

Ephesians 6

M. W. Bassford

3-22-09

Introduction.

- A. In the modern-day US, and perhaps in most other places too, we like to divide the human race into two groups: the strong and the weak. The strong are the ones who get ahead in life, whether or not that occurs at someone else's expense. They include the schoolyard bully, the snotty prom queen, the road-rager who weaves in and out of stopped traffic on the freeway, the politician who exploits the system for his own financial gain, and the banking executive who gives himself million-dollar bonuses for running his bank into the ground.
- B. Then, on the other hand, conventional wisdom says, you have the weak. That includes everybody else whom the strong exploit: the nerd who daily gives his money to the bully, the uncool girl so ferociously rejected by the in-crowd, the taxpayers who are exploited by corrupt government, and the clerk who works 60-hour weeks for his bank, only to be downsized at the first hint of recession. Conventional wisdom also tells us that given the chance, it's much better to be the strong. It's much better for us to assert ourselves at every opportunity, to demand our just deserts, and to get ahead however we can. If somebody else gets stepped on in the process, hey, that's too bad. It's their fault, really, for not looking after their own interests themselves.
- C. Of course, the Bible takes that traditional narrative and flips it on its head. According to God's word, the point isn't to look out for ourselves. It's to look out for others. Strength isn't found in crashing through life like a monster truck. It's found in dedication to what is right and good. The godly who excel in this have more reason to rejoice than the crooked politician and greedy executive ever will. Biblical strength, then, is found in submission. Let's look at the way these two themes appear in our last chapter of Ephesians, Ephesians 6.

I. Submission, Continued.

- A. As we consider Ephesians 6, the first separate context that really jumps out at us is Ephesians 6:1-9. However, once again, this context isn't really separate. As seems to be a theme, the chapter break between Ephesians 5 and Ephesians 6 doesn't do us any favors. It falls right down the middle of a single discussion that stretches from 5:21 to 6:9, a discussion on submission. The submission of the wife to the husband, and of the husband to the needs of the wife, flows seamlessly into more submission discussion in chapter 6.
- B. The first topic addressed in this continued exploration of submission is the submission of the children to the parents. For obvious reasons, vss. 1-3 are oft quoted by parents everywhere, and for many of us who were raised in the church, they are the first passage we remember memorizing. Let's look now, though, and see what the text actually means. The first thing that jumps out at us is that in discussing the submission of child to parent, Paul uses a different word. Back in chapter 5, the wife was commanded to submit, and the husband was commanded to love. Here, though, the child is commanded to obey. In the Greek, this is actually the same word that is used to describe the way the winds and the sea obeyed Christ when He calmed the storm in Matthew 8. So, then, just as the forces of nature obey God, children are supposed to obey their parents. Why? Because that's the way the established order works. As Paul says, because it is right.
- C. Along with many other commands in the Bible, this one gets short shrift in today's culture. To me, at least, the dominant image of child-grownup relationships in our culture is probably the movie "E.T." For those of you who haven't seen it, in that movie, it's the kids who are good and wise, but the adults are at best incompetent and at worst evil. That idea is reinforced in us in a thousand subtle ways all the time, and I suspect the result is that parents and children have a much more difficult time getting along today than they did 100 years ago.
- D. It's against that backdrop that children need to remember vss. 2-3. When Moses, as quoted by Paul here, says that children who obey have prosperity and long life, I don't think he's implying that God zaps disobedient children. I think the point is that children who listen avoid a lot of the disasters that happen to children who don't listen. Young folks, I know it's hard to believe, but your parents were young too once, and they saw or possibly experienced a lot of the dumb ways that teenagers can get themselves in trouble. They know what happens when you hang out with the wrong crowd, or spend time in the wrong places, or are out too late. Sure, there's fun in those things, but they all too easily lead to sin of every kind and bad decisions that can ruin your life. The point is, listen to your folks. You'll be happier and better off if you do.
- E. On the other hand, we have a command given to parents in vs. 4. As far as I can tell, if anything, Paul here is urging parents to strive for consistency. Nothing will confuse and enrage a child more than a parent who can't keep a steady course. If Mom and Dad are Nazis one day and couldn't care less the next, the child has no idea what the rules really are, and worse still, no idea how he's supposed to live his life. In a setting like that, who wouldn't be exasperated? Instead, parents are supposed to point out a path for their children that is based on the word of God. What our children need, more than anything else, isn't the latest toys and clothes and gadgets, or even the best schools and a top-ranked college to attend. Instead, the most precious gift we can give them is daily, constant training in how to serve God. Now, I've been told that maintaining that kind of

consistency is the hardest thing about being a parent. If so, tough cookies. That's where the submission part comes in. As parents, we need to bite the bullet, invest the effort, and continually lead our children to God.

- F. In vs. 5-8, Paul turns to the next group to submit: either slaves or servants, depending on your translation. As we've noted before, slaves in the time of Christ weren't in a vastly different position than employees today, so many of their lessons apply to us. Of course, unlike slaves, we have the right to quit and walk away from our jobs, but as long as we remain employed, this is how we must behave. When we work, we shouldn't be worried about impressing our bosses. If that's our goal, our hard work will stop when our boss's attention does. That reminds me of a guy I used to work with at Wal-Mart. We'll call him Mikey. Mikey used to win all kinds of employee-of-the-month awards, but one time, he took me to the abandoned mall next door, and showed me the old break room where he used to hide out when no one was watching. He had the eyeservice thing down, but actually being a good employee? Not so much. As Christians, we must be better. We need to work hard, not just when our boss is watching, but especially when he isn't, because our Master in heaven is always paying attention. That way, we'll receive not just a paycheck, but a heavenly reward.
- G. Likewise, Christian employers and supervisors are obliged to consider the welfare of those under them. There are many in positions of power who let that power go to their head. Like the pointy-haired boss in "Dilbert" they make their underlings jump through hoops just because they can. What Christians who are in charge need to remember is that they are servants too, and the work that their God expects from them is to treat their employees according to the principles of Christ, with justice and mercy and faithfulness. I suspect that employers like that will prosper financially, but more importantly, they will prosper spiritually as well.

II. The Armor of God.

- A. That's the end of the submission section, and next up, we see the context that stretches from Ephesians 6:10-23. Since Ephesians 4:1, Paul has set forth a truly daunting number of commandments for every Christian to follow. In vs. 10-13, he tells us how it's possible. We can't maintain our righteousness by ourselves, but we can through God. We need this spiritual help because our foes are spiritual. It might sound like a paranoid fantasy, but in our case, there is an evil mastermind out to get each one of us. The devil and his minions are constantly plotting against us all, and the same evil schemes that have destroyed billions before us will surely destroy us do, unless we armor ourselves against those schemes with the help of God.
- B. Vss. 14-17, in what is one of the two most familiar passages of Ephesians, describes what the armor of God is like. It begins with the belt of truth. Just like the belt with its attached armor was the first piece that a soldier of Paul's day would have put on, we have to begin our spiritual warfare with truth. We must be honest with the word, honest with other people, and honest with ourselves. Without that honesty, we will never make any progress. After it, we must put on the breastplate of righteousness. Remember, folks: it's not enough to do the right; we must also love the right, and it is our own love of good and hatred of evil that must be the last line of defense against the wiles of Satan. Finally, in this section of armament, we see the shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace. This, I think, is the desire awakened in us by the gospel: the desire to have our sins forgiven, to please God, and to live forever in heaven with Him. That's what will get us going.
- C. In the second layer of protection, first we see the shield of faith. I think Paul describes faith in this way because when Satan places trials and obstacles in our lives, it's our faith that enables us to shrug off those attacks. We believe that God is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, so we keep moving toward heaven. Salvation is our helmet because like a helmet, it protects the most vital part of ourselves. The helmet guards the brain, but salvation guards the soul. Finally, then, we come to the sword of the spirit, the word of God. Other passages of Scripture describe that sword being used on us; here, we are its wielders. If we're really fed up by Satan and his attacks, if we want to strike back, the word is the only way to do it. As we use it to show God's will to others, both inside and outside the church, that's the kind of assault that Satan's kingdom cannot stand against. It's how we prove to be a true soldier of Christ.
- D. In all of our spiritual struggle, though, we can never forget that we have more than God's indirect help. We have His direct help too, and that's the idea that Paul explores in vs. 18-20. As we fight, we should also pray. Notice, in these couple of verses, how often the word "all" appears. We are to pray at all times, keeping alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. In other words, we need to be praying all the time for everybody, and keep doing that until the end of our lives. The fact that Paul places such a strong emphasis on prayer teaches us clearly how important prayer should be to us. Let's put that into practice.
- E. As if that weren't enough, Paul seeks the prayer of the Ephesians on his own behalf. Here, from the comfy perspective of 2000 years later, it's hard for us to imagine that Paul needed anything from any other Christians, but his own words tell a different story. Paul here faces a familiar problem. He wants to be bolder in proclaiming the gospel. I'm certain that many of us wish the same, that we could be as courageous as first-century Christians in teaching the lost souls around us. Paul here tells us how we can find help. If we pray in faith, the boldness will come. With that, and with a few closing remarks about his own personal welfare, Paul closes the book of Ephesians, leaving us with a vision that stretches from the beginning to our own lives.

Conclusion. If you want to carry out God's vision for your life, come to Him tonight.