

The Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians
Ephesians 6:1-9
Quotes from the Fathers
May 21, 2008

Ephesians 6:1

St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

Paul has spoken first about the husband, second about the wife; now he moves along this path to children. The husband is responsible for the wife. Both the husband and the wife are responsible for the children. He speaks to children in an infant voice. He is well aware that if husband and wife are well disposed according to the commands he has laid down, there will be little difficulty in eliciting the cooperation of children. But what if the parents command foolish things? Generally parents do not command foolish things. But if they should, the apostle has a remedy when he says that parents are to be obeyed in the Lord. They are to be obeyed in whatever way they are not offending against God. (Homily on Ephesians 21.6.1-3)

Ambrosiaster [pseudo-Ambrose] (about A.D. 370):

This law is given to children: Since their parents are the enablers of their existence, they are to obey them. The principle is that they reverence those through whom they exist. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.2)

St. Jerome (AD 347 – 420):

It is not clear whether this saying means that children are to obey their “parents in the Lord” or that in the Lord children are to obey their parents. I take it both ways. We are to obey those parents who gave birth to us in the Lord, as through Paul and the apostles they were spiritually born, and do what they say. And we should submit in the Lord to our own parents, from whom we were born according to the flesh, performing all their commands that are not contrary to the Lord’s will. (Epistle to the Ephesians 3.6.1)

Theodoret (AD 392 – 457):

The order in which he gives his injunctions is worthy of admiration. For first he has given laws to husbands and wives, for marriage comes before childbirth. Then he tends to fathers and children, for childbirth is the fruit of marriage, since it is only after the birth that one is called a father and one called son. Finally he has set forth his instructions to servants and masters. This arises from the social environment, as distinguished from those arrangements that come about under the laws of nature. Thus, having given all these specific injunctions, he once again gives them a common one. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.9)

Ephesians 6:2

St. Jerome (AD 347 – 420):

A promise is attached to this commandment.... It is found in the Decalogue. It is the first command in the second table of the law. It was given to the people as they were leaving Egypt. (Epistle to the Ephesians 3.6.1)

Ephesians 6:3

St. Jerome (AD 347 – 420):

What is promised in honoring one's father and mother is not intended for the Jews alone, nor was it intended as an outright financial exchange. . . . For there surely have been many who, even while being obedient to their parents, died abruptly. Others who have been irreverent to their parents have reached extreme old age. . . . Rightly interpreted the command looks for the land that the Lord promises to Israel. It is offered to those who have left the spiritual Egypt. It calls us to patience as we traverse the vast and terrible wilderness of this life, as we overcome great challengers whom the Lord strikes down and as we enter into the Judea that flows with milk and honey. (Epistle to the Ephesians 3.6.1)

Ephesians 6:4a

St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

He does not say, "Love your children." Nature itself takes care of this by implanting this in us even against our will. So that interpretation would be superfluous. Instead, what does he say? Do not make your children angry. So many parents do this. They do this by depriving them of their portion of the inheritance and their promises, by oppressing them with burdens, by treating them not as though they were free but as slaves. (Homily on Ephesians 21.6.4)

Ephesians 6:4b

John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

Then he explains the all-important thing about parenting; how children are to be brought to obedience. He traces the motive of obedience back to its source and fountain. He has already shown how the husband's behavior elicits the wife's obedience when he spoke primarily to the husband, advising him to draw her to him by the bonds of love. Similarly here also he shows how the parents' behavior elicits the children's obedience, saying, "Rear them in the instruction and discipline of the Lord." Do you see how, when the spiritual motives are present, the physical effects will follow along? Do you want your son to be obedient? Rear him from the outset in the teaching and discipline of the Lord. Never regard it as a small matter that he should be a diligent learner of Scriptures. (Homily on Ephesians 21.6.4)

St. Jerome (AD 347 – 420):

Instead of asking parents to give their children a fancy education in secular literature, instead of making them read comedies and recite the obscene writings of the theater, he asks the Ephesian laypersons, many of whom, as is common in a population, were engaged in the ordinary occupations of this life, that they should educate their children in every doctrine and counsel of the Lord. Bishops and priests ought to take note of this. (Epistle to the Ephesians 3.6.4)

Ephesians 6:5a**Ambrosiaster [pseudo-Ambrose] (about A.D. 370):**

Christianity promises the kingdom of heaven only to those who believe, in order that they will not feel human pride on meriting this. Our faith is by grace, which is exalted to a higher plane than works. Only faith avails. On this gracious premise we are ordered to discharge all that is due to earthly masters. This will have the effect of inciting all the more the minds of unbelievers toward the worship of God. They will see by our behavior that our religion is both righteous and humble. Then, as masters see their slaves become more educated and more faithful in rendering service, they will see with what light reins true religion exercises governance in human affairs. So, when servants for their part notice the increased kindness of their masters, they will be similarly moved to more avid faith. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.5.1)

Theodoret (AD 392 – 457):

It was necessary for Paul to offer instructions for slaves. They were present everywhere in the Church, which contains all classes and strata of human society, both men and women, parents and children, slaves and masters, rich and poor, governors and the governed. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.5)

Ephesians 6:5b**St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):**

Paul instructs those virtuous servants who contribute so much to the organization and protection of the household. He does not overlook them. Though their instruction comes last, because they are last in dignity and rank, he addresses them at great length. He does not speak to them as children but in a far more advanced manner. He does not make this-worldly promises to them but points directly to the world to come. He instructs them to love wisdom. In this way he raises up and soothes their wounded souls. He counsels them not to grieve that they have less status or honor than others. Their brief earthly submission is for a time only. Whatever power their masters might have remains transient and brief and subject to the vulnerabilities of the flesh. All that is carnal is fleeting. It is in fear and trembling that they are learning obedience. He does not call for the same kind of reverence from the servant as from the wife, who is called to reverence her husband. Rather he heightens the expression in saying that it is in sincerity of heart that they

are to serve, as if serving Christ! He is speaking concisely here. Just what are you saying, blessed Paul? Here is one who has become the brother of servants, living himself the servant life, as they live. He is their brother, facing the same limitations, contributing to the same body. His servanthood is understood in relation to the Son of God. He is not his own master. He has entered into the life of the serving Son. Out of this assumption he calls them to be obedient to earthly masters with fear and trembling! Why? He is in effect saying, “How much more powerful is the ministry to those who are already servants, more than to those who are free men. How much easier do they learn the life of obedience in their reverence for God.” They are not entering into a lower status but into the highest status when they learn how to yield to their neighbor, how to become meek and how to be humble. (Homily on Ephesians 22.6.5-8)

Ephesians 6:6

Ambrosiaster [pseudo-Ambrose] (about A.D. 370):

It is on account of their reverence for God that they are called to demonstrate here and now their faithful and just service to persons. As they serve God by their service to earthly masters, they look toward the day of judgment, when all will be requited and all brought to final justice. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.8)

St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

Serving Christ comes from the heart and with good will. The goal is not merely to serve sincerely and do nothing wrong. It is rather to serve with all one’s might. Paul does not call servants simply to do what is barely due but to serve abundantly out of ardor, not from necessity. Serve on principle and by choice, not under compulsion. If you serve freely in this way you are not a slave. If your service comes from your free choice, from good will, from the soul and on account of Christ, you are no slave. (Homily on Ephesians 22.6.5-8)

Ephesians 6:7

Ambrosiaster [pseudo-Ambrose] (about A.D. 370):

This conduct may also tend toward the salvation of the master. They will see that their slaves through the grace of God have become faithful ministers. This is no small thing. They will then come to praise God’s grace as well. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.8)

Ephesians 6:8

St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

Regrettably it is the way of many unbelieving masters to feel no shame when they fail to keep faith. They do not give any just return to their slaves for their obedience. Paul comes to comfort these servants. They should not look for retaliation but be fully confident about their ultimate

compensation. Those who receive benefits but make no just payment to their servants are putting themselves in debt to God, ultimately. If your master receives good from you but does not treat you fairly, you do well to serve him all the more earnestly. You have all the more compensation stored up finally. For God is watching these transactions. Your time of compensation will come. (Homily on Ephesians 22.6.5-8)

Theodoret (AD 392 – 457):

He shows that slavery and mastery are categories that are confined to this present life. When we pass on from here, these distinctions will no longer apply. There nothing will be based on social status, such as slave or master, but on virtue and vice. (Epistle to the Ephesians 6.8)

Ephesians 6:9a

St. Jerome (AD 347 – 420):

Serving is to be done in singleness of heart. One is called to do the will of God and to do it with a good will, that is, with benevolence from the heart. Everyone will finally receive just judgment from the Lord for whatever good he has done. If he has served as a lowly one in the household, he will be judged justly according to his responsibility. The master of the household is not to be overbearing, not quick to punish. He should know that he too has a master in heaven who will judge justly, who will judge fairly according to our own willing, who will judge by deeds, not status. (Epistle to the Ephesians 3.6.9)

Ephesians 6:9b

St. John Chrysostom (AD 349 – 407):

Society arrangements, like laws made by sinners, acknowledge these distinctions of classes. But we are all called to accountability before the law of the common Lord and Master of all. We are called to do good to all alike and to dispense the same fair rights to all. God's law does not recognize these social distinctions. If anyone should ask where slavery comes from and why it has stolen into human life -- for I know that many are keen to ask such things and desire to learn -- I shall tell you. It is avarice that brought about slavery. It is acquisitiveness, which is insatiable. This is not the original human condition. Remember that Noah had no slave, nor Abel nor Seth nor those after them. This horrid thing was begotten by sin. It does not come from our earliest ancestors. We pay our ancestors no respect by blaming them. We have insulted nature by this system. Note how Paul connects everything to the idea of headship. As to the woman he says to the husband: "love her" (Ephesians 6:4). As to children he says to parents: "you are to rear them in the instruction and discipline of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). As to slaves he can only say: "knowing that you too have a Lord in heaven." In this light be benign and forgiving. (Homily on Ephesians 22.6.9)