Opening Words

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190 Eph The Faith … in the Family – Parents

OK dads and moms! Now it is our turn. We have looked in this brief series on parents and children and tried to answer the question, "Should Children Really Obey Their Parents in Everything?" Children's responsibility is to obey their parents in the Lord. Today we are going to see what Paul says to parents. Here's the verse, Ephesians 6:4.

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

Paul uses the word "fathers" and fathers are primarily responsible for their children, but the word also can include mothers just as the word "brothers" in Scripture does not refer to men only but to men and women. And so, in my message today, we are going to take Paul's admonition both to fathers and mothers. This is especially important because some of you listening today may be single moms, and we want you to find the grace of God as you embrace this challenging task of raising your children for Christ.

The apostle John in 3 John 1:4 wrote, "I have no greater joy than this, to see my children walking in the truth" and while he wrote this about his spiritual children, I don't think he would mind too much if we applied it to our physical children. It is one of the greatest joys."

The other day I was having breakfast with a friend, and I decided on the spur of the moment to give my son, who lived about ten minutes away, a call. He has been in a tight situation with work and I knew he could use the encouragement. He gladly accepted my invitation. We went for a walk in a park and shared our hearts with each other and prayed for each other. The time was priceless and full of joy.

There are some things we should focus on in this passage. First, let's remind ourselves again of the radical difference between the type of father the Roman world offered and what Paul is describing. A Roman father had absolute authority over his children. He could sell them into slavery if he wished. He could make them work in the fields while wearing chains. He had rights under the law to punish his children, even to the point of death.

But this is not the vision of fatherhood Paul presents. If we can remember, way back in Ephesians 3, Paul talked about how every family derives its name from our Father in heaven. He said in verses 14-15 that he bowed his knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth

derives its name. The Greek word for Father is pater and the word he uses for family is patria. This is a play on words by Paul to remind us that every family on earth and every father on earth derives its existence from the Creator who is the Father of all.

Paul is making a biblical worldview statement. The idea of family comes from God, the Father of all. This is a crucial point in these crazy days in which we hear that there can be all kinds of families such as two daddies in this family or two mommies in that family. Well, if the idea of family is just a creation of man, that could be true. If family is just man's idea, then we are free to make up new definitions for family and for marriage.

But we hold to the truth that the idea of family comes from God himself and that on earth every family derives its legitimacy from the Father above. We must walk carefully in this truth lest our culture find itself dishonoring the Father in heaven, the creator of all.

And fathers, our fatherhood and our expression of it to our children should reflect the Father in heaven. We are shaping our children and we have an opportunity to give them a picture of God. I know we are not perfect in this. I know that because I have not been a perfect father and am not a perfect father today to my grown children. But I did give them a picture of the divine Father that has remained with them and influenced them to seek God in their lives and to pass it on to their children. And by the grace of God all of us can do the same.

What a difference this is from the ancient Roman family, and we must remember that Paul was also speaking from the influence of his upbringing within Israel where fathers were also commanded to teach their sons the word of God. Listen to these familiar words from Deuteronomy 6:1-7.

> Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the Lord your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it, 2 so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. 3 O Israel, you should listen and be careful to do it, that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.
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> 4 "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. 7 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.

Let's look at Paul's specific instructions for parents in Ephesians 6:4. He says first, don't exasperate your children. In Colossians 3:21 he says, "Don't cause them to lose heart." There are so many ways we can do this. We can be too strict with them. We can fail to discern their unique personality and how they learn. We can give them commands that are not age appropriate – commands that are too hard for them or commands that are beneath their age. If I told a 5-year-old that he needed to clean the garage, and when he failed to do it, disciplined him, that would cause him to lose heart. If I told a 15-year-old he could not see his friend because it was too dangerous for him to cross the street by

himself, that would exasperate as well! We also exasperate our children by being arbitrary with our rules, making things one way, one day, and another way another day. Or by not having sufficient reason for our rules. Of course, our children should learn to obey without question, but they will quickly learn the difference between a good rule with a reason behind it and an arbitrary rule that we make up just for our convenience. Sometimes it is good to explain why we are imposing rules and discipline upon our children. Sometimes it is good for them to hear it.

I remember on many occasions explaining to my children that they must obey me because I was God's authority in their lives, and the way they responded to me was important. I told them even though I was not perfect I was better than nothing and God was using me to protect them and guide them to become adults. Their world was the world of children and I wanted them to see that it was only a temporary fleeting world. I wanted them to see that most of their earth experience would be as an adult and that God had placed me in their lives to help them reach that goal.

Let's move, now, into the second and positive part of the command. After Paul tells us not to exasperate our children or cause them to lose heart, he says, "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." The phrase "bring them up" is the same phrase he used in Ephesians 5:29 when he said that husbands need to nourish their wives. Just as a husband must value and nourish his wife physically, emotionally, and intellectually so that she may reach her full potential, so parents must do the same with their children. The goal is to nourish them in every part of life – body, soul, spirit – so that they will become well rounded adults and can take their place within God's kingdom as a responsible and fruitful member.

Bringing them up requires two things: discipline and instruction. And when Paul speaks of discipline he is speaking of the need to correct and sometimes punish for wrong behavior. I realize the word "punish" is not in vogue today, even in some Christian circles, but I mean it not in a harsh, angry, abusive way but in a positive, instructive way where sometimes corporal discipline is necessary. The word Paul uses is the same word the writer of Hebrews uses in Hebrews 12 where he says that God disciplines us that we might share in his holiness. Discipline is no fun. The writer said that all discipline for the moment brings sorrow. And with our children discipline often brings tears. But just as the writer of Hebrews says that discipline yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness, in the same way, when we are diligent to discipline our children appropriately, it will yield strong and healthy character in their lives. Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently." Proverbs 29:15 says, "The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother."

Finally, Paul says, give them instruction. Don't yell at them. Don't discipline in anger. But instruct them as you discipline them. Let them know what they have done wrong and show them what they must do to avoid discipline in the future. And, this instruction is not just about lessons for specific infractions they have broken but it is instruction in the things of God. In Israel, a father was required to teach his sons the word of God and to build in his heart loyalty to God. Father and mothers are to do the same with their children today, to make them into followers of Jesus.

There is so much more that could be said about this, but I will stop here. We live in a day of abundant resources where entire ministries are devoted to help you raise your children for Christ. I

hope you will take advantage of these resources and that you will do it with the heart that Paul tells us to have in this wonderful verse, “Fathers, parents, don’t exasperate your children, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”