

Ephesians 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ephesians chapter 6 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother, this is the first commandment with a promise, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by way of eye service, as people please, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord, and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might.

Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

[1 : 3 6] In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one, and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

So that you also may know how I am, and what I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.

Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ, with love incorruptible.

In Ephesians chapter 6, Paul concludes his household code, and gives a final exhortation to the recipients of the epistle. The fact that Paul addresses children directly, with the instruction to obey their parents, is probably notable.

[2 : 4 9] Children, and there is little reason to believe that Paul isn't addressing boys and girls alike here, are not just treated as those to be dictated to and controlled by their parents, but as persons to be exhorted to a willing obedience.

The presence of such an instruction suggests that Paul expected children to be with their parents, in hearing this epistle read. Christian teaching, and willing Christian obedience, is not just for adults.

They are to obey their parents in the Lord. One thing that we see in places such as the book of Acts, for instance, is the assumption that whole households would come under the reign of Christ, not just detached individuals one by one.

Children are addressed as members of the Christian community, and Paul will go on to instruct fathers to raise them in the instruction of Christ. The expectation is that, as such children are raised in the faith, they will grow into a full, willing, and mature ownership of the faith for themselves.

This is why honouring of parents, and the faithful teaching of parents, is so important. As in the Old Testament, these are the means by which children will grow into such mature personal faith.

[3 : 53] Paul supports his teaching with a reference to the fifth commandment, underlining the importance of the promise attached to it. Honouring of father and mother is seen in a particularly potent form in willing obedience to them.

Such honouring of parents creates a firm bond between the generations that functions as the backbone of a people through its history. A people lacking such a healthy bond will not last long, but those who have such a bond will live long and prosper in the land.

Fathers, for their part, must encourage rather than frustrate or provoke their children. There is a reciprocity here. The father is the head of the household, but his headship is supposed to be something that builds up, strengthens, supports, encourages, and gives security and peace to everyone else.

An overbearing, abusive, or hypercritical form of fatherhood is opposed here. Fathers should direct and correct their children, but their strength must be exercised with gentleness and compassion.

It must be something that supports and elevates and edifies their children. From fathers, Paul turns to servants. They are called to obey their masters with fear and trembling, to show respect, to act with sincerity, and to act as to the Lord.

[5 : 08] This is not just acting as if to the Lord, but as to the Lord. Their true master is not their earthly master, but their heavenly master, Jesus Christ. And so they act as one who will be seen by him, as one whose work will be judged by him.

Whatever the cruelty or injustice of their earthly masters, they know that their heavenly master will see and honour their work as it is done in a way that glorifies him. They are called to act for his honour and for his recognition, not for human attention.

Such faithfulness could sometimes be costly. We can think of the story of Joseph, whose faithfulness to his earthly master, not as a people pleaser, but as one who is acting towards God, led to him being thrown into prison.

By being faithful to Potiphar and not sleeping with Potiphar's wife, he ended up seeming unfaithful to Potiphar. Yet the Lord, his true master, blessed him and raised him up.

Servants are assured that whatever they do, they will receive back from the Lord. And this is something that is true for people whether they are bondservant or free. The Lord sees and rewards those who do good.

[6 : 15] And there's an important point about Christian vocation here. So often we can idealise those situations where people are not alienated from their labour in any ways. They're doing exactly what they want in communities they feel that they really belong in, in situations where they feel highly rewarded for their efforts.

However, here Paul talks to people who are servants, who might be beaten on a daily basis, who might find themselves routinely dishonoured in their labours, prevented from enjoying ownership of their labour and its fruits, or from finding true belonging and identity in what they do.

While all these conditions of work are bad, and in an ideal society would be removed or minimised or even eradicated, For Paul, it does not prevent people from knowing the dignity of serving Christ.

Even the humblest servant can find honour in his labour as he does his work towards Christ and not to man. Paul now addresses slave owners, introducing his remarks with a surprising expression.

Masters do the same to them. There is a symmetry between the way that masters should treat their servants and servants should treat their masters. It's very hard to believe we can think of this relationship between masters and servants as the most unequal and imbalanced and asymmetrical relationship there is.

[7 : 32] But Paul can see a symmetry, because both people should be acting towards a heavenly master and treating their earthly counterpart, whether a master or a slave, in a way that recognises God's oversight of them.

One of the effects of all of this is to place the social order that currently exists in the light of how we all stand relative to God on the same level ground. While many would have sought to drive the current order down deep into the depths of reality to claim its grounds and fundamental being, Paul does quite the opposite.

He presents a more fundamental reality that reveals the superficiality and transitory character of a society where there are masters and slaves. We should also recognise the contrast between the way that he treats masters and servants and the ways that he treats husbands and wives.

Husbands and wives are related directly to the gospel. The relationship between husband and wife is an anticipation of the gospel of Christ, the joining together of Christ and his church.

In the process, the fundamental goodness and divine intention of marriage is stressed. No such connection is made with slavery, however. Paul makes similar points here to those he made in Colossians chapter 4 verse 1.

[8 : 47] Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven. Masters are charged to stop threatening their servants. They must recognise that they too have a master in heaven.

By this reminder, Paul is reconstituting the institution of slavery by the golden rule. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets, and by Christ's principle of judgment.

For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Masters must act towards their servants as those who are themselves bondservants of Christ, accountable to him, and answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image.

There is no partiality with God. The status of the slave owner does not exalt him over others in God's sight, nor does it give him some greater dignity. Christians are in a battle.

We need continual strength, which ultimately comes from the Lord. Paul expresses all of this using the imagery of clothing ourselves with armour. Such a metaphor is also found in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 8.

[9 : 52] But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. The parallels and contrasts suggest that the point is less specific identifications than the more general effect.

Paul is also here drawing upon Old Testament imagery of the Lord clothing himself for battle that we find in Isaiah chapter 59 verses 16 to 17. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.

Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

The enemy is the devil himself, who is cunning and a brilliant strategist. He can easily outwit and snare the careless, and render them useless. Paul began the epistle by focusing on the cosmic scale of Christ's victory, and his exaltation over all authorities and powers and principalities.

He returns to this here. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood. The image of hand-to-hand fighting devolves into wrestling. We're wrestling against these things. In 2 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 3 to 5, he makes similar points.

[11 : 07] For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

We destroy arguments, and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. We are caught up in a battle that is so much greater than us, like hobbits in the war for Middle-earth.

There are dark demonic forces, and Satan himself is at work. In the light of all of this, we need to be dressed in preparation. We need to wear the armour of God so that we can withstand in the evil day and stand firm.

We face days of bitter testing and tribulation, times when the church will not seem to be on the advance anymore, but will be hard-pressed on all sides, needing to hold its ground at all costs.

The armour of God is the armour worn by the Lord himself and by the messianic warrior, as we see in Isaiah chapter 11 verses 1 to 5. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit, and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

[12 : 18] And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Christ is the messianic warrior whose victory over the principalities and powers was declared in chapter 1. To share in his victory, we must fight in his spirit and with his armour.

We should also recognise the similarity between the clothing of God, his armour, and the clothing of the priest, who also has garments of salvation, a breastplate, and the like. In Isaiah chapter 61 verse 10, I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

The question of the character of the things that we are wearing is an important one. Some lean to emphasise their character as Christian virtues. However, this might miss the fact that the armour is the armour of God, and of the messianic warrior, something that we must clothe ourselves with from without, equipping us for battle.

[13 : 40] This is part of what it means to clothe ourselves with Christ. When God clothes himself with righteousness and salvation, along with vengeance and zeal, the point is not that God needs to be covered with righteousness, or that he needs salvation.

God is clothing himself for and even with these actions. God's righteousness is his redemptive work of setting things to rights, his delivering work of salvation viewed from a particular perspective.

When we clothe ourselves with these things, the point is less about personal virtues, and more about clothing ourselves for and with God's saving work, by what God has accomplished and is accomplishing in Jesus.

We are called to act within the act of the messianic warrior, Jesus Christ, who has won the victory over the principalities and powers, and is now seated at God's right hand. We must fight his fight, clothed with him, both protected by and authorised by his clothing.

However, while the Isaiah text about God's putting on his armour is about offensive battle, the focus for us will be more upon defence. We must be alert in all of this, mindful of the many pitfalls and the perils.

[14 : 52] Our adversary is wily and cunning, and he will do anything to destroy us. Before closing the letter, Paul requests a special prayer that the Lord would give him the words that he requires as an ambassador of the gospel in chains.

Paul is profoundly aware of his serving the Lord's mission. Unlike in his other epistles, Paul does not end with a long list of specific greetings. This, it seems to me, is because this letter is an encyclical, a letter to be sent around several churches, rather than just to one.

A question to consider, what are some very practical ways in which we can put on the armour of God in our daily lives?