

Foundations of Parenting - The Role of Parents
Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21 & Selected Scriptures

Introduction

Last week I reviewed God's design for marriage and the roles of the husband and wife which is foundational for parenting because you cannot be a better parent than you are a spouse. As Jesus states in Luke 6:40, "*A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.*" Parents are the primary teachers of their children, and their children will naturally emulate them, so they will follow the example you set in dealing with your spouse. Ideally, that will be in a godly marriage which is why I spent the time talking about the God given roles of the husband and wife. However, even if your spouse is not a Christian, or is more difficult, or you are divorced and your ex-spouse is antagonistic to you, the manner in which you respond will be copied by your children. If you respond in submission to the Lord in all godliness, then you will be a positive example to your children. If you respond in ungodliness, then do not be surprised if your children also behave in ungodly ways.

This morning I want to look at the basics of the role of parents. We will be looking at Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and other selected Scriptures.

Prohibitions on Parents - Colossians 3:21, Ephesians 6:4

Paul's brief prohibition in Colossians 3:21 - "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart.*" is dependent on the parent carrying out all the other commands he gave in Colossians 3:1-17. A godly parent must put off actions and attitudes that characterized them before being saved and put on the attitudes and actions that are in keeping with the new self that comes with being redeemed, regenerated and raised up with Christ. They must put off things such as immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech and put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing one another's burdens, forgiving each other, being loving and having the word of Christ richly dwell in you. The godly parent is to then correct their children of wrong behaviors and attitudes while instilling into them these same virtues.

In a similar way, Paul's similar command in Ephesians 6:4, "*fathers, do not provoke your children to anger,*" is based on the assumption the parent will be following all the other commands given earlier in the letter, and specifically walking as wise men who are filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:15-21).

But why these specific prohibitions? The answer lies in the abuse that can easily arise from being in the superior position. The children have just been commanded to obey their parents, and parent must be careful to avoid being authoritarian and arbitrary in their commands. You must give proper thought to what is being taught to the child and the difficulties the command may place on the child. The warnings are to keep parents from being selfish and indifferent to what they demand from the child.

The idea of exasperation (ἐρεθίζω / erethizō) is to stir up, stimulate, provoke. This is a response to something that is happening. Such a stirring up could be good or bad depending on what is being stirred up, but in this case it is bad. The father is provoking the child to a response of being disheartened. The word here, (ἀθυμέω / athumēō), is the negation of spirit, courage. This is an interesting juxtaposition in the words for we usually think that something that stimulates will provoke action, but this does the opposite. The child is provoked to give up. How can that be? Because when something is prodded too long, callous builds up and it then no longer responds. Like a sliver embedded in the skin, it irritates and provokes at first, but eventually callous tissue forms around it so that it is no longer noticed. So it also is with children. This negative stimulation will at first cause anger, as Ephesians 6:4 warns, but eventually it discourages and disheartens creating indifference or even despondency.

There are many things parents can do to provoke their children to an angry response which when continued could eventually lead to discouragement and giving up. I will point out a few of the common

things that can do this, but first I want to be clear that you are not to parent based on the response of your child. Children can be, and probably are most often, angry when they do not get their way. You do not stop what you are doing just because they get angry, but you should give careful consideration as to why they are angry and then proceed with godly wisdom to parent according to the principles of God's word.

1) Abuse: Physical and verbal. Generally, those who abuse, whether physically or verbally, are those who cannot control their own anger, and such anger breeds more anger. Proverbs 30:33, "*For the churning of milk produces butter, And pressing the nose brings forth blood; So the churning of anger produces strife.*" Proverbs 15:1, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*" This is true for kids as well as adults. This kind of anger is never godly and it cannot produce godly results. James 1:20 tells us that "*the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*" Parents should never take out their anger on their children. Even if you have suffered at the hands of someone else, you need to remember that revenge belongs to God, not you, and you are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19-21).

A simple definition of child abuse is striking out at a child, either physically or verbally, out of anger. That is never proper for any parent, and even more so the Christian parent. If you are angry, you must refrain from disciplining your child until you calm down enough to administer proper chastisement. Anger in you produces anger in the child as they respond in like manner, or perhaps worse, they may internalize it out of fear you. If that goes on long enough, the child can become despondent and severely depressed, or that anger may burn internally as resentment waiting for the time when it can be expressed.

2) Inconsistency. This is a great cause of frustration to children. If the rules of the home change according to your whim, then you are going to provoke your children to some form of anger. Consider it from the child's perspective. One day you write on the wall and your considered "cute," The next day your little bottom is spanked for the same thing. One day mom says to do something five or six times before she actually gets serious, the next day she says it once and then comes in with a paddle. One meal you play with your food and dad laughs, at the next meal dad is angry with you for doing the same thing. The child is confused and is uncertain of what is expected, and children will gamble when you are inconsistent being optimistic they can get away with it. This is one of the reasons that first time obedience is so important. Children know what is expected when parents are consistent and so it is easier on both of them.

Inconsistency causes frustration which in turn leads to anger. If such inconsistency is continued long enough, even an optimistic child can become pessimistic and quit trying out of fear they will do the wrong thing no matter what they try to do. Aren't you glad that the Lord is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8)? He is consistent so that His commands remain the same and you can trust His promises.

3) Parental Selfishness. This is another provocation to anger. This is the opposite of the child centered parent - which is a whole different problem. The degree of selfishness will vary, but for these parents, the children are an intrusion. The result is that they do not take the time needed to really know their children and what is on their hearts. While this may be more common among dads since their work usually takes them away from the house and the children to begin with, it also occurs among moms. The parent may even be physically present, but their mind is somewhere else and only rarely on the children, and then only enough to keep them out of their way.

The child with a selfish parent will not usually be angry with the parent, at least while they are small, but they will be angry at whatever takes the parent away from them. As they get older that will change to an anger, resentment or indifference because there was not practical demonstration the parent cared about them. The old pop song "*Cats in the Cradle*" illustrates this last point well. The son wanted to be with his dad, but dad never had the time. When the dad became old and wanted to be with his son, the son did not have the time. As the song writer put it, "*My son was just like me.*" The selfish indifference was passed to the next generation.

4) Favoritism. This is a danger for every family with multiple children. Each child is different and will need different amounts and types of attention. Add to it that you might just like the personality of one of them more than the others. If you allow yourself to favor one and are not fair to the others, you are showing both favoritism and your own selfishness. You will be the cause of increased sibling rivalry and the resulting anger and resentment

The anger and rivalry that existed between Jacob and Esau was directly caused by their parents favoritism. Rebekah favored Jacob and Isaac favored Esau. Jacob followed his parental example and his obnoxious favoritism of Joseph caused all sorts of problems for Joseph, himself and his other eleven sons.

5) Excessive Expectations and Discouragement. I put these two together because they are so often associated with each other. This is the parent that continually demands more of their child than they are capable of and then castigates them when they fail. Such parents usually fail to make allowance for childishness which is the simple fact that the child does not yet have the skills to do certain things. It takes practice to learn to hold a cup without spilling it, to color between the lines, to write the alphabet legibly, to throw and catch a ball, or to read. The same will continue to be true as they get older and take on more difficult skills - riding a bike, driving a car, cooking, school lessons, household chores and repairs, etc.

In addition, the reality is that we are neither born with nor develop with equal ability. Every child will be different. Some will have great intellectual capacity, others will not. Some will have great physical ability and others will not. Don't compare your children to others including siblings either way. The proper expectation and requirement is that your children do their best, whatever that may be.

If your child is advanced, there is nothing wrong with complimenting them on their achievements. However, do not brag on them about how superior they are or you will feed their pride to their detriment. As Proverbs 16:18 warns, *"Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling."* You also want to make sure they are doing their best and do not fall into the trap of slacking off because they are ahead of others their age. Your goal is to train their character. Learning the academic lessons and gaining particular skills are secondary to character development.

If your child is behind the other children in their skills, abilities, and achievements, then you still compliment them on what they are able to do while encouraging them to press on to do their best even if it is not as good as others. Again, the goal is to train their character, not learning academic lessons and gaining particular skills within some particular time frame. If you complain or make disparaging remarks about their lack, you will discourage them. If you compare them to others, especially siblings, you foster resentment. Be very careful of put downs and sarcasm. Ephesians 4:29 is clear that we are to speak in ways that will encourage and build up, giving grace according to the need of the moment. Don't let your parental pride become a detriment to your child through excessive expectations and discouragement.

6) Using affection to manipulate. Making your affection conditional is a sure way to destroy your children. We are to be reflections of God's love toward us who loved us when we were yet sinners. Certainly when your children disobey there is a strain in the relationship the same way there is in our relationship with God when we disobey Him, but He still loves us and tells us so. You need to do the same with your children. They need to know that when they have done wrong, the correction and chastening they receive is because you do love and care for them. You are not rejecting them, but only striving to train them for their own good. You are to always stand ready to forgive and reconcile with them. Hebrews 12:6 states that is the way God loves us. *"He chastens whom He loves,"* but those without His discipline are illegitimate and not His sons (12:8).

Trying to manipulate the child's behavior by making your love conditional upon it will not only distort their understanding of love, but it will bring upon them frustration and discouragement. Why? Because there will always be another area in which they fail to meet the standard. Winning love becomes achievable only in the short term, so there is never security in it. The insecurity of not feeling loved is

only relieved temporarily before it returns with the next failure and its frustrations. The goal becomes unreachable resulting in discouragement.

Parents have a great responsibility. You must be careful to not provoke your children to anger or exasperate them causing them to lose heart. If that becomes the pattern in your parenting, you will damage your children in ways that can hinder them throughout their lives. The reality is that you will do these things on occasion, at which point you need to confess your own failures and seek forgiveness and reconciliation with them. This should be done as quickly as possible after you realize your error and failure. If you do not recognize what you have done wrong until long after you have done it, it is never too late to confess and seek God's forgiveness, and if those you have wronged are still alive, it is not too late to confess and seek their forgiveness too. That even lays a foundation for either reconciliation or a closer relationship than you might have thought possible.

There are a lot more Scriptures that direct parents about things they are to avoid in raising their children. The Proverbs have many such statements which are also often contrasted with what should be done. There are 8 sermons on parenting in the Proverbs series on the church website.

Prescriptions on Parents - Ephesians 6:4

Let me contrast the prohibition we have just looked at in Ephesians 6:4 with God's prescription given in the same verse. Parents are to *"bring [their children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."*

To *"bring them up"* is the idea of caring for them. The word here (ἐκτρέφω / ektrephō) is primarily used of children and means to "to nourish" as in "to feed, provide," "nurture," "rear." And as we are all aware, feeding is an on going action. It seems we have hardly finished one meal when we are already starting to plan for the next. The same idea is inherent in bringing up a child. It is on going. One task is done and the next one starts and often the first task has to be repeated several times. You get them to crawl and then start on walking which is followed by running, riding a bike and then driving. You teach them the alphabet, and then putting letters together to make words, then reading and writing at ever increasing levels. They learn to count, then simple addition, then subtraction, which is followed by multiplication, division, fractions, proportions, scientific notation, logarithms, geometry, algebra, calculus, etc. You teach them to talk, then you have to teach them to be quiet!

Paul speaks of two aspects of bringing up a child. Discipline and instruction.

Discipline. This is discipline in sense of training. The word used here (παιδεία / paideia) specifically refers to the various aspects of training a child and so it is also translated as chastening, nurture, instruction, discipline and training. There is a tendency to think of child training, especially discipline, from the negative side of teaching them lots of prohibitions - what they are not to do - and then bringing on the consequences of violating them. Certainly that negative training is included, but most of discipline should be positive training. This is the education of the child in all aspects - morally and spiritually as well as about the world and society. It involves example, lecture, reading, observation and discovery. It sets up opportunity for practice, gives reminders as well as correction back to the standard to reinforce a lesson. It is both formal and informal, for it is to occur throughout the day in every circumstance.

A good explanation and example of what it means to discipline in this manner is seen in Deuteronomy 6 where Moses is concerned about how to teach the next generation the commandments of the Lord in a way that the generations following them will also be taught.

In verse 4 Moses condensed the Law into a succinct statement - *"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."* Jesus called this the great and foremost commandment (Matthew 22:38). Moses took that which was fairly complex and simplified it so that it could be easily remembered. He took the law to its foundational general principle, which if adhered to would lead a person back to most

of the specifics God asked of them. If you love God with all that you are - mind, emotion and will, then it will not be hard to obey Him.

Moses continues in verse 5 to explain how this important lesson would be transferred from generation to generation: *"And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; 7 and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up."*

You are to be diligent to teach your children about God and the principles by which they are to live. That begins with it being on your own heart, for what is in your own heart is what you will end up transferring to your child. This teaching is hard work and involves pointing out and explaining things over and over in the many different situations of life - when you sit, walk, lie down, or rise up. That takes patience and perseverance. Your goal is that they will both understand and have many examples to transfer to their own situations. Proper parenting is on going and teaches a child to think for himself according to the principles of God's word and instilled through proper training.

Instruction. This is the second aspect of bringing up a child. The word used here (νουθεσία / nouthesia) gives more stress on the mental aspect of teaching for the root word means *"to set in mind."* Instruction sets in the mind both the spiritual and societal truths of life in how to live with God and with man. This would be exemplified by the book of Proverbs which was written, according to Proverbs 1:2-6, *"To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding, 3 To receive instruction in wise behavior, Righteousness, justice and equity; 4 To give prudence to the naive, To the youth knowledge and discretion, 5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, 6 To understand a proverb and a figure, The words of the wise and their riddles."*

There is also a strong element of correction in this element of child rearing which is why the word is also translated as "admonition," "warning" and "exhortation" as well as "instruction." In this sense it is instructive correction given without provoking or embittering the child.

Of the Lord. A final point I want to make from Ephesians 6:4 is that the parental discipline and instruction given are to be *"of the Lord."* The primary task of parents today is really the same as what Moses gave to the children of Israel. Our children are to understand who the Lord is, what He has done for them and what it means to love Him. Parents who fail to do this have failed regardless of how much time and money they have spent on their children. Too many dads think they are successful if they can purchase lots of stuff for their kids. Too many moms think they are successful if they give lots of time to their kids. However, if time and materials are not used to help your child understand God, what He has done and how to love Him, then it was all wasted.

Nurturing a child in the discipline and instruction of the Lord should encompass all that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says the Word of God is to accomplish in us. It provides the teaching, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. Teaching points out the path of life. Reproof warns when you have gotten off that path. Correction gets you back on the path. Instruction tells you how to stay on the path. That is what you will do for your children as you nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

This is no easy task. It is one of awesome responsibility. There is no responsibility or privilege you will ever have that will be greater than raising your children. No parent has it all together, which is why you are to be humble and always looking to the Lord in your own life so that you can succeed by both following His instructions, and relying on His mercy and grace upon your children to bring them to maturity despite your own failings. Commit yourself to bringing your children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord while avoiding provoking them to anger or exasperating them causing them to lose heart. If you do so, your children will become a blessing to both you and others, which is the real mark of successful parenting.

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5) Excessive Expectations and Discouragement

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To “*bring them up*” (ἐκτρέφω / *ektrephō*)

Discipline (παιδεία / *paideia*)

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Instruction (νουθεσία / *nouthesia*)

Proverbs 1:2-6

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