

Children & Parents

by Cole Newton

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor 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.

Ephesians 6:1-4

Trevin Wax opened up a recent article of his with this quotation of Kevin DeYoung: "Our generation is prone to radicalism without follow-through. We want to change the world and we have never changed a diaper." Wax then continues to expound upon this thought, saying:

Having read much of G. K. Chesterton, I now look askance at anyone who seems to speak primarily in the abstract: "fixing the economy," or "changing the culture," or "loving humankind." Why? Because it's easy to succumb to self-righteousness when you pursue utopian visions in regard to great and massive things. It's when you are faced with the smaller things and the people nearest you where you begin to spot your own flaws and diagnose your lovelessness.

These household commands are prime examples of those "smaller things." The Apostle Paul has sandwiched these ordinary, everyday relationships between the commands for how every Christian is to walk in unity, truth, and light, and to stand against the schemes of the devil. The Christian life and war both occur primarily within our own homes. Therefore, let us never neglect the importance of something simply because it seems small and ordinary. Annie Dillard famously reminded us, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing." Likewise, your homelife *is* your life. It is far easier to wax poetic about theology and politics, but it is much harder to recapture something of Eden within your home. Yet the smaller turns out to be the greater in the end. For as Jesus has taught us, the last will be first, the humble will be exalted, and those who lose their lives will save them. When it comes to changing the world, changing diapers is a good place to begin.

CHILDREN OBEY YOUR PARENTS // VERSES 1-3

Looking beyond marriage and Ephesians 5 as a whole, Paul brings us to our second set of relationships: children and fathers. Although the apostle spends three verses on children and one verse on parents, we will spend much more looking at the parents here. I do this for a few reasons. First, within our congregation, we have many parents and significant number of us are still young parents. Second, because we have many young parents, most of our church's children are very young as well. Third, in verses 2-3, Paul draws on the Fifth Commandment, which we studied last year. Therefore, I will largely turn our attention for children's obedience and honoring of their parents back toward that sermon from the Ten Commandments.

I do, however, want to discuss briefly an interesting bit of wording here. In verse 1, Paul commands children to obey their parents, yet the Fifth Commandment, which Paul quotes in verse 2, tells us to *honor* our father and mother. Although obedience and honor go together, they remain two distinct concepts. In fact, Paul's structure seems to imply here that obedience to parents is an important aspect of honoring them. Or perhaps we should say that for children still within their parents' household, obedience is the primary means of honoring their parents. But even while children outside their parents' home are no longer required to strictly obey them, we are still commanded to honor them.

We should also note that the obedience expected of children to their parents is different than the submission that Paul commanded of wives. The authority distinction between parent and child is more pronounced than that of husband and wife. Marriages, after all, are a one flesh union of a head and his helper. Together they form their household, which often then brings in children, but their children are not destined to remain within their household but rather to form homes of their own. Thus, children are born into this relationship of obedience and authority, whereas marriage is entered by choice and consent.

Indeed, the language of children and parents more closely resembles that of servants and masters. In fact, in Galatians 4:1, Paul noted the similarities between slaves and children, saying, "I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything." This is an unpopular truth, but children are called to obey their parents, not merely submit, because they are not their own. Children absolutely are image-bearers of God, but for their own benefit, their early years are spent under the authoritative possession of their parents.¹ For example, my three-year-old could not properly take care of herself; she requires the guardianship of her mother and I. Left to her own will, she would easily choose actions that could result in her harm or even death. Therefore, it is for her good that I have the authority and responsibility to override her will.

Yet like wives' submission, children are called to obey their parents *in the Lord*. We are all ultimately in submission and obedience to the lordship of Christ, and children must rightly understand their obedience from this context.

FATHERS, DISCIPLINE AND INSTRUCT // VERSE 4

We now turn to Paul's commands toward fathers. We, of course, know from the rest of Scripture that mothers are called to raise their children in the way of the LORD, yet the apostle speaks directly to the fathers in order to emphasize the headship of the husband and father. Mothers, therefore, must hear and learn from this verse as well, but it is pointedly the responsibility of the fathers to appropriately disciple his children.

The apostle gives fathers two commands, one being a negative prohibition with the other being a positive commendation. Yet both are intricately bound together, guarding us against two opposite but equally danger extremes: authoritarian and laissez-faire parenting. First, he tells fathers not to

¹ I will speak next week to the issue of slavery within the Bible. Briefly, however, I will note Paul indicates the fundamental difference between childhood and slavery: that the child grows up. The apostle's words to masters next week set the stage for the eventual collapse of slavery within Christendom; thus, making modern day employment more akin to a wife's submission to her husband and a husband's headship over his wife.

provoke your children to anger. This warning is against frustrating and, ultimately, fostering resentment within the child's heart. Second, fathers are commanded to *bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* As we mentioned two weeks ago, the command to *bring them up* is the same word the apostle used for the husband's call to *nourish* his wife. Thus, this bringing up or nourishing of our children should involve two specific elements: discipline and instruction.

If those commands sounds broad, it purposely is so. Perhaps it would be easier for us if Paul simply gave us a list of do's and do not's for parenting, but given the ultimate inadequacy of lists to instruct the heart, the Spirit leads the apostle address the heart of the matter.

We might begin by asking of the first command: what might provoke a child to anger? Anything, even good things if they are done with a bad heart. Parenting is not a series of boxes to check off. In fact, we can follow all the advice from all the parenting gurus and still end up embittering our children. For instance, family devotions and memorized verses will be slow to seep into the child's heart if they are surrounded by harsh and impatient orders from the father or mother.

Proverbs 15:1 counsels each us to remember that "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," but it also applies perfectly to parents with their children. Children, after all, do not naturally know how to control their emotions. Since infants cannot speak nor do they have a context to understand their surroundings, emotions lead them to naturally cry out for their mother for anything. Many mothers soon begin to discern various types of cries from their babies, but the language of the infant remains crying. As children grow, they learn to use words to express their desires more effectively, but alongside their vocabulary, we also must teach them how to master their emotions rather than being mastered by them. For example, my daughter is occasionally burst into somewhat hysterical tears for relatively minor things. In those moments, I can respond with harsh words like "Stop it or I'll give you a reason to cry" that only escalate the moment, or I can calmly but firmly guide through back into control, saying, "I want to know what's wrong, but I can't understand you when your crying." Yet this very response presumes that I am endeavoring to discipline and instruct her. For this reason, the best way of guarding against provoking your children to anger is by understanding your call to *bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

Let us now address what exactly constitutes discipline. The book of Proverbs is famous for speaking of parental discipline, and it often speaks of it in connection with the rod. Consider a few examples. "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (10:24). "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (22:15). "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol" (23:13-14). "The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (29:15).

This rod of discipline is typically seen as referring to physical correction, such as spanking, which I believe is generally very useful as prod to keep children from veering off the appropriate path.² With my daughter, I have also come to see the practical benefit of a quick and physical response to

² I say generally because there may be many circumstances when a child, perhaps especially an adopted child, has experienced physical abuse and, therefore, physical corrections bring more confusion than clarity. Or if a parent has a difficult time controlling their own anger, refusing to spank a child may be the better option to take.

disobedience. It provides a sharp reprimand of behavior, which I then follow by reemphasizing why that behavior is not permitted and with an assurance of my deep love for her. And life moves on. She is often playing full-force again within the next few seconds. Nevertheless, we should take great care not to limit parental discipline to spankings.

While conversing about discipline in adulthood, we rightly think of a multitude of things, like waking up or going to bed early, training and practicing a skill, exercising, and exerting self-control. We rightfully consider discipline to be how we shape ourselves, little by little, into the molds of who we would like to be in the future. Discipline means actively cultivating our lives into how we desire to live them, and of course, sometimes physical correction plays a role. For example, if I want to continue losing weight but I also want to eat desserts, I'll need a significant amount of exercise in order to maintain a caloric deficit. Yet in general, I must realize that limiting desserts and regularly doing moderate exercise is the easiest path to shedding the extra pounds. As a whole, being disciplined is nothing less than how we are choosing to live our lives.

Likewise, the role of parents in childrearing is to discipline in the LORD's ways, to guide them in the path of wisdom, which has its beginning in fearing God. By strength and grace of the Spirit, we are called to shape and mold their lives into a biblical pattern, a Christ-glorifying cruciform design. Discipline, therefore, is not simply a by-the-moment act; it is an each-and-every-moment act. And it can never be divorced from instruction because how we correct them is how we are also instructing them. Through naps and bedtimes, meals and snacks, playing and reading, we are constantly disciplining and instructing them; we cannot do anything else. The only question, therefore, is: are we disciplining and instructing them according to God's Word or according to the pattern of this world.

This means we are called to so much more than simply having well-behaved children; we should want well-disciplined and well-instructed children after God's commands. God's commands, of course, is the key phrase. Far be it from us to only desire miniature clones of ourselves! Rather, our aim must be to equip them for living as God designed and intended, to be disciples of Jesus. After all, parenting is nothing less than a long-term act of discipleship.

Nourishing a child through discipline and instruction is a radically different mentality than wrangling a child into submission, "straightening them up", or even simply producing, as we said, a well-behaved child. No parent wants their children to be unhappy, unsuccessful, or incompetent, but while these are good desires, they are not the final goal of godly parenting. The discipline and instruction *of the Lord* are both aimed at holiness above all else.

If eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3), then our supreme objective in parenting our children should be to disciple them into knowing God. But, of course, this can only properly be done by pursuing the Lord ourselves first. If we ourselves are not disciplined and instructed in the Lord, how then are we meant to discipline and instruct our children in the Lord? Hear this fathers and mothers: the single greatest action you can take to become a better parent is to know the Lord and to be disciplined and instructed in His way. Tedd and Margy Tripp give similar guidance:

Perhaps the best thing you could do for your children would be to get yourself before God, behold his glory, and then move toward your children with the encouragement

that there is a great and glorious God for whom they were made. Life is found in beholding and knowing Him.³

But how can we ourselves know God and be disciplined and instructed by Him as well as disciplining our children to do the same? “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In other words, the Scriptures are entirely sufficient for our discipline and instruction that we might attain maturity in holiness. But they are also sufficient for equipping us to disciple our children in that same task as well. Indeed, if the greatest need to parent biblically is to know the Lord ourselves, I would argue that the greatest hindrance against godly parenting is biblical illiteracy. Today, there are an abundance of resources on how to parent well, and many of them are excellent. However, you do not need books or lessons on parenting more than you need to know and love God and His Word. In fact, while Paul mentions parents explicitly in only this verse, the entire letter of Ephesians is a parenting manual.

For example, the walk commands that we studied for a couple of months from Ephesians 4:1-5:21 are not simply for guiding how we interact with one another as adult believers but also for how we raise our children. Few verses would be more benefit for exasperated parents to memorize than 4:2, which calls to walk “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” Repenting to our children certainly requires true humility because if there is any relationship that we can “get by” without repenting, it is with our children. Likewise, showing gentleness and patience in the midst of the day’s fourteenth meltdown requires a tangible work of the Holy Spirit. When we read Paul’s call to bear with one another in love, we automatically think of those outside our household, but it is most often the members of our own home toward whom we must bear with in love.

Or we could look to 5:19 and ask ourselves whether we are addressing our children “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” or whether we are instructing them in the ways of the world through its own music?

Or perhaps we should meditate over the commands of 4:25-32 and ask ourselves a series of questions: Do I speak the truth with my children, or do I tell them lies, even “little” ones? Do I sin against them in my anger, or more fundamentally, do I get angry for the right reasons and at the right things? Do I teach them how to do honest work with their own hands, even when that means patiently letting them do things poorly? Do I let corrupting talk come out of my mouth against them, or are my words a source of grace for building them up? Am I kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving toward them? If we were to live out these commands well before our children, we would already be guarding ourselves against provoking them to anger.

God’s Word, fathers and mothers, is sufficient for disciplining and instructing us in how we are to discipline and instruct our children in the Lord. Let us, therefore, love God with all our heart, soul, and might, and let us teach our children to do likewise.

³ Tedd and Margy Tripp, *The Gospel & Parenting*, 57.