th century slave ships and cotton fields when we read the passages in the Bible about slavery. The lot of a slave was not all bad.

Within Greco-Roman society, slaves were as essential as electricity is for us today – without them nothing would function. They were the basic building block that made up the hierarchy of society. Paul does not endorse or challenge this arrangement. Life would have been inconceivable without slaves for a first century citizen, and therefore Paul, instead, simply addresses the way slaves and masters should behave towards one another if they are born again.

For an extended commentary on this, read and study Philemon in which Paul encourages Philemon to accept Onesimus back, not just as a once useless slave who is now useful, but also as a brother in Christ. In doing so he leaves it to Philemon as to whether that also means he will set Onesimus free from slavery.

So what relevance does a discussion of slavery have for us? The principles within it can also apply to any of us who work for another. The underlying principle Paul gives us is that when we are working for a boss, we need to work for them just as diligently as if we were working for Jesus himself. In other words our secular work is an extension of our work for God and our attitude towards it, and towards our boss, should be the same as if we were working for Jesus. He makes a number of points in this respect:

* We should respect our boss because God has put them in authority over us
* We should not just work hard when we are being watched but also when we are not being watched
* We will be rewarded by God for the way we work in the workplace, irrespective of any pay we might receive, based on our work ethic and our attitude

But what if we have a boss who us unhelpful, unjust, lazy, a bully or displays other negative behaviours? Paul’s principle here is that it is not about them, it is about us and keeping ourselves right before God.

Over the years I have worked for some very good bosses. I have also worked for one or two who were not so good. One particular one used to drive employees to deliver beyond reasonable expectations. Unpaid overtime was the norm and was expected. People were bullied, and I left that company after 18 months having lost much of my confidence. Thankfully, my next boss was completely the opposite, and I found my confidence restored in a short space of time. It is hard to keep a right attitude when we are in such circumstances but Paul gives us the secret – work as if you are working for Jesus. Don’t let a bad boss’s oppression rob you of your peace or of your reward.

On the flipside, Paul also instructs Christian bosses to lead without bullying knowing that ultimately you answer to God. This means that you cannot oppress another person for whom God is also their father.

One of the biggest challenges in the workplace in my experience is gossip about bosses. Don’t take part in it. Don’t disrespect those God has put in authority over you. Walk away and demonstrate a different attitude, and don’t get caught up in office politics if you can possibly avoid them.

## Fathers & Children

Next we come to fathers and children. Again, looking within the context of the society in which Paul was writing, children were to be ‘seen but not heard’. There was no such thing as a teenager in Greco-Roman society; you were either a child or an adult, although you came to be considered an adult in your mid-teens when, if you were a girl, you would probably be married, and, if you were a boy, you would probably start work in the family business or in the military.

So Paul is instructing children to act out of honour: ‘honour your father and your mother’, and he reminds them that this flows out of the Ten Commandments.

What does ‘honour’ actually mean? The root of the word in Greek means ‘to value’ somebody. In other words, to honour somebody is to recognise their worth, their goodness and their influence in our lives. For children, Paul says, obedience should be rooted in our valuing of our parents and appreciating all that they do for us, have done for us and all that they provide us with in terms of wellbeing, security, sustenance, finance and instruction.

Paul is not commanding obedience in a vacuum: ‘obey me because I am your dad’. Rather, he says that obedience should flow out of our appreciation for all that our parents do for us, all that they have sacrificed to bring us into the world and to care for us, and all that we are because of them.

As in all of the household codes, however, Paul does not leave this completely one-sided. He says, ‘fathers, don’t exasperate your children’, or (as the KJV says it) ‘don’t provoke your children to wrath’. Effectively, he is instructing us not to frustrate our children so much that they have nowhere to go and just end up angry.

Sometimes, I think, we as parents can take up the mindset of ‘the answers ‘no,’ now what is the question?’ Instead, Paul says, we should have in mind that which will help them to know how to handle themselves in relationship to God. Our aim should not be just what suits us, but actually what will help them to know more fully how to live as children of God. That will mean saying no at times of course, but it will also mean modelling the love and grace of God to them as well.

## Husbands and wives

This brings us to the third couplet in this set of household codes: the thorny issue of husbands and wives. Again, let us set this in context.

In the society in which Paul lived and moved there was a real contrast in the way women could behave. A Roman woman of high birth had a level of freedom within the culture of the time, but she, like all other women, was expected to submit to her husband in all things. Effectively, she was the possession of her husband.

Paul, having laid down the principle of mutual submission endorses the generally held view that wives should submit to the authority of their husbands. However, in contrast with the other household codes, instead of then telling husbands how to govern their household, he gives them the pattern for how to make that submission possible – to love their wife sacrificially following the example that Jesus, himself set. Let’s break this down further.

Firstly, there was no expectation that a husband would love his wife. She was there to satisfy and service his needs and to look after his house and children for him. Paul tells us that it is not to be like that in the Christian community. Instead, a husband’s first responsibility is to love his wife – to commit himself to her completely: emotionally, physically and financially. It is not a soppy kind of love that Paul has in mind here but rather the kind of love that puts the needs of our partner above those of ourselves. It is the kind of love that Jesus exemplified when, he gave himself for us.

A parallel can be seen in the life of Jacob. He travelled to Haran and spotted Rachel. He fell in love with her, and worked for seven years (and then a further seven years) in order to pay her betrothal price. In the same way, Jesus came from heaven to receive a bride for himself. The price to gain her was his death on the cross. He paid the price, and we are now his bride as a result. Not only that, he has taken us and cleaned us up so that we will be fit and ready for the coming marriage.

Paul tells us that that is how we should be towards our wives – loving them in such a way as to liberate them and to help them to be more like Jesus. If a husband is like this towards his wife, Paul says, then he should earn her respect. This passage is not about reinforcing a patriarchal kind of domination, but rather to instruct husbands how they need to model Christ to their wives. I believe if we, as husbands, were truly to be Christ-like, as Paul envisages, then many of the flashpoints and conflicts that typify modern marriages would cease. If wives respected their husbands as the one whom God has given responsibility to for ensuring the household is loved, cared for and kept secure, then this too would ease the tensions.

Marriage does not have to be a battleground. It should be an oasis that causes both parties to flourish and be all that they can be in Christ.

## Application

These household codes are very practical. Whilst the culture into which they were written is very different from our own, there are principles ensconced within them that are universal and are as applicable today as they were when they are written.

The challenge for us as modern westerners is, are we going to live as the culture around us dictates, or are we going to live as ‘children of light’? That may mean choosing to live and behave in a way that is countercultural. It may mean not exerting our rights but rather taking up our responsibilities. It may mean surrendering our wants and needs in order to serve another.

All of this is simply to follow the model set by Jesus himself whom we actually serve as we live in this way and who will rewards us accordingly.