



Of child's obedience, parent's honour and parental restraint: A contextual and ethical analysis of Ephesians 6:1–4

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This article examines Ephesians 6:1–4 through a contextual and ethical lens, exploring its enduring applicability and implications for parent–child relationships within contemporary Christian households. The text's dual injunction – child's obedience and honour to parents and father's disciplinary limits – forms the cornerstone of many theological conceptions of family life. However, its application has often veered into coercive territory, particularly within conservative religious communities where parental authority is sacralised and unquestioned. Utilising insights from theological exegesis, Greco-Roman household code analysis, and contemporary child development psychology, this study critiques both permissive and authoritarian models of parenting that claim biblical legitimacy. It also challenges children's disobedience to godly parental instructions (in the Lord).

Contribution: The article contends that Paul's exhortations must be reinterpreted within their original socio-cultural matrix and in alignment with Christocentric ethics. Consequently, it offers a theologically responsible and child-sensitive framework that upholds mutual dignity, relational accountability and the spiritual formation of children without resorting to control or abuse. Ultimately, the study reclaims Ephesians 6:1–4 as a text that fosters ethical parental restraint and meaningful, voluntary obedience rooted in love and discipleship.

Keywords: Ephesians 6:1–4; Christian parenting; Biblical ethics; parental honour; discipline; obedience; trauma-informed theology.

Introduction

The biblical injunctions concerning family life, particularly those found in *Ephesians 6:1–4*, have long shaped Christian understandings of parent–child relationships. These verses command children to 'obey' and 'honour' their parents (vv. 1–2), while equally exhorting fathers not to 'provoke' their children but to nurture them in the 'discipline and instruction of the Lord' (v. 4). Historically, these instructions have been interpreted as establishing a framework for hierarchical yet morally grounded family structures (Yarbrough 2021:345–352). However, in contemporary discourse, this passage has emerged as both a foundational ethical text and a source of tension, especially when the call for obedience and honour is employed to legitimise coercive parenting practices (Allen & Strawn 2020:355–368).

Recently, a growing body of theological and psychological scholarship has challenged the uncritical application of Ephesians 6:1–4 within Christian households, highlighting the ways in which the language of obedience and honour can be misused to silence, control or even abuse children (Knutson, Enlow & Singer 2022:790–803). These concerns are particularly acute in conservative religious communities, where parental authority is often presented as divinely ordained and unquestionable (Langberg 2021). Conversely, children may choose to disobey their parents even when instructed in the Lord – because of societal and peer group influences or even personal submission. Theologically, such conservative interpretations risk detaching the concept of obedience from its Christological and covenantal roots, turning it into a tool for enforcing dominance rather than fostering moral development (Bartholomew & Goheen 2020).

Furthermore, socio-cultural shifts in parenting philosophy and child development studies have underscored the ethical dangers of authoritarian parenting models. Contemporary research indicates that children raised in rigid, obedience-focused households are more prone to internalising problems such as anxiety, guilt and moral confusion (Murray-Swank & Wang 2021:190–210). These outcomes conflict with the ethical vision of the New Testament, which

promotes relational responsibility and mutual dignity, rather than hierarchical subjugation (Osmer 2018:50–61).

Therefore, this article argues that a contextual and ethical reading of Ephesians 6:1–4 challenges both overly permissive and coercively authoritarian parenting models. It posits that Paul's exhortations must be interpreted in light of their Greco-Roman household code background, Christocentric ethical priorities, and contemporary insights into child welfare and autonomy. By re-examining the concepts of obedience, honour and parental restraint, the study seeks to provide a biblically grounded yet ethically responsible framework for modern Christian parenting.

Contextual background of Ephesians 6:1–4

The contours of family life in antiquity are complex because, as scholars note, 'the notion of a nuclear household familiar to modern contexts did not structure Greco-Roman domestic life' (Kirkegaard 2009). Instead, kinship operated within broader, socially embedded household relationships. Consequently, the understanding of the Greco-Roman household or *Domus* is paramount in studying individuals living or connected to the household, forming what 'can' be labelled as a family. Roman terminology underscores this wider conception, where *familia* encompassed slaves, dependents, and kin, and *domus* referred not merely to a dwelling but to 'the interconnected physical, relational, and patrimonial structures comprising the household' (Kirkegaard 2009). This multi-layered system shaped social and legal identity.

At the centre of this system stood the *paterfamilias*, whose authority shaped the internal order and public reputation of the household. As Kirkegaard (2009) observes, Roman family life was structured around 'a hierarchical model in which the father's authority defined the household's social standing and internal cohesion'. Roman domestic structures were embedded within a wider system of social stratification, and the household not only reflected these hierarchical patterns but also reproduced them across both private and public spheres (Van Aarde 2003:402) (see Table 1).

Ephesians 6:1–4 provides a significant window into the dynamics of early Christian family structures, particularly within the context of the Greco-Roman world. This passage, which is part of the broader 'household codes' [*Haustafeln*], offers directives to children and fathers, emphasising obedience and nurturing discipline (Adewale 2023:1–7). In the 1st-century Greco-Roman society, the household was a

microcosm of the state, with the *paterfamilias* (father) wielding substantial authority over his family, including his wife, children and slaves (see Table 1). This patriarchal structure was considered essential for maintaining social order. The household codes in Ephesians address these relationships, providing guidance that reflects both continuity with and transformation of contemporary social norms (Montanaro 2025:258). The early Christian family was deeply influenced by the prevailing Greco-Roman societal norms, yet it also introduced transformative concepts that redefined familial relationships. In the Greco-Roman world, the *paterfamilias*, or male head of the household, held extensive authority over family members, including his wife, children and slaves. This authority encompassed control over property, legal rights, and even life and death decisions (Pholoso 2019) (see Table 1).

New Testament attitudes towards the family within the setting of both Jesus' and Paul's ministries set the stage for an examination of the early Christian family during the Roman Imperial Period. The Gospels depict Jesus navigating complex interactions with his biological relatives, at times distancing himself from them to emphasise the primacy of divine mission. This tension reflects what Kirkegaard (2009) describes as Jesus' 'ambivalent posture toward his earthly family', signalling a shift toward spiritual kinship grounded in discipleship. The early Christian movement also engaged the question of belonging, as Jesus' teaching announced a new community in which loyalty to God supplanted biological descent. This resulted in what Kirkegaard (2009) terms a 'reconfigured or fictive kinship', where disciples formed bonds that paralleled but also challenged traditional household ties. This challenge to establish family bonds in the light of a new passion to follow the way that Jesus set forth provided an ongoing motif in early Christianity. To put these changes in sociological terms, Christianity created a new fictive kinship group in contradistinction to the established kinship groups within its surrounding Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures.

The Apostle Paul further developed these ideas, advocating for mutual respect and love within the household. While the directives given by Paul in Ephesians 5:21–6:4 maintained certain hierarchical aspects of the Greco-Roman familia, they also introduced a call for compassion and mutual respect that contrasted with the often-authoritarian Roman model (Meeks 1983:77–80). Paul's household instructions in Ephesians reflect an engagement with the wider Greco-Roman moral framework, yet they also 'reorient traditional domestic expectations around Christ-centred ethics' (Kirkegaard 2009). This adaptation allowed early Christians to inhabit familiar social structures while reshaping them theologically.

Exegetical analysis of Ephesians 6:1–4

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Obey' [ὕπακούω, *hypakouō*] in Ephesians 6:1

Hypakouō [ὕπακούω] is derived from *hypo* [ὑπό, 'under'] + *akouō* [ἀκούω, 'to hear, listen']. It means 'to listen attentively

TABLE 1: Traditional Roman view versus Paul's Christocentric view.

Traditional Roman view	Paul's Christocentric view
Children are property of the father	Children are moral agents accountable to God
Obedience is absolute and lifelong	Obedience is conditional and limited (Eph 6:1)
Fathers have unchecked power over children	Fathers must nurture, not provoke (Eph 6:4)
Discipline is often harsh and punitive	Discipline is formative and Christ-centred (Eph 6:4)

and respond appropriately', implying willing and intelligent obedience rather than blind subjugation (BDAG 1036). According to World Biblical Commentary (1990), it is found 21 times in the New Testament including obedience to divine commands (Mt 8:27, Heb 5:9), slaves obeying masters (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22) and Christians obeying the gospel (Rm 6:17, 2 Th 1:8). *Hypakouō* is qualified by 'in the Lord' [ἐν κυρίῳ], which limits obedience to what aligns with Christ's righteousness.

'In the Lord' [ἐν κυρίῳ, *en Kyriō*] in Ephesians 6:1

En Kyriō [ἐν κυρίῳ] means 'within the sphere of Christ's authority' (BDAG 1022). It is found throughout Pauline epistles, often qualifying commands as seen in Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18 and Romans 16:2.

The verb obey in this chapter is Present, Active and Imperative, and it means 'to hear, listen, or obey'. This indicates that it is a command and continuous. Firstly, children are to pay attention to the commands or instructions of their parents to determine whether or not the command is in the Lord. Secondly, they are to continuously obey their parents in the Lord. This suggests that once the instruction is according to God's directions, children do not have the opportunity to contemplate obedience. Furthermore, this obedience is not a one-time duty but is required throughout their lifetime. Thirdly, they are expected to obey simply because it is the right thing for them to do.

'Honour your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise - 'Honour' [τιμάω, *timaō*] in Ephesians 6:2

Timaō [τιμάω] means 'to value, respect, or hold in esteem' (BDAG 1005). The Septuagint (LXX) uses it in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16 for honouring parents, which Paul cites in Ephesians 6:2. It is also used in the New Testament in honouring parents as seen in Matthew 15:4–6, Mark 7:10, honouring God seen in John 5:23, and honouring elders and widows as seen in 1 Timothy 5:3,17. Honour does not require blind submission; Jesus rebukes Pharisees who misused this command in Mark 7:10–13 (Thielman 2010).

Similar to 'obey' in verse 1, honour is in 'Present, Active, Imperative' form. It is an internal attitude of respect, courtesy and reverence, placing emphasis on the command to 'obey'. One can only honour whom he places value on or an authority figure in his life. It is worthy of note that one can obey out of fear or to escape punishment, but emphasising that children should honour their parents denotes the importance of the willingness to listen, obey, and respect on the part of the children. Consequently, Paul's use of *timaō* here indicates obedience that streams out of a genuine reverence for parents. Whereas one can obey without honouring the one being obeyed, it is easy for one to obey a person whom he or she honours. Therefore, the Lord does not require a coercive obedience from children but an honourable one.

'That it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth' in Ephesians 6:3

This verse reveals the purpose for the commands in verses 1 and 2. It is a promise with a condition. Children will only receive this promise when they obey and honour their parents in the Lord.

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord - 'Provoke' [παροργίζω, *parorgizō*] in Ephesians 6:4

Parorgizō [παροργίζω] means 'to provoke to anger, irritate, or embitter' (BDAG 781). Rooted in *orgē* [ὀργή, 'wrath'], it carries the connotation of deliberate provocation or exasperation. It is used in Deuteronomy 9:7–8 (LXX) to describe Israel provoking God to anger and also in the New Testament in Romans 10:19 and Colossians 3:21 (parallel passage: 'Do not embitter your children').

Applicability of the Ephesians 6:1–4 parent–child relationship

Having in mind the patriarchal nature of the Greco-Roman household codes, Ephesians 6 focused on fathers. Fathers can only provoke their children to wrath when they are angry. This anger can be caused by disobedience from their children. Children, on the other hand, can disobey their parents for different reasons.

Firstly, when parents instruct children outside the Lord, they are expected to disobey. Christian parenting is ideally grounded in biblical instruction, with Ephesians 6:4 urging parents to 'bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord'. Yet, in practice, many parents, whether professing faith or not, often instruct or discipline their children in ways that contradict the very principles they claim to uphold. Below are multifactorial reasons why parents may instruct their children outside the Lord or biblical principles.

Theological inconsistency

This occurs where a parent's professed beliefs do not align with their lived practice. Many Christian parents may nominally affiliate with faith traditions without deeply internalising or understanding biblical ethical models. According to Balswick and Balswick (2020), when faith is cultural rather than transformational, parenting may default to secular or inherited authoritarian norms rather than Spirit-led guidance (Coles 2019:657–674). As such, even devout parents may unknowingly promote unbiblical behaviours such as harsh punishment, favouritism or conditional love because of the lack of intentional theological reflection.

Influence of authoritarian cultural norms

In many societies, especially those with collectivist or hierarchical traditions, authoritarian parenting is culturally normalised. These norms often encourage strict obedience,

punitive discipline and parental dominance, even when such practices diverge from the biblical model of servant-leadership and nurture (Liu & Wang 2022:275–287). Research confirms that Christian parents often conflate cultural expectations of authority with divine sanction (Pinquart 2021:177–196). This syncretism leads to parenting practices that are more reflective of patriarchy, fear-based compliance and control than of the fruit of the Spirit (Gl 5:22–23). Also, parents who experienced neglect, abuse or harsh discipline may perpetuate these patterns unconsciously, even when they intellectually assent to biblical ideals (Callaghan & Tottenham 2020:1–10). Studies in developmental psychopathology indicate that early adversity shapes the brain's stress response and emotion regulation capacities, which often resurface in parenting behaviours (Bernier, Matte-Gagné & Whipple 2021).

Parental mental health

Often overlooked, chronic stress, depression or anxiety can significantly impair parents' capacity to respond with wisdom and patience, often leading to reactive or neglectful behaviours (Miller, Yu & Grolnick 2021:1–11). Even well-meaning Christian parents may temporarily revert to worldly methods of control or emotional withdrawal under pressure, not out of rebellion but as a symptom of psychological overload (Landry, Smith & Swank 2022:1398–1413).

Lack of mentorship or intergenerational accountability

Without supportive church structures, many Christian parents rely on secular parenting books, cultural intuition or emotion-driven responses rather than Scripture-informed wisdom (Hardin & White 2020:211–225), which may lead to individualistic and unexamined parenting habits. Therefore, parents may instruct their children outside of the Lord not because of outright defiance of biblical truth, but often because of a complex interplay of theological inconsistency, cultural pressures, trauma histories, poor mental health and lack of community discipleship.

Secondly, children may choose to disobey their parents even when the commands are in the Lord because of the following reasons:

Developmental drive towards autonomy

According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, children must navigate stages of independence (e.g. autonomy vs. shame, identity vs. role confusion) to develop a coherent self-concept (Miller et al. 2021:1–11). As children mature, especially into adolescence, questioning authority, including religious authority, becomes a normative aspect of cognitive and moral development (Liu & Wang 2022:275–287). Also, children who lack secure attachment relationships are more prone to disobedient behaviours. Insecure attachments – often stemming from authoritarian or inconsistent parenting – lead to relational anxiety, mistrust and oppositional tendencies (Bernier et al. 2021). Even when parents instruct in the Lord, if their relational style lacks

emotional attunement, warmth or responsiveness, the moral instruction may fail to internalise effectively (Pinquart 2021:177–196).

Moral disengagement

This is a process where individuals rationalise unethical behaviour or disassociate from moral standards. This often occurs when religious instruction is perceived as hypocritical or controlling (Albanese & Giangiacomo 2020:312–329). If children witness inconsistency between parental teachings and behaviour (e.g. religious instruction paired with emotional abuse or neglect), they may reject the moral authority of their parents altogether. Also, as children grow, they are increasingly influenced by peers, media and secular ideologies. These external influences often conflict with religious or parental norms, contributing to a redefinition of values and behaviours (Youniss & Barber 2020:119–140). Adolescents, in particular, may experience tension between their faith-based upbringing and the values of autonomy, self-expression and relativism promoted by the broader culture. Thus, even when instructed 'in the Lord', children may deviate because of competing allegiances and evolving personal identities.

Trauma, neglect or inconsistent discipline

Often masked under religious rhetoric, this can distort a child's perception of authority. Studies in developmental trauma indicate that children who have experienced chronic stress or parental harshness often develop oppositional or defiant behaviour as a protective mechanism (Callaghan & Tottenham 2020:1–10). From a theological perspective, obedience must be freely given and rooted in relational love, not compulsion (Coles 2019:657–674). Biblical instruction is effective only when embedded in authentic relational contexts where children feel seen, valued and respected. Parental authority that mimics divine guidance must reflect the grace, patience and justice of God. When this is absent, children may intuitively reject both the parental and theological framework presented to them (Balswick & Balswick 2020). Furthermore, Pauline exhortations like Ephesians 6:4 – 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger ...' – suggest that children's disobedience can be provoked by parental insensitivity, harshness or inconsistency. The failure to nurture can undermine the moral instruction that parents offer, even when framed religiously. Therefore, children's disobedience, even in religiously devout families, cannot be attributed to simple moral failure or wilful rebellion. Instead, it reflects a complex interaction of developmental, relational, cultural and theological factors which may signal a desire for autonomy, a reaction to emotional harm, a response to perceived hypocrisy, or an expression of identity in a changing world. Christian parenting must therefore integrate theological instruction with developmental sensitivity, emotional availability and relational integrity to foster true obedience that is rooted in love rather than fear.

However, whether or not the children disobey their parents in the Lord, fathers are counselled not to be angry with them to the extent that they provoke the children to anger; rather, they should deal with them with understanding. According to O'Brien (1999), forms of provocation include: excessive control or unrealistic expectations, emotional neglect or favouritism, physical and verbal abuse. Instead of provocation, Paul commands discipline [*παιδεία, paideia*] and instruction [*νουθεσία, nouthesia*] 'of the Lord'. Whereas *Paideia* refers to holistic moral training, not just punishment (cf. Heb 12:7–11), *Nouthesia*, on the other hand, refers to gentle correction and teaching, not coercion (cf. 1 Cor 10:11) (O'Brien 1999). Fathers are commanded to continuously bring their children up in the training and admonition or discipline of the Lord, despite their disobedience, and to discipline with love and care pointing them back to God. Such disciplines should not inflict any sort of injury on the child, physically, emotionally, mentally or otherwise; rather, they should help the children see where they have erred. Therefore, fathers are required to be emotionally mature and constantly depend on the Lord to the extent they are able to control their anger and continue to instruct their children when they disobey, especially when they disobey the Lord.

Ethical and theological implications

Christocentric household ethics: A paradigm shift

Paul's instructions in Ephesians 6:1–4 redefine the parent-child relationship within the framework of Christ's lordship. This represents a radical shift from both Jewish patriarchal norms and Roman legal structures, where the father [*paterfamilias*] wielded absolute authority over his children. Instead, Paul places Christ, not human authority, at the centre of family ethics, ensuring that both parental responsibility and children's responses are governed by righteousness (Lincoln 1990).

Key Christocentric principles in Ephesians 6:1–4

This redefinition of household authority aligns with Paul's overarching teaching in Ephesians 5:21: 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'. Thus, parental authority is not about dominance but mutual responsibility and love in Christ.

Children's obedience is not absolute but conditioned by righteousness

Paul commands children to obey their parents 'in the Lord' [*ἐν κυρίῳ, en Kyriō*], which limits the scope of obedience (see Table 1). The Lord, not parents, is the ultimate authority (Ac 5:29). So, if a parental command contradicts Christ's righteousness, a child is not bound to obey. This qualification guards against authoritarian abuse, ensuring that obedience aligns with divine justice and human dignity (Thielman 2010). Therefore, in cases of abuse, coercion or moral corruption, children are not biblically required to comply. Rather, they are to seek righteousness in their responses.

Honouring parents does not mean enabling injustice

Paul quotes Exodus 20:12, emphasising the command to honour [*τιμάω, timao*] parents. However, biblical honour does not justify blind allegiance: In Matthew 15:3–6, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for distorting this command, showing that honour must align with God's righteousness. Ezekiel 22:7 condemns dishonouring parents in a broader ethical context, linking it with oppression and injustice. Malachi 1:6 suggests that honour includes ethical integrity, not submission to unrighteousness. Honouring abusive parents does not mean tolerating or covering up their sin. Children may set boundaries and seek accountability for wrongdoing while still maintaining respect for the parental role. Seeking justice (e.g. reporting abuse, holding parents accountable) can be a form of honouring God's justice (Thielman 2010).

Parental authority is accountable to God's standards

Paul directly limits paternal authority with the command: 'Fathers, do not provoke (*παροργίζω, parorgizō*) your children to anger' (Eph 6:4). This is countercultural, as Greco-Roman fathers had unchecked disciplinary power. Instead, Paul demands: (1) Restraint in discipline avoiding excessive control, manipulation or emotional harm. (2) Nurturing instruction guiding children through *paideia* [discipline] and *nouthesia* [admonition], which focus on moral development, not coercion (O'Brien 1999) (see Table 1).

God disciplines in love, not anger (Heb 12:7–11). Jesus models authority through servanthood, not oppression (Mk 10:42–45). Parental authority is not for self-exaltation, but for the child's well-being (Col 3:21). Parents who abuse their children violate God's standard of leadership and are accountable to divine justice. Children do not have to endure sinful mistreatment under the guise of obedience. Therefore, Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6:1–4 establishes a Christ-centred model of family dynamics, where:

- Children obey within the framework of righteousness.
- Honour is moral, not unconditional.
- Parents are held accountable for nurturing, not controlling.
- Abuse is explicitly condemned, not tolerated.

Thus, Ephesians 6:1–4 does not justify abusive parent-child relationships but instead upholds a biblical standard of justice, love and ethical accountability under Christ (see Table 1).

Conclusion

The ethical and theological analysis of Ephesians 6:1–4 reveals that the apostolic instructions were never intended to sanction absolute parental control or blind filial submission. Rather, they propose a covenantal model of mutual responsibility in the home, where parental guidance aligns with divine instruction and children's obedience stems from

spiritual understanding. By locating this passage within the Greco-Roman household codes and interpreting it through the prism of Christocentric values, this study demonstrates that obedience and honour are not instruments of domination but expressions of love, dignity and discipleship. Furthermore, parental restraint, as urged by Paul, serves as a necessary ethical boundary to prevent abuse and foster the moral agency of children. In light of contemporary challenges and psychological findings, this reinterpretation calls for a renewed Christian parenting ethic – one that balances authority with empathy, instruction with patience and discipline with grace. This ethical reading of the text provides not only a corrective to harmful parenting ideologies but also a constructive theological vision for nurturing healthy, spiritually grounded families in today's world.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Theodore U. Dickson: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Visualisation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. Innocentia N. Charles: Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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