

The awake or alert amongst you might have noticed that the reading we have just had is very similar to last week's reading. It's not a mistake! The letter to the Ephesians is all about the new life which Jesus brings and the new way of living which is meant to follow. These last two chapters speak particularly about the new relationships into which God has brought us as Christians and what that should mean for husbands and wives, children and parents. Last week Tim spoke about husbands and wives and marriages. This week I'm going to speak about children and parents.

And the reason that we've repeated the reading is that I wanted to be sure that these few verses about how children and parents are to live were not pulled out of context. They come in the middle of a general exhortation to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. And as Tim reminded us, submission is not the same as subjugation and subordination. So any frustrated parents who find themselves drawn only to the verse that says, '*Children, obey your parents!*' need to remember that.

And let me also say right at the beginning that I'm not an expert on parenting. (If you want that you need to watch 'The house of tiny tearaways' or 'Supernanny'!) Yes, I am a parent, but I've made more than my fair share of mistakes. I frequently lose the plot and there are many times when I feel I've failed my children.

Many of you here are much further down this parenting road than I am and could probably add considerably to what I have to say. Indeed, some of you may be thinking '*Well, this isn't for me. My parenting days are over.*' I hope that won't lead you to switch off. It seems to me that in our very fractured society grandparents have a key role in bringing stability and parenting skills to families. You may not always feel as if you have as much authority or contact as you would like, but your influence can be enormous.

Here's what a nine year old wrote about grandmothers:

'Grandmas don't have to do anything except be there. If they take us for walks they slow past things like pretty leaves and caterpillars and they never say hurry up. Usually grandmothers are fat but not too fat to tie their shoes. They wear glasses and funny underwear and they take their teeth and gums out at night. Grandmothers don't have to be clever, just be able to

answer questions like why isn't God married and why do dogs chase cats? Grandmothers don't talk baby talk to us like visitors do because they know it's hard for us to understand it. When they read to us they don't skip over pages or mind if it's the same story over and over again. Everybody should have a grandmother, especially if you don't have a television because they're the only grown ups that have time.'

That's quite an indictment of the busyness of that nine year old's parents, isn't it? Yet how wonderful that her grandmother is there for her. An African proverb says, '*It takes a whole village to raise a child*'. I think there's great wisdom in that. We all have a part to play. So what follows is for parents and grandparents.

If I were to ask you, '*What do you most want for your children or grandchildren?*' I wonder how you would answer? You might respond simply by saying you wanted them to be happy. But what will make them happy? Maybe you would say you wanted them to be successful. But what do you want them to be successful at – studying? Business? Relationships?

You see, key to what we want for our children will be what we want for ourselves. Those things that we value most will probably be the things that we want them to have, whether they be physical things or spiritual things. What shapes or informs what we want most in life?

In Ephesians Paul begins his letter by reminding the people of the new life they have been given in Jesus - *once you were dead, now you are alive in Christ; you have been saved by grace* – and then he goes on to say that they should therefore no longer live as the Gentiles do but they should live as 'Children of Light'. Paul is describing the new society, the new way of living, that we are to be part of. In this new way of living, what matters most to us, what are the values that we treasure? These values need to be informed by Jesus rather than the world around us.

And the point is that our children and grandchildren will be greatly affected by the values we live by. It's no good telling my children to live by one set of values and then living by a different set myself. If I say to my children that 'God comes first', but then they see by my actions that God is often pushed aside when something more urgent comes along, which will they

believe? If I tell my children that 'we should forgive one another' but they see by my actions that I'm eaten up with bitterness and always criticising others, which will they believe?

James Baldwin wisely said, '*Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.*'

So what I really believe and live by will be the greatest force in shaping my children. If you ask me what I want most for my children, I would answer that I want them to have a living faith in Jesus Christ. I want that for them because I believe deep in my bones that that will be the best possible life for them. Yes, I want them to be happy, yes, I want them to be fulfilled, but I truly believe that the best way to find that is in Jesus.

Rob Bell says that he thinks '*the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.*' I agree with him. He goes on: '*I'm convinced being generous is a better way to live. I'm convinced forgiving people and not carrying around bitterness is a better way to live. I'm convinced that having compassion is a better way to live. I'm convinced that pursuing peace in every situation is a better way to live. I'm convinced being honest with people is a better way to live.*'

So am I. That Jesus' way of living is the one I want to choose for myself and the one I want for my children. And more than that, I'm also convinced that whatever difficulties and trials may come their way in life, Jesus is the one who will help them through it.

Here are some challenging questions to ask ourselves. They're taken from Lindsay and Mark Melluish's book 'Family Time' to help us examine some of our family values:

- What is a priority and what is not?
- What causes Mum and Dad to 'go mad', and what goes by without them even commenting?
- Are material possessions important, or do friendships and family relationships have greater value?
- Is keeping the house tidy too important to allow friends home for pizza and Coke, or are people welcome in our home any time?
- What attitudes do the children grow up with?

- Is a relationship with God central to family life, or does life go on from week to week without reference to him?

How we answer those questions will help us to see whether we are living by the values we say we embrace.

Now let's look at those verses from Ephesians:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord. This is not a call for unqualified obedience to a tyrant; it's an instruction to obey your parents **in the Lord**. There is an assumption here that the parents will have been shaped by the Lord. That they will have in them the mind of Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. That they will be seeking the values of the kingdom and living out a new quality of life for themselves. So any 'commands' will flow from that context and should therefore be obeyed.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children. In other words, don't drive your kids crazy. Don't be on their backs so much that you completely discourage and demoralise them. Don't make irritating or unreasonable demands that take no account of their inexperience or immaturity. Children have a life and personality of their own and, though they are to obey their parents in the Lord, they are also to be respected and allowed to be themselves.

Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. This has the sense of 'moulding', 'shaping' and 'nurturing' children. Bringing them up to understand the things of God. Training them how to react and respond and speak and live. It's interesting that Paul places the primary responsibility for this on parents.

The community of the church is, of course, very important in encouraging and supporting the upbringing of children. In our own children's lives, the presence of significant Christian adults in the church who have valued our children as individuals in their own right has been enormously significant. We are greatly blessed here to have gifted workers like Rick and Joe and Lydia and the rest of the team who speak significantly into young people's lives.

But the primary responsibility to see that my children are brought up in the training and instruction of the Lord does not lie with them, it lies with me. Most importantly, whatever the youth and children's leaders may say, if our children do not see that being lived out at home, they are far less likely to adopt it for themselves.

Of course in all of this we fail. We get it wrong. We need forgiveness. When your children hit adolescence, all your best made plans come to naught! (I'm encouraged that one of the foremost Christian psychologists in America, Dr James Dobson, says that you cannot heal adolescence and you cannot exorcise it. You just have to endure it!)

Yet, in all our failures and troubles, I never cease to be amazed by the resilience of our children and their ability to forgive and forget our mistakes, when we are able to say sorry to them.

I want to leave you with three important principles. The first is to love your children. Of course loving your children is usually pretty instinctive, but I mean by this to go on loving your children when they hurt you or disobey you or let you down. Probably the best example of this shown by the father in the story of the prodigal son. The son had turned his back on the father, taken the father's money and squandered it all on wild living. Yet when he came to his senses and headed back for home, the father ran out to greet him and called for a ring, sandals and a robe. The father accepted him and showed that he still loved him. We need to find ways of doing that when we find conflict and division with our children.

The second principle is to tell your children often that you love them. That may not be easy for you. You may have grown up in a family that was not very demonstrative or simply never said those things, but it is essential that however hard you find it, you try to do it.

Don Williams tells the story of leading a retreat for some worship leaders. At the end of the retreat they held a communion service and said that after the service they would like to pray with each person there. Don remembers one young man who came up to him after he had received the bread and wine. Don asked what he could pray for him.

The young man explained that he was the worship leader of a large church and that his father was the vicar of a different large church. He then said that he had never heard his father say that he loved him. And then the young man began to weep. We all need to know without doubt that we are loved and accepted. Tell your children often that you love them.

Finally, pray for your children. There are many situations that you will not be able to change and many things that you will not be able to fix, but you can always pray.

Bring these situations to the Lord and lift your children daily in prayer.

I'm convinced that many of the crises we as a family have safely passed through and many of the blessings we have received have been in part attributable to the faithful prayers of Judy's parents. We know that they pray together for us all every day.

I'd love you now to listen to a track from a Chris Rice CD which illustrates this last point. It's called 'Momma prays'. In Deuteronomy 6 we find these verses: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

God longs for his people to take his commands to heart and he knows that that will be best achieved if we impress them upon our children by talking about them when we sit and when we walk, when we lie down and when we get up. In other words, establish these as the values you will live by and hand them on to your children. Love your children and tell them often that you love them. And pray for

CELL NOTES

Who would you say was most formative in your growing up years?
What do you remember about them?
What values have continued with you into adulthood?

What key values would you want to pass on to your children and grandchildren?

Look at the family value questions in the sermon. How would you answer them?

Read Ephesians 6:1-4.
What does 'in the Lord' mean in this context?
How can we exasperate our children?
What is the best way to bring up children in the training and instruction of the Lord?

Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9.
Pray for your children and grandchildren them, that God might be with them and that he might bless them.