

Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study
Bible Study Session 15
Colossians 3:20-21 : Topic 7.2
Children and their Fathers in the Family

Study By
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Greek NT

20 Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα, τοῦτο γάρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ. 21 οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμώσιν.

La Biblia de las Américas

20 Hijos, sed obedientes a vuestros padres en todo, porque esto es agradable al Señor. 21 Padres, no exasperéis a vuestros hijos, para que no se desalienten.

NRSV

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

NLT

20 You children must always obey your parents, for this is what pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, don't aggravate your children. If you do, they will become discouraged and quit trying.

The Study of the Text:¹

Perhaps few other aspects of family life in both the modern world and the ancient world are as important as children in the home. And yet the diverse attitudes toward children heavily reflect cultural traditions more than national patterns in the modern world. When one begins analyzing the ancient literature a similar diversity of overwhelmingly ethnic driven diversity surfaces. The task of interpreting such biblical texts as this one becomes more complex. One must carefully sort through the cultural aspects of the biblical teaching in order to derive the timeless truths that can then be applied to a modern situation. Specific application to a specific modern cultural setting must carefully analyze what perspectives in the culture are at odds with the timeless truths of scripture. Additionally, application of these biblical principles will be shaped by issues, especially weaknesses, in the particular culture being addressed. What is the consequence of this? Only careful, reflective application, born of much prayer, merits serious consideration for a Christian view of children. Anything else should be immediately rejected as unworthy hot air.

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

This second unit of the family code emphasis, i.e., Haustafeln, treats the relationship of children to their fathers. With this topic we encounter the biblical perspective on family at the point of children² in the family. Given the many issues related to raising children in today's world this topic stands as an important issue.

Closely connected to the Col. 3:20-21 text is the parallel passage in Eph. 6:1-4:

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" — this is the first commandment with a promise: 3 "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

4 And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

6.1 Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ, τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν δίκαιον· 2 τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα, ἣτις ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελίᾳ, 3 ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται καὶ ἔσῃ μακροχρόνιος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

4 Καὶ οἱ πατέρες, μὴ παροργίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφετε αὐτὰ ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ κυρίου.

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²Six different Greek words in the New Testament are translated as child; they are derived from two basic root stems: τεκν- (tekn-), which produces τέκνον and τεκνίον, along with several verb expressions; and παι- (pai-) which produces παῖς, παιδίον, and παιδάριον. Additionally βρέφος shows up meaning child or infant.

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With the material in both these letters scheduled to be read before the Colossian believers, understanding the perspectives of both texts takes on special importance. Additionally other passages will contribute to our understanding, but these two texts address child / father relationships more directly than any others inside the New Testament.

Historical Context:

External History. In the thousand year history of the hand copying of the Greek text of the New Testament only one variation of wording in this text surfaces that the editors of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS, 4th rev. ed.) considered important enough to impact Bible translation. It centers on the verb ἐρεθίζετε in verse twenty one.³ Many copyists replaced ἐρεθίζετε with παροργίζετε in order to make it conform with Eph. 6:4.⁴ The two verbs are very close in meaning, although ἐρεθίζετε may suggest a rage by the father that produces bitterness in the child.⁵ Both internal and external factors slightly favor the reading of ἐρεθίζετε, that is adopted by the UBS editors.



The text apparatus of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th rev ed) lists on one additional place where variations in wording surface.⁶ But both of these variations do not change the meaning of the passage, and represent stylistic improvements to the original wording.



Consequently, the adopted Greek text can function with full confidence as the original wording of the passage when first written.

Internal History. For us to understand the thrust of this text clearly, a basic insight into ancient views of family life, particularly at the point of children in the family,⁷ is essential. Paul is addressing these admonitions

³{B} ἐρεθίζετε P⁴⁶vid κ B D² Ψ 0150 6 424 1739* 1852 1881 2200 Byz [K] Lect ita^{f, b, f, mon, o} vg eth slav Clement Basil Chrysostom Theodore^{lat} // παροργίζετε (see Eph 6.4) A C D* F G L 075 0198 33 81 104 256 263 365 436 459 1175 1241 1319 (1573 παροργίζετε) 1739^c 1912 1962 2127 2464^{vid} I 422 I 596 I 921 it^{d, (g)} vg^{mss} arm geo Ambrosiaster Pelagius” [Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (With Apparatus); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition (With Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000; 2009).]

⁴“In place of ἐρεθίζετε, supported by P⁴⁶vid κ B Ψ 1739* al, a wide spectrum of other witnesses has adopted παροργίζετε from the parallel passage in Eph 6:4 (where the verb is without variant reading).” [Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament* (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 558.]

⁵“In place of the second person plural imperative ἐρεθίζετε, supported by manuscripts of the Alexandrian text-type, a wide range of other witnesses has adopted the imperative παροργίζετε (make angry) from the parallel passage in Eph 6:4 (where the verb is read by all witnesses).

“If these two verbs are synonyms (so Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 69), the difference is more a matter of style in the source language than of difference in meaning. But to reflect the fact that different verbs are used here and in Eph 6:4, translators should use different terms in the receptor language also if possible. If there is a slight difference in the two verbs, the verb in the UBS4 text refers to ‘impotent rage which then culminates in bitterness and resignation’ (Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, p. 443).” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament : An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 420]

⁶Kolossar 3,20

* τω 0198. 81. 326. 629. 630. 945. 1241^s al (ar) vg^{mss}; Cl Ambst (these manuscripts insert the article in ἐν κυρίῳ so that the reading becomes ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ, but doesn’t change the meaning)

Kolossar 3,21

(E 6,4) παροργίζετε κ A C D F G L 075. 0198. 0278. 33. 81. 104. 365. 1175. 1241s. 1505 al; Ambst (ἐρεθίζετε is replaced with παροργίζετε)

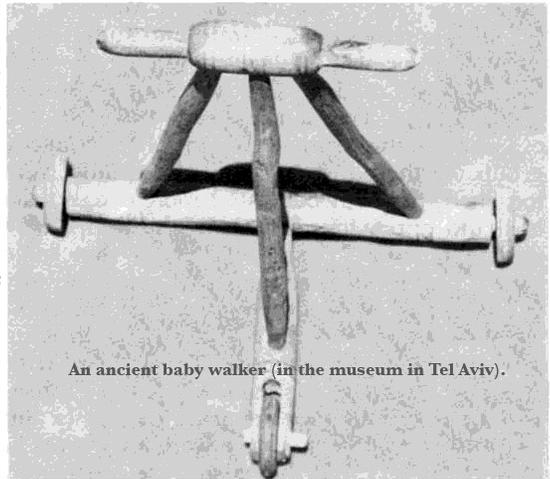
| txt P⁴⁶vid B D¹ Ψ 1739. 1881 M; Cl

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 529.]

⁷One should note that in the Hebrew Old Testament, no single Hebrew word corresponds to the English word ‘family.’ In modern western society we are accustomed to thinking in terms of the ‘nuclear family’ as basic to society. But in ancient Israel, this family unit was secondary to the clan or tribe. The situation is similar, although not exactly the same in the New Testament, as is noted by L. Hunt (“Family,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Rev. ed., [Eerdmans, 2002], 279):

A. In the OT No Hebrew term in the OT corresponds precisely to the modern Eng. “family.” The term most frequently translated “family” is *mišpāhâ*, which had a larger connotation than “family.” It meant “clan” and could be applied, e.g., to six hundred Danites from two villages (Jgs. 18:11). The term closest in meaning to Eng. “family” is Heb *bayit* (lit “house”). This may indicate a house either as a building or as the occupants of a building, i.e., a “household” or “family.” So we read of Abram’s trained men “born in his house” (Gen. 14:14; cf. 17:12f). In Ex. 1:21 the word refers to “families” that God gave to the Egyptian midwives and in 1 Ch. 4:21 to a family of linen workers. It could be used not only of those who lived under the same roof (Ex. 12:4) but also of

to a family situation that could come out of a Jewish heritage, and / or, just as easily, out of a Greco-Roman heritage as well. Given the presence of a few other ethnic groups in the Lycus Valley either native to the region or as immigrants from regions mainly east of the valley, a diversity of family traditions likely were found in the various house church groups. That both Jews and non-Jews were the component elements of the believing communities in the Lycus Valley is clear. Thus some awareness of the similarities and differences between these two primary cultural sources of families inside the Christian community can be helpful. Such limited data is available regarding the native groups to the Lycus Valley that it is impossible to speak to ways their family traditions would have differed from the Greco-Roman patterns. Since the Jewish patterns reflect an ancient Middle Eastern set of values in many ways, one can safely assume that the local customs would reflect some influence from typical Semitic customs in the region and also from the Greco-Roman patterns.



An ancient baby walker (in the museum in Tel Aviv).

Child in a Jewish home. In the Jewish tradition the child was valued significantly by both parents and by society in general.

When studying family life in the Bible one has to distinguish carefully the time period under consideration. In the early period of the patriarchs and before the monarchy, family was but one unit in the larger, more important unit of the clan. The clan was dominated by a single male. And the clan was a part of the larger tribe. From the monarchy to the beginning of the Christian era, the clan played less and less a dominating role, while the family unit gradually became the most important segment. By the beginning of Christianity Jewish family life was largely shaped by whether the family lived in Palestine or whether it lived outside Palestine in the Diaspora. Inside Palestine, more traditional Jewish values form the idea of family. But in Diaspora Judaism both Jewish values and the surrounding Greco-Roman values shaped the understanding of Jewish family life. Since the readers of Colossians included Diaspora Jewish families who were a part of the believing community in the Lycus Valley, one would give major attention to family understandings containing elements of both traditional Jewish perspective, particularly Hellenistic Judaism, and the Greco-Roman influences upon Jewish thinking.

The status of Jewish children is aptly described by Hazel W. Perkin:

The nature of patriarchal society made for unfortunate distinctions between male and female children. The position of a daughter, who could be sold into slavery or sold to be the concubine of a man and then possibly sold again (Ex 21:7–11), was certainly inferior to that of a son. In the patriarchal period, however, both a son and a daughter could be put to death for disobeying the head of the family. One's children could also be sacrificed in worship rituals (see Gn 22; Jgs 11). It is probable that infant sacrifice was practiced by nations neighboring Israel, including Canaan and Ammon.

The rights of children were improved considerably with the promulgation of the code of Mosaic law. A father was no longer permitted to put his child to death without referring the case to the elders (Dt 21:18–21). Both sons and daughters could be brought before such authorities and accused of being disobedient, gluttonous, or drunkards. If convicted, they were stoned to death. A father's absolute authority even extended to his married son and family if they were living under his roof. The law also prohibited children from being held responsible for the crimes of their parents (24:16). In King David's time a person convicted by the community had the right of appeal to the king (2 Sm 14:4–11).

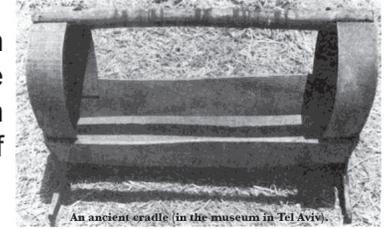
In Hebrew families both parents were held in high respect. Honor had to be given to both mother and father (Ex 20:12), and the law condemned offenses against either parent (21:17; Lv 20:9; Dt 21:18; 27:16). Respect due to the mother is a recurrent

much larger groups, e.g., the house of Israel (Isa. 5:7), which included the whole nation. Quite frequently the word is applied to a family of descendants, e.g., in 1 K. 12:19, where it refers to the "house of David." The Hebrew terms *·elep*, *zera*·, *·ābôt*, *·ahîm*, and *tôlēdôt* are translated literally by the AV, but more accurately in terms of the context by the RSV and NEB

B. In the NT The NT generally uses GK *oikos*, "house," as the equivalent of Heb *bayit* and renders it "family" in 1 Tim. 5:4, 8; Tit. 1:11 (and "household," or a family of descendants, in Lk. 1:27, 69). Gk *patriá* is the NT equivalent of Heb *mišpāhâ* and can mean: (1) the historical origin of a household, i.e., its patriarch rather than its present head (Lk. 2:4); (2) a tribe or even a nation (Acts 3:25, "the families of the earth"); (3) the whole human race in Eph. 3:14f ("every family ... on earth"), behind which is the universal fatherhood of God. The term *génos* refers to descendants of a common ancestor and can designate a family, race, or a nation. The RSV inserts "family" in Rom. 16:10f (AV, NEB, "household"), and in Mk. 3:21 renders *hoi par' autoú* as "his family" (AV "friends"; NEB "family").

theme in the Wisdom literature (Prv 19:26; 20:20; cf Eccles 3:1–16).⁸

By the beginning of the Christian era with the rise of the nuclear family in importance, the situation of children improved somewhat. But the long time held heritage of a patriarchal family structure continued many of the long term patterns from ancient Israel. Perkin continues with an interesting overview of daily family life in a Hebrew family:



Daily Life of the Hebrew Family.

In the everyday affairs of a Hebrew household, it was the father's responsibility to maintain the family fortune and to be the provider. He might work in the fields, most probably with crops of flax, barley, or wheat. Or he would work at a trade, possibly as a weaver, builder, potter, dyer, fuller, or a worker in copper or bronze. If he lived near the shore, he might be a fisherman.

The father was also responsible for the religious well-being of the family. It was his duty to take over his sons' education from the mother at an early age, teaching them the tenets of Hebrew religion (Ex 10:2; 12:26; Dt 4:9; 6:7). He also explained all the facets of the Law and the interwoven history of the nation.

The father was the disciplinarian of the family, with the rod being used to drive home the lessons taught (Prv 13:24; 22:15; 29:15, 17). Though children were loved and valued, they were not pampered (Eccles 30:9–12). In post exilic times education also took place within the precincts of the synagogue, and shortly before the time of Christ a general elementary education was introduced. It was also imperative that a father teach his sons a trade, normally his own, for a man without a trade either starved or became a thief. Another important paternal responsibility was to provide wives for male offspring in the household.

The mother was responsible for her sons' and daughters' early education (Prv 1:8; 6:20), teaching them religious songs and prayers as soon as they could talk. A father took over the education of his sons, but the mother continued with the daughters, training them to spin, weave, cook, clean, trim the lamps, and generally to become competent in all the household duties. (31:13–31).

With little furniture, keeping a house clean meant sweeping the floors to keep them free from dust and dirt. Cooking was at once simple and difficult. It was simple in that much of the food was cooked in the form of a soup or stew, or else made into a cake and cooked on a griddle. It was difficult in that the corn had to be ground by hand and bread was baked daily.

A mother was expected to take wool, card it, spin it, and often weave and make clothes for her family. In addition, she would help her husband in the fields at harvest time. Because many families had one or more olive trees, a few grape vines, and fig trees, the mother would also assist in picking the fruit. She would sometimes work at the press when the olives or grapes were being processed. Frequently the treading of grapes in the family vat would be done together by husband and wife. Drawing water from the well was considered a menial task and was generally the wife's responsibility, although sometimes it was assigned to the children (Gn 24:15, 16).

As in all societies, there was a time when children laughed and played together (Zec 8:5; Mt 11:16), although childhood and adolescence were not recognized as specific stages of development. Children were considered as sucklings if under three, but were regarded as boys or girls when they were able to take care of themselves. A small child sat on his mother's lap and was played with (Is 66:12). There is no evidence of organized sports for children. Toys including whistles, rattles, dolls, and miniature cooking utensils have been excavated at Palestinian sites.

As soon as a boy was old enough, he took his place in the family and accepted his appointed task. Among other things, children were expected to gather fuel (Jer 7:18). Young boys and girls tended the flocks. The sheep had to be protected from marauding wild beasts, guarded against their own folly when they wandered near crevices, steered toward good pasture and water, and carried home when sick or injured (Gn 29:6; Ex 2:16). The care of cattle was also the responsibility of children (1 Sm 16:11). Of necessity, boys were trained in the various arts of war.

Children sometimes joined their fathers in the fields, and their presence was always welcome. From earliest times, boys in particular would watch their fathers until they too picked up a tool or implement to try their skill; girls watched and learned from their mothers. Young children frequently listened to the talk of the elders at the city gates or in the villages. A visit to a sanctuary at festival time was a family affair, furnishing an ideal learning experience. As a child, Jesus accompanied his parents Mary and Joseph to the temple in Jerusalem (Lk 2:42–47).

Young girls were surprisingly free to go about their appointed tasks. They were not secluded or veiled, and could visit unhindered with friends and neighbors (Gn 34:1). They were also able to converse with men without embarrassment (24:15–25; 29:11, 12; 1 Sm 9:11–13).

Meal times were strictly family times. It is doubtful whether a meal comparable to a breakfast was eaten, and a farmer would probably have a light lunch in the fields. The main meal of the day was prepared by the mother, and would be eaten in the early evening. Although the variety of food available was limited, its preparation was time-consuming.

Feast times were periods of great religious significance, and also the days when family members participated in the

⁸Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 767-73. s.v., "Family Life and Relations," by Hazel W. Perkin.

symbolic rituals of their faith. Among the Israelites several kinds of food were fundamental to their religious ritual. Family unity and the national religion were molded together by special meals in the home.

Light played an important part in the daily habits of the people in antiquity. Although oil lamps were readily available in later periods, it was customary to rise with the sun and go to bed relatively soon after dark. The wife would probably be up before sunrise and might continue her labor after dark.

By NT times, for those who followed the Greek and Roman style, life became more elegant. Despite that, the status of many family members did not change substantially. Wealthier families had more slaves, and the children were more likely to have formal education, sometimes spending less effort on family chores. Even in Roman times, however, the father still had a legal right to accept or reject his child.

The status of the woman had definitely improved by the NT period. A Roman matron was highly respected, and exerted a strong influence over her husband. She was not sequestered in a particular section of the house, as a Greek woman was, but managed and supervised tasks in any part of her home. She helped her husband in business, had her own place in theaters, games, and religious festivals, and sometimes managed her own property. Palestinian women began to enjoy a new status and dignity as the result of Jesus' attitude toward women and its influence on the early Christian church.⁹

Many, if not most, of the basic patterns found among first century Jews living in Palestine would have existed among Diaspora Jews. The influence of the Hellenistic culture surrounding them outside Palestine would have influenced some of the clearly Semitic patterns found in Palestine. But this would have varied from family to family depending on the level of openness to the non-Jewish influences. Both the New Testament and contemporary Jewish sources clearly indicate that the degree of openness to Hellenism among Diaspora Jews ranged across the full spectrum from complete assimilation into a Greco-Roman lifestyle to a rigid adherence to the strict Jewish traditions practiced by the very conservative Jews in Palestine.

The impact of the Greco-Roman culture could be substantial, if it were fully adopted.



Child in a Greco-Roman home. The situation in Greco-Roman society is summarized well by A. Oepke:

1. *Original Positive Estimation.* Children, especially sons, are valued highly in early antiquity because they enhance the strength of a family and the state. Their birth is greeted with feasting. Rome takes a similar view, but with little personal feeling.

2. *Decline and Countermeasures from the Classical Period.* Cultic and genetic factors lie behind the exposure of children, but economic considerations are also important. Depopulation comes with abortions and the prevention of pregnancies. Children are regarded as unimportant. Laws are passed favoring larger families but with no great success. Philosophers tend to shun marriage, poetry magnifies free love, and the novel depicts adultery, jealousy, procuring, and pederasty. Another trend is toward continence even in marriage.

3. *The Rediscovery of the Child in Hellenism.* Parental love continues, provision and prayer are made for children, and their loss is bewailed. Poetry revives ancient motifs, e.g., the divine child of the golden age (Vergil). Drama makes some use of children (in boyish pranks), and art gives better depictions of children. But taste is sentimental and perverse; the rich often amuse themselves with slave children. On the other hand, there is no bar to children becoming emperors.

4. *Ethico-Religious Evaluation.* Antiquity rarely speaks of the innocence of children. The child has no sexual complications, has little comprehension of joy or suffering, and cannot deceive (though mainly because of intellectual immaturity). The idea of the wonder child is strong in Egypt. Ideas of universal imperfection and guilt also occur. Thus Orphism detects a nexus of evil that initiatory rites must overcome. The concept of the body as a prison moves in the same direction. But these thoughts are marginal. The main feature of the child is immaturity or childishness. The child lives for the moment and simply plays at things. Education has the task of making something out of this raw material, and with normal gifts and the right techniques can succeed at the task, but with little love for the child or regard for its developing personality.

5. *The Child in the Cultus.*

a. Children have a part in the cultus from birth. They are placed under divine protection, are present at cultic rites, and may be lifted up to kiss the household gods.

⁹Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 772-73.

b. The children of priests and other privileged groups serve the sacrifices. Temple schools exist. Conscious or unconscious manticism is ascribed to children. Children engage in intercessory processions. They also perform certain cultic actions. Thus a boy at the games cuts the victors' leaves from the sacred olive. Boys and girls assist the vestal virgins. The vestal virgins themselves are appointed as small girls. To guarantee chastity, many Greek cults entrust priestly functions solely to children.

c. Children have a place in the mysteries too. They join in the processions of Eleusis. Their initiation is customary. They officiate in the mystery ritual.¹⁰



Consequently the status of children in Greco-Roman society wasn't as good as it was in Jewish society. But children certainly did not occupy primary attention in the way they tend to do in modern western society.

Literary Aspects:

The literary aspects here again play an important role in the interpretive process.

Literary Form. Col. 3:20-21 comes in the body proper of an ancient letter. This strongly suggests the 'occasional' nature of the material. That is, the distinctive form of the text is occasioned by the circumstances present in the initially targeted readers of the letter. This helps to explain the differences between the two parallel texts of Col. 3:20-21 and Eph. 6:1-4. Even though a probably literary dependency between these two texts is present, it was not a matter of rote copying one source into the other. Adaptation to the distinct needs of the readers prompts the changes that are present.

Col. 3:20-21 comes in the Paraenesis section of 3:1-4:6, and thus stands as a part of the practical admonitions given by the apostle for Christian living. More precisely 3:20-21 comes as the second unit of the Haustafeln material in 3:18-4:1, narrowing the focus even more to principles of Christian living within family relationships. The use of the common formula of roughly similar to the surrounding discussion of family relationships points to an awareness of the popularity of these issues in society generally, and of the apostle's concern to address issues that were frequently discussed by folks generally. Nothing in the text or the letter points to specific problems within the families of the believing community in the Lycus Valley. But the very distinctive Christian perspective on the relationships of children to their fathers certainly merits this discussion in order to define how believing families were to function in contrast to the prevailing attitudes of non-Christian families in the Lycus Valley.

Literary Setting. As the outline to the right illustrates the setting is in the letter body at the first level. Secondly, it is a part of the epistolary paraenesis in 3:1-4:6. Finally, it is the second unit of the Haustafeln material in 3:18-4:1. This is important for proper understanding of these admonitions.

Literary Structure. The block diagram can visually illustrate the internal relationships of the ideas being presented.

^{3.20} Children,
44 **be subject to your parents,**
in everything,
for
45 **this is pleasing**
to the Lord.
^{3.21} Fathers,
46 **do not provoke your children,**
lest they loose heart.

¹⁰Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 759-63.

Outline of Colossians

Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2

Superscriptio: 1:1

Adscriptio: 1:2a

Salutatio: 1:2b

Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

Body

Intercession: 1:9-12

Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20

Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29

Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15

Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

Christian Legalism: 2:20-23

Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4

Christian Behavior: 3:5-11

Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1

Husband/Wife: 3:18-19

Father/Children: 3:20-21

Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9

Greetings: 4:10-17

Closing: 4:18

Letter Validation: 4:18a

Prayer Request: 4:18b

Benedictio: 4:19c

By way of the vocative direct address forms, ‘Children,’ and ‘Fathers,’ the twofold structure of the text is made clear. Statements 44 and 45 address children and their responsibility to their parents. Then statement 46 reverses the perspective and addresses the father’s responsibility to his children. The admonitions are simple and direct without much expansion through secondary phrases, words etc. Statement 44 is supported by the causal declaration in statement 45, thus providing a religious tone to the admonition given to children.

Exegesis of the Text:

The above twofold division of the text becomes the basis of the exegesis of the passage.

Children’s responsibility to parents, V. 20.

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.”

Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα, τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ.

In order to gain a fuller picture of Paul’s teaching that would also be read in the Lycus Valley, one should remember the Ephesian parallel here in 6:1-3:

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

2 “Honor your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise: 3 “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

6.1 Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ, τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν δίκαιον· 2 τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα, ἣτις ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελίᾳ, 3 ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται καὶ ἔσῃ μακροχρόνιος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

The major difference in the Ephesian text is the insertion of the Old Testament Decalogue statement from Exodus 20:12 in verses two and three. Additionally, τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν δίκαιον replaces τοῦτο γάρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ in Colossians. The reason expression τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν δίκαιον more naturally introduces the Decalogue statement from Exodus 20:12.

Later Christianity in the second century continued a lot of these emphases, but often with significant variations:

Didache 4:9. You shall not withhold your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth you shall teach them the fear of God.¹¹

Οὐκ ἄρεῖς τὴν χεῖρα σου ἀπὸ τοῦ υἱοῦ σου ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς θυγατρὸς σου, ἀλλὰ ἀπὸ νεότητος διδάξεις τὸν φόβον τοῦ θεοῦ.

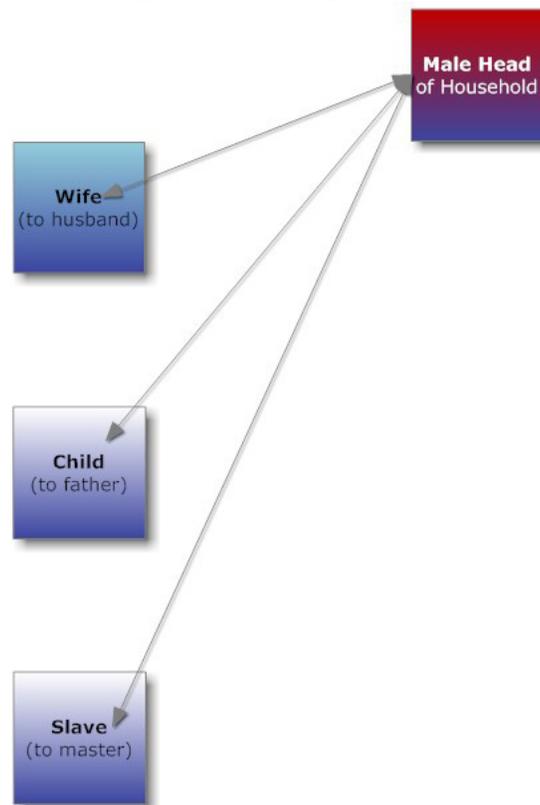
Epistle of Barnabas 19:5. You shall love your neighbor more than your own life. *You shall not abort a child nor, again, commit infanticide. You must not withhold your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth you shall teach them the fear of God.*¹²

οὐ μὴ διψυχῆσης, πότερον ἔσαι ἢ οὐ. οὐ μὴ λάβῃς ἐπὶ ματάῳ τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου. ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὑπὲρ τὴν ψυχὴν σου. **οὐ φονεύσεις τέκνον ἐν φθορᾷ, οὐδὲ πάλιν γεννηθὲν ἀποκτενεῖς. οὐ μὴ ἄρης τὴν χεῖρά σου ἀπὸ τοῦ υἱοῦ σου ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς θυγατρὸς σου, ἀλλὰ ἀπὸ νεότητος διδάξεις φόβον θεοῦ.**

¹¹Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 257. The composite text of the Didache seems to have come together in the beginning decades of the second century. The Greek text citations are taken from Kirsopp Lake, *Apostolic Fathers* in the Loeb Classical Library as found at CCEL online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lake/fathers2.html>.

¹²Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 321. This anonymous writer, who had no connection to Barnabas in the NT, appears to have produced this letter sometime prior to the rebuilding of Jerusalem by Emperor Hadrian as a Roman city after the Jewish revolt of 132-135 AD.

Ancient Family: Haustafeln Ephesians, Colossians, First Peter



First Clement 21:8. Let our children receive the instruction which is in Christ: let them learn how strong humility is before God, what pure love is able to accomplish before God, how the fear of him is good and great and saves all those who live in it in holiness with a pure mind.¹³

τὰ τέκνα ἡμῶν τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ παιδείας μεταλαμβάνετωσαν· μαθέτωσαν, τί ταπεινοφροσύνη παρὰ θεῶ ἰσχύει, τί ἀγάπη ἀγνή παρὰ θεῶ δύναται, πῶς ὁ φόβος αὐτοῦ καλὸς καὶ μέγας καὶ σώζων πάντας τοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ ὁσίως ἀναστρεφόμενους ἐν καθαρᾷ.

Polycarp to the Philippians 4:2. Then instruct your wives to continue in the faith delivered to them and in love and purity, cherishing their own husbands in all fidelity and loving all others equally in all chastity, **and to instruct the children with instruction that leads to the fear of God.**¹⁴

ἔπειτα καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ἡμῶν ἐν τῇ δοθείσῃ αὐταῖς πίστει καὶ ἀγάπῃ καὶ ἀγνεΐᾳ στεργούσας τοὺς ἑαυτῶν ἄνδρας ἐν πάσῃ ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγαπῶσας πάντας ἐξ ἴσου ἐν πάσῃ ἐγκρατεΐᾳ, **καὶ τὰ τέκνα παιδεύειν τῆν παιδείαν τοῦ φόβου τοῦ θεοῦ**

What one quickly notices in these instructions given in the first half of the second century is the focus on the responsibility of the father to his children. And that religious education, along with stern discipline, are the two central emphases of the father's responsibilities to his children.

The Jewish heritage of religious instruction of children found a place in first century Christianity and continued to be emphasized in subsequent centuries of Christian tradition.¹⁵ In the pages of the New Testament one notices the participation of children in the religious life of the family and the believing community, continuing the Jewish heritage of Christianity.¹⁶

¹³Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 55. Very likely written by Clement of Rome to the Corinthians about 95-97 AD.

¹⁴Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 211. Polycarp, spiritual leader at Smyrna in Asia, until the middle of the second century most likely wrote this letter to the Philippians toward the middle of the second century.

¹⁵In terms of the Roman Empire era, diminished emphasis on children and their value in society took place prior to the beginning of the Christian era, but began receiving renewed emphasis prior to the start of the Christian era and reached a peak during the second century AD. Note Albrecht Oepke remarks:

Though not without mistakes, provision is made for the welfare of children, Plut. Lib. Educ., 7 (II, 4a ff.); 13 (II, 9a ff.), prayer is made lest they be lost (M. Ant., IX, 40, 9), their loss is bewailed (CIL, III, 686, 1 f.), hope is held out of a blessed hereafter (ibid., 686, 17-20; the children's paradise of Octavia Paulina),¹⁶ and consolation is thus found (Plut. Consolatio ad Uxorem, II, 608-612). Hellenism formally rediscovered the child. The promotion of the diminished rising generation only reached its climax from the 2nd cent. A.D. (CIL, V, 5262: Pliny the Younger, Ep., 7, 18; CIL, X, 6228; II, 1174; VIII, 1641; Ps.-Aurelius Victor Epitome De Caesaribus, 12, 4; Dio C., 68, 5, 4; Script. Hist. Aug., I Hadrian, 7, 8: ibid., III Antoninus Plus, 8, 1; ibid., IV Marcus Antoninus, 7, 8; ibid., XVIII, Alexander Severus, 57, 7; CIL, XI, 1147; IX, 1455). Poetry and art now begin (in part again) to acquire a closer relation to the child. V 5, p 641 Poetry had had this before, Hom. Il., 6, 404, 466 ff.; 482 ff.;¹⁷ 22, 484 ff.; 9, 485 ff.; 16, 7ff., 260 ff.; Od., 15, 450 ff.; 19, 399 ff. In Vergil's Ecl., 4 there are echoes of ancient mythical motifs of the divine child of the golden age, but with such new feeling that the Church could see here a prophecy of Christ and number the poet with the prophets.¹⁸ The use of the child in drama was subject to technical limitations,¹⁹ but we find boyish pranks in comedy, Aristoph. Eq., 417-426; Vesp., 248-257; Nu., 877-881; cf. Herond Mim., 3. Plastic art is the last to make the link, and even then only in a limited way. The art of antiquity depicts the child as a small adult.²⁰ Kephisodotus and, in spite of progress, even Praxiteles create puppets rather than children.²¹ Ancient vase painting wrestles hopelessly with the problem of corotrophos.²² In Hellenism for the first time we find exquisite figures, the child with the fox, Boethos' goose-slayer, Hermes, Heracles or Solon as a boy.²³ The classic boy with the thorn²⁴ is travestied as a street arab.²⁵ The putti motif may be seen in the Nile swarming with 16 children.²⁶ We find a host of cupids standing, sitting or hovering, of children on horses, with torches, lyres, or horns of plenty.²⁷ On frescoes children imitate the doings of adults with ornate gravity.²⁸ The Dionysus child, Isis with Horus, Harpocrates alone, and the birth of Mithra²⁹ show art and religion competing for the child, and prepare the way for Christian art. But the taste is sentimental and perverse. The rich surround themselves with deliciae. These slave children amuse the carousing guests with impertinences,³⁰ smooth the churned up floor of the arena, and are even torn to pieces by beasts, Mart., II, 75; V, 31; Juv., IV, 122; Dio C., 72, 13. On the other hand, children can become emperors.³¹

[Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 5:640-41.]

¹⁶From what has been said, it is hardly surprising to find that children are generally numbered with the community. They take part in crucial events in the life of the community (Ac. 21:5), and at least when they reach years of discretion they are present at the services (Ac. 20:9, 12; Col. 3:20; Eph. 6:1-3). A later age pays particular regard to the faith and conduct of the children of leaders in the community (1 Tm. 3:4; 5:4; Tt. 1:6). In the light of ancient and oriental parallels it is even probable that at gatherings for worship infants would be present in their mothers' arms." [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 5:650.]

Children: τὰ τέκνα. Who is Paul addressing here? The primary thrust is to children still living at home under the responsibility of their parents, as Peter O'Brien observes¹⁷:

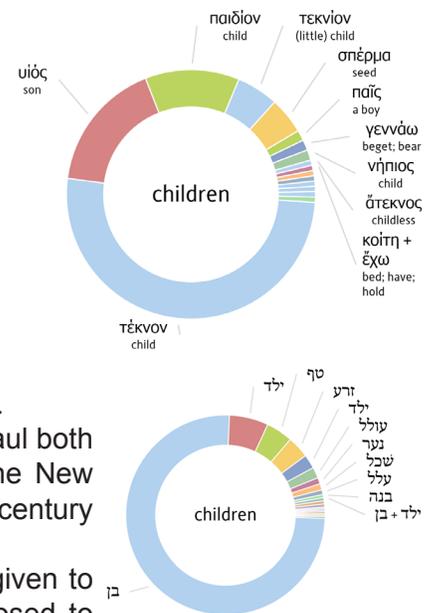
First, children are enjoined to obey their parents in all things, τὰ τέκνα (“children,” note again the nominative case with the definite article is used for the vocative, see above 23) probably refers to children who are growing up and are still subject to their parents (cf. Eph 6:4, “bring them up”) rather than those who have already grown up (though evidence for this latter interpretation is not lacking, note Lohse, 158). They are addressed as responsible persons within the congregation (Schweizer, 156; cf. Oepke, *TDNT* 5, 650) and this is noteworthy.

In the Jewish home this would cover males under thirty years of age and females who had not yet been married off by their father. In generally the same would be true in the Greco-Roman families inside the church, although the male age span might vary somewhat from the Jewish. It doesn't exclude older children who may have married and be living in their own home. But the primary focus seems to be on those still living at home.

As the chart on the right illustrates, references to children in the New Testament are made in a wide variety of ways, using some eleven different expressions (147 times).¹⁸ This compares to the Hebrew Bible's use of eleven different expressions for children (394 times). Daily life for children varied according to whether the child grew up in a rural or urban family, but some general patterns were common to all.¹⁹ Children were expected to be contributing members of the family and were assigned work responsibilities as soon as they were old enough to do them. Respect and obedience to their parents was a given. Failure to adhere could result in severe punishment, depending on the specific culture they were being raised in. One should note that the limits on the fathers advocated by Paul severely limited the fathers in punishing the disobedience of their children.

What is rather interesting is that children are addressed directly by Paul both here and in Ephesians. This focus stands unique to both the rest of the New Testament and also to later teaching by the church fathers from the second century onward.

Be subject: ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα. The admonition given to the children is different from that given to the wife: ὑπακούετε, as opposed to ὑποτάσσεσθε with the wife. The same verb ὑπακούετε will next be used regarding



¹⁷Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 224.

¹⁸The specific Greek words for 'child' include παῖς, † παιδίον, † παιδάριον, τέκνον, † τεκνίον, † βρέφος* [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 5:636.]

¹⁹“As in all societies, there was a time when children laughed and played together (Zec 8:5; Mt 11:16), although childhood and adolescence were not recognized as specific stages of development. Children were considered as sucklings if under three, but were regarded as boys or girls when they were able to take care of themselves. A small child sat on his mother's lap and was played with (Is 66:12). There is no evidence of organized sports for children. Toys including whistles, rattles, dolls, and miniature cooking utensils have been excavated at Palestinian sites.

“As soon as a boy was old enough, he took his place in the family and accepted his appointed task. Among other things, children were expected to gather fuel (Jer 7:18). Young boys and girls tended the flocks. The sheep had to be protected from marauding wild beasts, guarded against their own folly when they wandered near crevices, steered toward good pasture and water, and carried home when sick or injured (Gn 29:6; Ex 2:16). The care of cattle was also the responsibility of children (1 Sm 16:11). Of necessity, boys were trained in the various arts of war.

“Children sometimes joined their fathers in the fields, and their presence was always welcome. From earliest times, boys in particular would watch their fathers until they too picked up a tool or implement to try their skill; girls watched and learned from their mothers. Young children frequently listened to the talk of the elders at the city gates or in the villages. A visit to a sanctuary at festival time was a family affair, furnishing an ideal learning experience. As a child, Jesus accompanied his parents Mary and Joseph to the temple in Jerusalem (Lk 2:42–47).

“Young girls were surprisingly free to go about their appointed tasks. They were not secluded or veiled, and could visit unhindered with friends and neighbors (Gn 34:1). They were also able to converse with men without embarrassment (24:15–25; 29:11, 12; 1 Sm 9:11–13).”

[Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 772.]

slaves and thus matches that given to the children. This same pattern also holds true in the parallel in Eph. 6:1, 5.²⁰

Note the summary by Peter O'Brien (WBC, *ibid.*):

The injunction to children, like that to slaves, is put rather more strongly than the one to wives. While the latter was expressed in the middle voice (ὑποτάσσομαι, "be subordinate"), suggesting voluntary submission, the admonitions to children and slaves are in the active imperative denoting absolute obedience (cf Hinson, *RevExp* 70 [1973] 499, 500). The absoluteness of the command is strengthened by the phrase "in all things" (κατὰ πάντα, cf. v 22). Also the verb ὑπακούω (to "obey") is employed rather than ὑποτάσσομαι ("be subordinate") which may only sometimes imply obedience. The former term in Paul had special reference to one's submission to Christ, the gospel and the apostolic teaching (Rom 6:17, 10:16; Phil 2:12; 2 Thess 1:8, 3:14; cf Matt 8:27; Mark 1:27; 4:41; Luke 8:25; Acts 6:7; Heb 5:9; 11:8; cf ὑπακοή, "obedience," Rom 1:5; 5:19; 6:16; 15:18; 16:19, 26; 2 Cor 10:5, 6). The obedience of Christian children to their parents is all of a piece with their submission to Christ as the following words make plain. The unequivocal nature of this admonition to children is reminiscent of the OT. In the Decalog they are commanded to honor their parents and the promise of long life is attached (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; note how this is taken up at Eph 6:1-3). The expanded code of Exodus (21:15) ordered the death penalty for any child striking father or mother. In Judaism and in early Christianity the care of aged parents was regarded as a religious duty (1 Tim 5:4), their neglect, behavior worse than that of pagans (5:8; cf Hinson, *RevExp* 70 [1973] 500). But in antiquity generally the emphasis on children's duties toward their parents was widespread, although in non-Christian parallels the demand was for honor rather than obedience (cf Crouch, *Origin*, 114, for examples).

Helpful to notice is that although the direct address (cf. V. 21) is to the fathers, the demand for obedience is to parents, i.e., τοῖς γονεῦσιν. Both mother and father are to be obeyed, not just the father. This is especially consistent with the Old Testament inclusion of both mother and father as commanding obedience from children. In societies across the Roman empire, respect and obedience to both parents was normal.²¹

In that society, the Christian duty of children is simply to do what their parents instruct them. This obedience is not partial or when convenient. Instead it is to be consistent and pervasive, as κατὰ πάντα stresses. The emphasis upon obedience rather than honor sets apart the Christian emphasis. This should not be taken to mean that children don't need to honor their parents. Instead, the honoring of parents is pragmatic. Genuine honoring comes not through meaningless rituals and empty words of praise, but by consistent obedience to their words. Jesus took to task both the Pharisees and the Jewish people of His day with empty expressions of honoring parents (cf. Mk. 7:9-13):

He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
7 in vain do they worship me,

^{20c}The legal status of children under Roman law was still more disadvantaged. Technically speaking, they were the property of the father; so, for example, the formalities for adoption were essentially the same as for the conveyance of property (OCD s.v. "patria potestas").²¹ The child under age in fact was no better off than a slave (a point Paul had been able to put to good effect in Gal. 4:1-7); note how closely parallel are the instructions of 3:20 and 3:22 (cf. the advice of Sir. 30:1 and 42:5). This situation is presumably reflected in 3:21, where the responsibility for the child is thought of as exclusively the father's. For although the mother was the main influence over her children till they were seven (cf. pseudo-Phocylides 208), the father was primarily responsible thereafter for the boys at least. In view of all this it is worth noting that children who were presumably still minors (cf. Eph. 6:4) are directly addressed; evidently they are thought of as both present in the Christian meeting where the letter would be read out and as responsible agents despite their youth (Schweizer, *Colossians* 223; Gnllka, *Kolossierbrief* 220). Responsibility in Christian relationships is not to be determined by legal standing." [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 249-50.]

^{21c}"Obedience²² is called for in respect of both parents; those now primarily under their father's discipline should continue to respect their mother also. This is not an exclusively Jewish feature, since honoring parents was widely recognized as a virtue (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.26.1-4; Plato, *Republic* 4.425b; Stobaeus, *Anthology* 3.1.80; 4.25.53 [in A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 91-93];²³ Epictetus 2.10.7; 3.7.26; see further Lincoln, *Ephesians* 401; Wolter 201). But it was given particular prominence within Jewish tradition, as enshrined in the fifth commandment (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) and repeatedly emphasized in Jewish writings of the period (e.g., Sir. 3:1-16; 7:27-28; Tob. 4:3-4; Aristas 228; Jubilees 7:20; Philo, *De posteritate Caini* 181; *De ebrietate* 17). A stubborn and disobedient son, indeed, was liable to death by stoning (Lev. 20:9; Deut. 21:18-21; Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 2.232; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.206). Κατὰ πάντα ('in everything') also reflects the customary respect in the ancient world for the wisdom of age. The assumption is that parents, acting as parents, will deal wisely and kindly with their children (cf. Matt. 7:9-11/Luke 11:11-13). This is the expected norm of good family and social relationships (so also Mark 7:10 par.; 10:19 pars.; cf. Rom. 1:30 and 2 Tim. 3:2). The counsel here, of course, does not envisage situations where the norm is breached by the parents or where a higher loyalty might need to be invoked (as in Luke 14:26)." [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 250.]

teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9 Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God) — 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

Paul in his chosen terminology underscores the Decalogue language as being pragmatic and functional. Such respect must never be reduced to ritual actions of verbal expression of honor at birthdays, funerals etc. This was commonly done not only by Jews, but all across the cultures of the Roman empire. Christian practice demands genuineness and concrete expression in an continuing manner.

This phrase κατὰ πάντα compares to ἐν κυρίῳ in Eph. 6:1, which positions the child’s obedience to parents in the context of commitment to Christ. This idea is expanded by the reason statement that follows in verse one (cf. below).

The reason why: τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ. The foundation for children’s obedience to parents is given in the second core declaration: “for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.” A similar but still slightly different reason is given in Eph. 6:1: “for this is right” (τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστιν δίκαιον). Also the Ephesian addition of the Decalogue commandment re-enforces and defines the responsibility from the Hebrew perspective.²² O’Brien’s (WBC, *ibid.*) notes are helpful:

The motivation (γάρ, “for”) given is that (lit.) “this is pleasing in the Lord.” Although εὐάρεστον (“pleasing,” “acceptable”) was used widely outside the Bible (cf. Foerster, *TDNT* 1, 456, BAG, 318, and Merk, *Handeln*, 216) particularly on inscriptions (Priene, 114, 115, and Nisyros) originally to designate that which people considered proper (Dibelius-Greeven, 46, considered it points “clearly to an established social value”), in the NT it describes almost exclusively that conduct which is acceptable to God (at Tit 2:9 εὐάρεστος describes that which is acceptable to men). For Paul the term can designate the goal and motivation of the Christian’s whole life (Rom 12:1, 2; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:10; Phil 4:18; cf. Col 1:10 where the similar term ἀρεσκεία is used of pleasing the Lord in all respects as the apostle’s goal for the Colossians). Normally the expression “acceptable,” or “pleasing” would be followed by the dative case “to the Lord” (τῷ κυρίῳ; cf. Turner, *Syntax*, 263; manuscript 81 al Clement of Alexandria [cf Eph 5:10] have this reading; the RSV renders it as “this pleases the Lord”) but here the additional phrase is

²²**Eph. 6:2-3.** 2 τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα, ἣτις ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελίᾳ, 3 ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται καὶ ἔσῃ μακροχρόνιος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

2 “Honor your father and mother” -- **this is the first commandment with a promise** -- 3 “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

As the “-” in the NRSV indicate, Paul inserts a comment in the middle of his citation of the Decalogue commandment: **this is the first commandment with a promise**. This was expressing a common Jewish observation of the ten commandments that formed the foundation of the legal code for the Israelites.

Exodus 20:12. τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα, ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται, καὶ ἵνα μακροχρόνιος γένη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τῆς ἀγαθῆς, ἧς κύριος ὁ θεός σου δίδωσίν σοι. † (LXX)

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

כַּבֵּד אֶת־אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכֶנָּךְ יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ: 12
[*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* : SESB Version., electronic ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003), Ex 20:12.]

Deuteronomy 5:16. τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα σου, ὃν τρόπον ἐνετείλατό σοι κύριος ὁ θεός σου, ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται, καὶ ἵνα μακροχρόνιος γένη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ἧς κύριος ὁ θεός σου δίδωσίν σοι. (LXX)

Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

כַּבֵּד אֶת־אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכֶנָּךְ וְיֵטֵב לָךְ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ: 16
[*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* : *With Westminster Hebrew Morphology.*, electronic ed. (Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary, 1996), Dt 5:16.]

“These words [Ex. 20:12] must be read in the light of such texts as Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9; and Deut 21:18–21; 27:16. Disrespect for one’s parents was a serious offense in the covenant community, and rebellion against them was punishable by death, precisely because such disrespect and rebellion constituted disobedience of Yahweh. The addition to the fifth commandment thus has a double meaning: while appropriate honor accorded father and mother could contribute for a number of reasons to the length of one’s days in Yahweh’s promised land, a lack of respect for them could just as certainly mean an abrupt end to those days.” [John I. Durham, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary : Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 292.]

“in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ).²³

Thus more than a social reason for children’s obedience is given. Rather, a religious motivation is placed on the table underscoring that the final obligation and accountability is to God.

Father’s responsibility to children, V. 21:

“Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.”

οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμῶσιν.

Here the father comes under obligation to treat his children in a Christian manner. The focus is on the father’s disciplining of his children.

Again note a comparison with the Ephesians parallel in 6:4, which employs largely different terminology:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Καὶ οἱ πατέρες, μὴ παροργίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφετε αὐτὰ ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ κυρίου.

Here more differences than commonalities are present. Both a warning against abusive disciplining of children and a positive admonition to Christian parenting principles are found. But the essential thrust between the two texts is basically the same: fathers have a God ordained responsibility to treat their children properly and to provide the best possible upbringing for them.

Fathers: οἱ πατέρες. Here just the fathers are addressed, largely because of the male dominating nature of the ancient household. He would have possessed ultimate authority over the children, and thus he stands under ultimate accountability to God for how he treats his children.

In the *Haustafeln* section, he is addressed as husband (3:19, οἱ ἄνδρες), father (3:21, οἱ πατέρες) and as master (4:1, οἱ κύριοι). All of these terms reflect the ultimate authority possessed by the male head of the household. But in each of these roles his use of the authority that his culture gave him is severely restricted by Christian non-power principles of love and just treatment of the members of his household. The positive, edifying thrust of Christian relationships replace the raw expression of power that he could exercise from the surrounding culture.

Do not provoke: μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν. Once again O’Brien’s comments are helpful:

If children are exhorted to render obedience to their parents, then the latter, especially fathers, are enjoined not to irritate or provoke their children lest they lose heart and become timid. (Bengel 2, 470, comments: “Despondency is the bane of youth.”) While the children have to obey both parents (γονεῦσιν, v 20), fathers have a special responsibility toward them. Even if it is conceded that οἱ πατέρες here denotes “parents” (as in Heb 11:23, where it is stated that Moses was hidden “for three months by his parents,” ὑπὸ τῶν πατέρων αὐτοῦ; cf BAG, 635), certainly it is the fathers who are primarily in view. In contemporary society the Roman *patria potestas*, i.e. the authority and power of the head of the house, gave the father unlimited power over his children and this law exercised a considerable degree of influence in the Hellenistic culture generally (cf Schrenk, *TDNT* 5, 950, 951). In Hellenistic Judaism severe punishment could be meted out for disobedient children (Philo’s demand for severity on the part of parents has been attributed to this influence: PhiloHyp 7.2; Philo²⁴. *Spec. Leg* 2.232; cf Josephus, *Ap* 2.206, 217; *Ant*²⁵ 4.264, and note Crouch, *Origin*, 114–116). This is not to suggest, however, that the Roman period evidences no examples of tender love in the home (Moule, 129, claims it “would be unjust to paganism ... to describe it only in lurid terms of infanticide and broken homes ... And Judaism, even more obviously, was able to show splendid examples of such happiness”). But for all that the relationship ἐν κυρίῳ (“in the Lord”) was new, and in this household table fathers are told nothing about their power of disposal over their children; instead their duties are spelled out (cf Schrage, *NTS* 21 [1974–75] 15) — they are not to provoke or irritate them. ἐρεθίζω, used at 2 Corinthians 9:2 in a good

²³The variations in the ancient copies of the Greek text here with “in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ) prompt O’Brien to make the following observations:

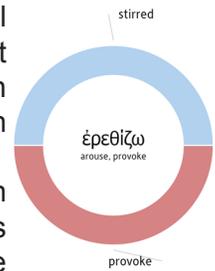
This has been regarded as: (a) an unnecessary addition; (b) equivalent to a sort of conditional clause (so tentatively Moule, 130, referring to 1 Cor 7:39; Phil 2:19) meaning “provided that the children’s obedience is ἐν Κυρίῳ, on a truly Christian level of motive”; (c) signifying “as judged by a Christian standard” (Lightfoot, 225); or, more likely, (d) obedience to parents is fit and proper in that sphere in which the Christian now lives, that is, in the new fellowship of those who own Christ as Lord (on this showing the parallel with v 18 is maintained; there may be, as some commentators suggest, a conscious qualifying of a traditional maxim by this addition: so Weidinger, *Haustafeln*, 51, Lohse, 159, Merk, *Handeln*, 217, and Martin, NCB, 120). Since Paul has a Christian family in view (ἐν κυρίῳ), he does not envisage the situation where parental orders might be contrary to the law of Christ. Clearly at that point the law of Christ must take precedence and children would have to obey God rather than men (cf Acts 5:29).

²⁴Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus*

²⁵Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

sense of an encouraging example (the only other NT instance, see BAG, 308), here signifies to “irritate” either by nagging at them or by deriding their efforts (Lohse, 159, Martin, NCB, 120, and BAG, 308, point out that in Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 20, the expression, “when someone irritates [ἐρεθίσῃ] you,” refers back to “the man who reviles or strikes [ὁ λοιδορῶν ἢ ὁ τύπτων] you”; in the LXX it occurs at Num 14:8; Deut 21:20; Prov 19:7; 25:23, etc).

The challenge is for fathers to impose sufficient pressure upon the children so that they will do what is right and proper, but to not impose a crippling pressure on them with the result of ‘breaking their spirit.’²⁶ The parallel admonition in Eph. 6:4, μὴ παροργίζετε, along with its noun equivalent παροργισμός, refers to making someone intensely angry.²⁷ Thus both expressions are close in meaning to one another.



With the much greater authority granted to the ancient father than is typically true in the modern world, finding this balance was indeed challenging. But it none the less was important to do. Fatherly outbursts of uncontrolled anger against a child were off limits. The use of excessive punishments that could physically harm the child are not permitted. But also -- and perhaps more importantly -- the psychological shredding of a child verbally so that his ‘spirit’ is destroyed is clearly out of bounds for the Christian father.

The danger: ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμῶσιν. Literally the danger with excessive pressure imposed on the children they will have their fire taken out of them. Once again O’Brien’s comments are important:

Fathers are to obey the injunction so that their children (is the ὑμῶν, “your” inserted to remind fathers that the children belong to them? cf von Soden, 65) do not become discouraged or think that it is useless trying to please them within the common life of the home (ἀθυμέω, to “be discouraged,” “become timid,” appears only here in the NT, though it turns up frequently in the LXX: e.g. Deut 28:65; 1 Kings 1:6, 7, 15:11; 2 Kings 6:8; 1 Chron 13:11, etc; and was used from the fifth century B.C. on, cf. BAG, 21). The corresponding passage in Ephesians 6:4 sets the positive counterpart when it urges fathers to rear their children “in the discipline (παιδεία) and instruction (νουθεσία) of the Lord.” There should be firm guidance, not servitude

Most of us as parents have wrestled with how to properly discipline our children. Paul recognized a clear balance between firm discipline and overpowering discipline. We have observed individuals around us in the work place and elsewhere, especially children, who seemed to have no ‘life’ in them. They are very passive and lack initiative in doing things. For some, this could easily be the consequence of a parent using overpowering discipline that literally -- to use Paul’s term here -- took the fire out of them.

The positive thrust of Eph. 6:4 throws some light on this: “but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφετε αὐτὰ ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νουθεσίᾳ κυρίου). The goal is to raise up children with self-disciplined commitment to God through Christ. In this material Paul balances out his warning against over bearing disciplining with the positive encouragement to raise children up in a spiritually healthy manner. The παιδεία καὶ νουθεσία, discipline and instruction, that will help them develop properly and holistically comes κυρίου, from the Lord.

The early church found in Jesus’ affirmation of children during His earthly ministry a renewed value for children and sought to provide them with every opportunity to develop spiritually and to come to that place of individual faith commitment to Christ. Children were present at the house church gatherings. They heard the reading of scripture and its explanation by Christian leaders. They listened to the powerful praying of

²⁶“ἐρεθίζω 1 aor. ἠρέθισα; aor. pass. ptc. ἐρεθισθεὶς 2 Macc 14:27; fut. pass. 3 sg. ἐρεθισθήσεται Da 11:10, 25 (s. ἔρις; Hom. et al.; Epict., Ench. 20; LXX; TestSol 4:6; 8:5 PC; TestDan 4:4) to cause someone to react in a way that suggests acceptance of a challenge, arouse, provoke mostly in bad sense irritate, embitter, as τὰ τέκνα Col 3:21 (cp. Epict., loc. cit., where ἐ. takes up the preceding λοιδορεῖν and τύπτειν; 1 Macc 15:40; Philo, Ebr. 16; Jos., Bell. 2, 414, Ant. 4, 169; 20, 175; Ath., R. 75, 22). In a good sense of an encouraging example (Ael. Aristid. 28, 75 K.=49 p. 516 D.; Appian, Iber. 26 §103) 2 Cor 9:2.—DELG s.v. ἐρέθω. M-M. EDNT. Spicq.” [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 391.]

²⁷“παροργίζω Att. fut. παροργιῶ (but 2 pl. παροργίσετε TestZeb 9:9); 1 aor. παρώργισα. Pass.: fut. 3 sg. παροργισθήσεται Da 11:36; pf. ptc. fem. acc. παρωργισμένην Sir 4:3 make angry (so in the pass. in Theophr., HP 9, 16, 6; Strabo 7, 2, 1; OGI 610, 4 [VI A.D.]) τινά someone (LXX; TestJob 43:9; Test12Patr; GrBar 16:2; TestLevi 3:10 [rdg. weakly attested]; Philo, Somn. 2, 177; Just., D. 130, 4) Ro 10:19 (Dt 32:21); Eph 6:4 (cp. Pla., Leg. 7, 823cd on effective nurture through praise rather than threats); Col 3:21 v.l.; Hv 3, 6, 1.—DELG s.v. ὀργή. M-M. TW.

παροργισμός, οὗ, ὅ (PsSol 8:9; LXX mostly act. ‘provoking to anger’: 3 Km 15:30; 4 Km 23:26 or ‘an action that calls forth anger’ in someone: 2 Esdr 19:18) state of being intensely provoked, angry mood, anger, pass. (Jer 21:5 w. θυμός and ὀργή) Eph 4:26 (cp. the Pythagorean saying Plut., Mor. 488bc; also IQS 5:26–6:1; CD 9:6–8).—DELG s.v. ὀργή. M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 780.]

individuals in the worship experiences. This continued the Jewish religious tradition, and expanded it. But ultimately Paul indicates here and in Eph. 6:4 that it is the father's responsibility to provide the spiritual nourishment his children need in order to glorify God in their lives.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

How does this text apply to us today? The relationship between children and parents is central to a solid family. And if the Christian family is to flourish it then must implement these responsibilities both by children and their parents. Obeying one's parents is foundational to a healthy childhood. And such obedience goes beyond attitudes of respect that 'honor' them. Paul clearly saw the gutting of the Decalogue commandment to honor parents by Jews in his day to empty verbal expressions of praise at birthday celebrations, funerals and other special occasions. In interpreting and applying this OT command to believers in the Lycus Valley he stressed the functional implementation of this principle, with the admonition to obey, and to use proper disciplining. Nothing can provide a stronger Christian witness by the family to the outside world than for parent / child relationships to be healthy and positive. Recognition of this was later affirmed to the Ephesians through Timothy by Paul in 1 Tim. 3:4 regarding the requirements for being a Christian leader: "4 He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church?" [τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος· 5 (εἰ δέ τις τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου προστῆναι οὐκ οἶδεν, πῶς ἐκκλησίας θεοῦ ἐπιμελήσεται;)]. Such remains true in our day as well.

Strong, spiritually healthy Christian families are urgently needed in our day. The world often judges the worth of our Christian profession on the basis of what they observe us doing inside our family. When Christ indeed becomes Lord inside the family, it will have a powerful witness to others!

And as the contextual meaning of 3:18-4:1 inside 3:1-4:6 stresses, the spiritual health of Christian families powerfully impacts the spiritual health of the congregation. If families are in turmoil, then the church suffers greatly and itself will slip into turmoil. But if families are spiritually strong and healthy, this will have profound positive impact on the spiritual health of the congregation.

1) What kind of a child are you to your parents?

2) What kind of a parent are you to your children?

