

The Biblical Role of Parents

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Our text this evening comes from Ephesians 6. And I would invite you to turn there with me. I will read the first four verses of the chapter and then have some preliminary remarks to kind of set the context for the spirit in which we hopefully gathered here this evening. Ephesians 6 beginning in verses 1 through 4.

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2 Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; 3 so that it may be well with you, and you may live long on the earth. 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

I remember when our family was very young. We had three or maybe four children at the time, and we were in Chicago temporarily to live for about a year, and we went to a new church to settle in during a time of transition in our family. And the pastor who was there, we came in at the end of his ministry, he was a relatively young man, and a terminal disease had taken hold of him and when we met him he was in a wheelchair with not very long to live. He met us near the front door, and he introduced himself, and he looked at us with our little towheads all around us, and I will never forget the gentleness with which he spoke to us. He said, "You guys have a beautiful family." We visited for a little while. I don't even remember his name. I remember the church, but I don't remember his name. But that's always stood out in my mind. Not because I agreed with him that we have a beautiful family, there was just this pastoral tenderness and gentleness and that word of affirmation just meant to us because those of you that have raised families or those of you that currently have families, you know that when they are young like that or even when they're older, you know, there can be times of exasperation as a parent and times of concern as you see trajectories and things like that, just to have a pastor come alongside and say those gentle words is something that has stuck with me now, you know, over twenty-five years later. I still remember that moment like it happened yesterday.

And I just want you to know that as I open God's Word for you here this evening to talk with you about parenting from Scripture, it's with that same spirit in mind that I address you and that I speak with you today. We have a lot of young families in our church, and without exception I would say to you, "You have beautiful families." It's really sweet to see the way that you are raising them and seeking to raise them in the nurture and the

admonition of the Lord. And at the same time, all of us as elders, I speak for all of the elders, not just myself here, all of us understand that you have challenges, all of us understand that you have failed in more ways than you would care to count, you have failed in ways that you wouldn't want the public to know about, things that you would prefer not to even think about, but it's there. We understand that, and we support and love you all the more for that. You know, Scripture says that blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We gather in Christ, not because we are self-righteous, not because we are perfect at parenting, not because our children are perfect or any models for anyone else, but we gather together humbly under the grace of God; we gather together humbly with one another to support one another, to show unity to one another, to encourage one another across different decisions and styles of parenting in the word of God and in the grace of God trusting God to guide us and to bless us.

There is another random story about a different friend, again going back many decades, and none of you would know him. But a dear friend of mine whose family is ahead of ours, he is older than I am, his family is older than ours, you get the idea. I remember many years ago talking with him, and we were close, and we still are across the distances and across time, across the miles, and I remember talking to him about parenting. And somehow we got into the realm of regrets, you know, and you look back, and you look at patterns and habits that you had over time, and he said something that was poignant, that was insightful, and that was funny all at the same time but it's an earnest comment that I think helps condition our hearts for what we are about to see from God's word. He said, "Is there anything you would change? Anything about your parenting?" And with all earnestness he said, "You know Don I wish we hadn't spent so much time watching Championship wrestling." This was the show kind of wrestling, not the bloody fights that are popular today. This was the show kind. And you know there are show men, and the garish outfits, and all of that, and it's all fake, and apparently he and his kids enjoyed watching that, you know, and they had some laughs together around the television. He looked at it then after the fact looking back on it and realizing that there was an opportunity cost with all of that time that they spent, you know, watching something that they no doubt laughed at and enjoyed together. There was an opportunity cost that something more serious wasn't used in that time, there wasn't something more constructive, more edifying, in the time is what he was saying. And now that his kids were grown and out of the house, he realized that he couldn't get that time back. And I think anybody that's a parent with grown children can look back and feel twinges of regret over lost opportunity, time that wasn't used in the best way possible, you know, and it just makes us all very glad that, you know, we are on the receiving end of the grace of God. Amen? The grace of God that he is gracious to us even in our parenting failures, and even if there are long term consequences, to our failures and to even our sins in parenting and in life, that the grace of God is more than abundant, that God gives his grace not to deserving sinners, but to undeserving sinners, that Christ died not because we were righteous in our parenting, but he died even for our unrighteous parenting to cover all of those sins. And so we come in a spirit of support together tonight. We come in a spirit of unity here tonight. We are not here to throw brick bats at anybody in what's about to be said. But just in this spirit of gracious love and acceptance for one another we

come to God's word in order to hear what God would say to us about the biblical role of parents from Ephesians 6:4.

With all of that introduction I think it's fair to say this, that to one degree or another, we all either share in carnal tendencies in parenting or we had carnal tendencies in our parenting. There are parents who just want a checklist. "Tell me what to do. Give me a checklist with itemized things that I do each day and how I deal with babies, how I deal with toddlers. Give me the checklist." And if they keep the checklist that some other supposed authority gives to them, they feel like they've done their duty, and sadly with that approach it's easy to overlook the principles of the heart that actually are designed to motivate and be the focus of parenting. It's not an external matter, you know, there are external aspects to it, but the heart of parenting is about the heart of the child preeminently, not their activities, and not the cute things that they say. But we're mindful that for a very brief period of time the Lord has put eternal souls under our care and has given us the opportunity to be his agents, as it were, in shaping them, and informing those souls, and praying for those souls. And I guess that's one other thing that I wanted to say. I can say this earnestly, all of you that are parents and with children at home and children away, I would want you to know that your elders pray for your children. We pray for your children. We pray for their salvation. We pray for you to have wisdom as you raise them. Those that have adult children, we pray for them as well. We pray for the Lord's work in their hearts. We pray for the Lord's comfort to you, knowing that some of you have children that are very wayward. We know that it breaks your heart. So it's just with a fullness of sympathy that we're gathered together here today and talking about these things.

Along with the checklist motif of parenting, you know, the truth of the matter is that some people are not really interested in the spiritual nurture of their kids. They're too busy with the work, with the activities of the week. And if their kids simply stay off of drugs, and the daughters don't get pregnant, parenting has been successful, because there is no obvious thing that anyone could point to that would shame them in their parenting. Well, obviously parenting from a biblical perspective needs to be much more than that. And yet at the other end, and this is something that might be a little bit more likely in this gathering here tonight and within our church, at the other end of the spectrum there are parents that forget the grace of God, forget the sovereignty of God in salvation, and they have this burden on their mind and on their heart that the salvation of their children depends entirely on how they parent, as if the grace of God wasn't operative, as if the work of the Holy Spirit wasn't needed; they feel this tremendous pressure that is almost suffocating and if something goes wrong with their children, they feel like they're a great failure and, you know, and they become defensive and all of that if anything is pointed out to them.

Well, against that range from spiritual indifference to spiritual obsession, within the sweet spot of all of that, there is the word of God speaking to us with stunning brevity and with stunning clarity. Before we look at Ephesians 6:4 I just want you to think, those of you that are parents, most of you have probably bought one or more Christian books on parenting, and you know that they can be thick, two, three hundred page books, and all of

that, and explaining things, and I am sure that at times those books are very helpful to you, and I could only thank God that they are. Still. Still, when we come to God's word and see what God's word finds sufficient to say for us, we are struck by how brief it is, how much God can say in a short period of time. And I say that to give you a sense of, let's approach it from this biblical illustration. You remember when David went to fight Goliath and Saul gave him his armor to wear, and it was just so heavy and so big and cumbersome to him that David could hardly move. And he said, "I can't go into battle against Goliath like this." And so he tossed off all of the armor that Saul had placed on him and went to battle with five smooth stones and a slingshot. It was greatly simplified and it was tailored to what David was able to do. And God blessed what he did, with that small bit of ammunition God did a miraculous thing and delivered Israel through the hand of a shepherd boy with a slingshot. It's crazy, so to speak, to think about it that way.

Well, what I want to do is help you to have a sense of putting off the heavy armor of a lot of extra biblical things that might be helpful but things that weigh you down with all of that, and just come and let's see what Scripture says to parents. And let's look again at verse 4, Ephesians 6:4, as we move into our time together. Ephesians 6:4. Where he says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." In those brief words we find three aspects of parenting that I want to share with you here this evening and I will just give you the outline now to start with, and then we'll go back and fill it out. First of all, we see in this verse, we see the realm of parenting. The realm of parenting, number one. Secondly, we see the restraint on parenting. Number two, the restraint on parenting. And number three, the responsibility of parenting, the positive responsibility, you might say, after the negative restraint on parenting. So, the realm, the restraint, and the responsibility is going to be our outline for this evening.

Now as we look at verse 4, we see that Paul speaks, and he says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." That word "fathers" is what I want to focus on for just a moment. He says "fathers" here as he introduces the duties of parenting. By the way, notice that the duties flow immediately out of the fifth commandment that we've been studying. He quotes the fifth commandment in verses 2 and 3 which are addressed to children in the relationship, but as an interpretive principle of the 10 Commandments, we see that the commandment extends beyond the mere words that are expressed in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Paul takes that commandment and says, "This actually has something to say to parents as well. Children honor your parents." Now, he addresses parents in terms of what they are to do. But it's interesting that as he uses the vocative "fathers," vocative simply being a fancy grammar term for who's being addressed in the command, he says "fathers" rather than saying "parents" or "fathers and mothers." I think that's important for us to notice, because in chapter 6 verse 1 he said, "Children, obey your parents," using a different word. In verse 2 he includes both father and mother in his quotation of the commandment, and then in verse 4 he uses the term "fathers."

Now, there are a number of commentators that would say that when he says "fathers" here he is referring to both parents but I think that may cloud things just a little bit. Paul used the more general term "parents" just earlier in verse 1. He had said, "Parents." He

used both “fathers and mothers” in verse 2 but when he gets to verse 4 he uses the more specific term “fathers.” And it seems to me that he’s making fathers uniquely accountable for the spiritual condition of their families. That’s especially true when you remember the historical context. In that culture fathers exercised a virtually unlimited authority over their households. And so Paul here is making fathers immediately accountable for what follows. They were the ones that had the authority. They are the ones who have the authority, the ultimately authority, in a Christian home, and so Paul addresses the fathers and says, “This is the home environment that God intends for you to provide.”

Now, with that said, the principles apply to mothers as well. But men, fathers, what I would say to you this evening, those of you in the room, those of you over the live stream, and we take this seriously as elders, that men have an elevated accountability before God for the spiritual state of their homes. Men have an elevated accountability before God for the spiritual state of their homes and for the principles by which their children are raised. Now, things change in the workforce and all of that. Things aren’t quite as clear in culture today as they used to be. But generally speaking in Christian homes, it’s going to be the mother that more often has more time with the children, the mother who has more direct day to day responsibility for the carrying out of discipline and provision and things like that while dad is away at work and all of that. We understand all of that and in our church we have a number of families that home school, and that’s great. We home schooled our children. And it’s often the mothers that are carrying the load on that. So we recognize that, but still fathers are the one who are supposed to set the tone and the direction by which the family runs. It’s fathers who are responsible to support the mothers as they carry out these duties. And so there is a direct word to fathers here that should make the men sit up, those of you that still have children at home to sit up and say, “Even though my wife is the one that’s with them on a more frequent day to day, hour to hour basis, I have responsibility here.” And I know that the men that are in the room here today that most of you are earnestly desiring to be faithful in that responsibility. So God’s word comes to instruct you and tell you how you can please God with your leadership in the home. So this is very, very helpful and practical for us.

So let’s look, first of all, at the realm of parenting. The realm, the r-e-a-l-m of parenting. Point number one. When we speak about, tonight, we speak about the realm of parenting, we’re talking about the scope of parenting, that what is it that parenting covers then? What is your parental responsibility in parenting? Well, we could put it this way: parenting is a comprehensive way of life, not simply a compartment of your adulthood. It is a comprehensive way of life. Every aspect of your life comes under the umbrella of your approach to parenting, even the way that you handle your job and the jobs you take and all of that, parenting is in the middle of that to one degree or another. And there is a basic point of grammar that helps us see that, Greek grammar, as it were, in Ephesians 6:4. Look at it there where he says, “Fathers, do not,” number one, “do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” He gives a negative prohibition. “Don’t do this.” And then he gives a positive command. “Do this instead. Don’t provoke your children to anger, but instead bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” There is a clear contrast there that he is making.

And those commands in the Greek text are in the present tense, which indicates not that it's happening right now today as we tend to think about the present, but the present tense command in Greek is a structure, is a form, that indicates ongoing action. This is to be your ongoing pattern of life as an ongoing repeated continual matter. Parent like this. Don't provoke your children, but on the other hand bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

And when we compare Scripture with Scripture, we see that that's definitely the proper way to understand the grammatical structure there. We looked at these verses on Sunday, but I want you to go back to them again in Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy 6. It was encouraging to me that one of our young fathers, Mitchell, opened our time together tonight reading out of Deuteronomy, reading out of Deuteronomy 8. We didn't plan it that way. He chose that of his own accord. But I was glad that he pointed us back to Deuteronomy, because you see in Deuteronomy, remember that in Deuteronomy Moses is expounding on the Law of God to the people of Israel before he is about to die and they are to move on in their national existence and enter into the Promised Land. So Moses is giving them principles that will have enduring significance for their national life after he is gone. You read at the end of Deuteronomy, you read about his death at the age of one hundred twenty. He was still a man of vigor, but it was time in the Lord's hand for him to go. And Moses addresses national life and quickly goes into the life of the family. In Deuteronomy 6:4 he says, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" And he says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Notice the second person pronouns there indicating the responsibility. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Five times that second person pronoun is used there indicating the personal responsibility that the adults had to be disciples of the Lord as they lived life and as they moved into the Promised Land. He goes on to say, verse 6, "And these words which I am commanding you today shall be on your hearts." We've got seven times already with this second person pronoun. Then he tells them what they are to do with it. He says, "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." And then look over at Deuteronomy 11:19 which reinforces this point that I'm making. Deuteronomy 11:19. "You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down, and when you rise up."

You see the picture, and we have emphasized this over the years, is that the biblical pattern for instructing your children and providing them spiritual care and direction, it's more than a short devotional time on a day to day basis. You do something at breakfast, and then you can move on to other things throughout the day, or whatever. Those devotional times, that family worship time, that's fine as far as it goes, but I am always concerned to emphasize that the biblical emphasis is talking about something that is done repeatedly throughout the day, that this starts in the morning. It goes throughout the activities of the day, and it's going on when you lie down at night. And so it's our responsibility isn't discharged, and our responsibility isn't summarized by a rule of a 10 minute family devotion time or something like this. It's far greater. It's far more

expansive than that. This is the way that we think about all of life. As we are going through day by day we are talking to our children about Scripture, about God, about Christ, about the gospel, and that this is a natural part of life. We should all understand that there is no place for a Christian father who has nothing to say to his family about spiritual things. How could you begin to lead your family spiritually if you aren't talking to them in one way or another about these biblical matters? And so Scripture pictures men, dads, fathers. Scripture pictures you with a continual dialogue with your children that is rooted in the character of God and your own love for him.

Go back to Deuteronomy 6 there for a moment. The soil in which the seed of family, spiritual life is sown, is sown beginning with the heart of the father who embraces and who has the work of the Spirit conditioning him in this direction, that the father himself is one who loves the Lord his God. The father himself loves the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all of his might. It starts with the father having his own vertical perspective on life and having a heart that is given over to the priority of worship, given over to the priority of knowing God and making him known to his family. And out of that soil grows the spiritual life of the family. It's rooted in the character of God and in the father's own love for him, the earthly father, the parent's own love for God himself. And so as you are going along, you are asking questions of your children, you are answering their questions, and never knowing exactly when a crucial moment is going to occur, right? Sometimes these things just happen spontaneously, and you never saw it coming. But something pops out of your kid's mouth that is crucial for an understanding of Christ and you have the opportunity to do that. Well, it obviously presupposes a father that in one way or another that is with his family and is involved with them.

And so this is more than, the realm of parenting is more than just telling them Bible stories about Noah and David and different things like that. The realm of parenting is more than just instructing them in external morality and, you know, "Be good or God will get you if you don't." No, no it's rooted in the deep things of the character of God that captivate your own soul. It's rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Christ came from heaven to earth in order to redeem sinful man, that he lived a perfect life. He went to the cross in order to offer up that life as a blood sacrifice to God the Father in order to turn away the wrath of God from his people, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day. Ascended into heaven from whence he intercedes for his children. One day he is coming again. Boy, that's a lot to be able to talk with your children about, isn't it? And these are rich and wonderful things. So much more than just, so much more, parents, and I just want to encourage you and even challenge you with this I guess, but we just see these deep things of God that have captivated the Father's heart, you know, and it's encouraging to me. It's genuinely encouraging to me to know that there are men in our congregation that are like this and that God's word has captivated them, and they love sound theology, and they're pursuing it and studying it.

Well, you know, a family that has a man like that is a family that God has particularly blessed. And you wives that have a husband like that that is leading and has his own passion to know God, to know Christ, to know the word, to study the word, you know, you should thank God for that and encourage that man in his pursuit of God, because God

has given you a special gift. Even in Christian homes not every Christian wife has that like she would like, and I'm mindful of the fact that in our broader church community, you know, we have wives that struggle with the fact that their husbands have no interest in the things of God at all. Well, ladies, if you have a husband that loves the word of God, the things of God, no matter what his other failings might be, you recognize the unique, special gift that God has given you, and you support that man and you encourage him in his leadership. There is nothing more vital to your family's well being than that. And it's just so important for you not to undermine the man and, you know, the truth of the matter is that a lot of times men feel a little bit intimidated in family leadership. They know how far short they fall. They are conscious of the fact that they don't have answers to all of the questions that could be asked. They're conscious of the fact that there are great things in the word of God that they don't understand. But they're trying. They're trying. They're seeking. Well, you know, rather than chastise him for what he doesn't do or what he doesn't know, ladies, I just beg of you to affirm him and encourage him as the most important priority that you have to contribute to the spiritual nature of your household.

And so, with that said, dads, you are lovingly and patiently teaching your children those things that I've mentioned. And you're lovingly and patiently teaching them of their need for repentance, their need to put their faith in Christ, and their need to obey him as Lord if they claim to know him in a personal way. These are all great matters of priority. And along with that, even, dads, even if you are failing in every other way in your parenting, isn't it obvious that the very least thing that you could do is to day by day faithfully be taking those lambs that the Lord has entrusted to your care, be taking them daily before the throne of God saying, "God be gracious on them. Look at what You've done, Lord. You've given them to me. You've given me to them as their dad. God, you know how much they need grace! They've got me as a dad! God, be gracious to them. God, send Your Spirit upon them. God, love them and bring them into the fold as Your own children and do that, O God, which I'm not able to do on my own." And you're pleading with God to do a spiritual work in their hearts and asking him to be gracious on all of your shortcomings and sinful failures as a father. You know, and you can at least talk to God about your children if you don't do anything else.

And so the realm of parenting is just the natural course of life over the course of time. That is the realm of parenting. Isn't it obvious then that the first priority for a Christian dad is not that his kids would be godly but that he himself would be godly. We have to keep this straight in our minds. Dads, your first priority, your first priority is your own personal godliness, because you lead spiritually out of the overflow of your own spiritual life. And so you must be godly yourself. I will never forget. I don't know how many years ago this was, and the details are foggy, but I remember clearly what the man said to me. The father of the house, the head of the household, said to me as he was talking looking at ministry, he said, "Why, I want this for my kids." Now, that sounds really high and pious, doesn't it? "Oh, he wants his kids to know the Lord." But the truth of the matter is that is not an impressive statement at all. That misses the whole point. The first priority is that you would be godly. It starts with you.

And so for men who would walk into our church, you know I don't often get the opportunity to give an admonition like this to people privately, because, you know, things just don't come up, but if I were to speak to a young father coming in to a church, I would want him to know that you need to be here for your own sake. This isn't about your kids. This is about you. If God is working in your life, then he will be working in your children's lives. But on the other hand, if you are not following Christ, if you do not love Christ yourself, it's not going to do any good to put your kids in church when your example and what you love is on daily display to them that it's contrary to what you're trying to foist upon them, but you don't want it for yourself. And so there has to be integrity in the man's leadership. There has to be integrity in the man's heart. That he wants this for himself. And so the father, the human father, I know it gets, you know you think about God the Father, well I'm talking about the earthly father now. The parent must be a man of God's word. The father must be a man of prayer. The father must be faithful to Christ and faithful in the local church. You lead by your example. You don't foist it off on someone else.

One of the things that just drives me crazy with the whole concept of youth ministry, which we don't follow here, is parents who just want to hand their kids over to the youth pastor and let the youth pastor deal with their spiritual condition. That is completely unbiblical. There is nothing in the Bible that would suggest that that's the way that your children are to be raised. You know, the youth pastor becomes the equivalent of a Catholic godparent to them and becomes one who is responsible for the spiritual condition of their kids, and then when the kids go off, the youth pastor gets blamed for it. There is nothing in Scripture to point to that. The youth pastor is not the one who gets up with your kids, who lies down with them at night, who is walking with them throughout the day. And we don't even use youth pastors, and I am defending them here. I don't know where that came from. You get the point. Dads, it's up to you. It's your responsibility. And you know, you are physically responsible for bringing those children into the world. Now you have a spiritual responsibility from God to raise them accordingly. It starts with you. Not with the kids.

Well, let's go secondly, that's the realm of parenting, let's go secondly to the restraint on parenting. The restraint on parenting. And go back to Ephesians 6 with me here. The balance of Scripture is just stunning to me, particularly in this section, this household charter that Paul gives to the church in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 as he deals with marriage, wives, and husbands, as he deals with the parent child relationship, children and fathers, he goes on into the workplace, slaves and masters. There is just this wonderful symmetry, this wonderful balance that the word of God brings to bear on our social relationships. It's not lopsided. It's not directed at only one. It's directed on both sides of the relationship. And I love that about the word of God.

And so in the first three verses of Ephesians 6, as we have been looking at for a few weeks now, the moral law commands children to honor their parents. Look at the first three verses again. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." Now, immediately on the heels of that

Paul guards family life from imbalance or from abuse, because he goes on and he immediately puts a restraint on those who have leadership on the home that this is how God commands fathers to lead their home and specifically in the realm of their relationship with their children. He says in verse 4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Men, you may be the dad, you may have the final authority in your home, but that does not mean that you get to do whatever you want in the home. You can’t just be arbitrary in your leadership. If you make any claim to godliness, if you make any claim to being a man of God, you understand, and you must understand, that God restrains you and directs you in your parenting. You do not have unbridled, unlimited authority. God has placed moral demands on you in the way that you parent and this must be respected.

And so he gives us, not only, he tells us, not only what fathers are to do, he also tells fathers what not to do. And he restrains parenting in this way. Look at it again there in verse 4. “Do not provoke your children to anger.” God forbids you from a pattern of parenting that irritates your children, and frustrates them, and confuses them. You have a responsibility to lead them in a way that brings them along and nurtures them. You know, I have heard of parents that think that their responsibility as parents is to break the spirit of their children. That just causes chills to run down my spine to hear parents talk about their family life that way that they would bring severity to bear on the children and crush them. This is not the picture that Scripture gives at all, and we will see that in our third point. For now we just see that God forbids a pattern of irritation to the children.

In Colossians 3:21 it says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children so that they will not lose heart.” If your child is starting to become heavily discouraged under your parenting, you need to step back and reevaluate everything that you’re doing. You know, and I have said this in the past, I tend to repeat, I am getting old, so I just start to repeat myself, and there are people in the audience who can nod in sympathetic understanding that “yeah, we do that too.” But a Christian parent is not one who lives by gospel for his own sinful condition and then parents by law without grace toward and his parenting is just harsh, and unbending, and unyielding to his children. You want grace from God, but you won’t give it to your own flesh and blood? That does not compute. That doesn’t make any sense. And the severity and harshness maybe that you had at the hands of your own parents is something that needs to be filtered, and renewed, and changed through the perspective of God’s word.

Well let’s just ask a question then as we talk about this restraint, some things that I needed to learn the hard way in my years of parenting from having done it the wrong way at times. What provokes and exasperates children, and how could you honor this command not to provoke them to anger?

Well, here is just some thoughts and suggestions. Don’t be so harsh in your rules and in your discipline. Don’t give rules to your children that you know they can’t keep and then reach quickly for your belt when they fail to keep them. Put them in a position to succeed. Do what you would want your boss at work to do for you to cater to your

strengths, minimize your weaknesses, and put you in a position to succeed. This is what you should do with your children as well.

Secondly, you should not ignore your children or mock them when they come and say cute little things to you, or when they don't get something right away. They should not be the objects of your ridicule or your mocking, making fun of them, laughing at their expense. This is very destructive. You know, and when you think about it as an adult, none of us like that. None of us would like that if someone in a position of authority to us was mocking us, laughing at us, making fun of the way that we said something. None of us would respond well to that. How much more a little lamb that is just learning to find its way and looking up to a mom and a dad as their authority, and almost a godlike figure in their lives, and this figure of authority comes down and insults them and mocks them? This is destructive. Don't do that. That's provoking them to anger. And don't criticize them when they've done their best to please you. Yeah, maybe they didn't get the floor completely clean. That's alright. Affirm them for what they've done and encourage them and come alongside them. They are there to be encouraged and helped, not to be mocked and made fun of.

Another thing that I wish I had done better on this over the years, this is my version of championship wrestling you might say. "Maybe later," be your standard response when your children come to you and request your time and attention. You know what's going to happen? Eventually they're going to move on in life. They're going to get their own job. They're going to get their own friends. They're one day going to move out of the house, and they're not going to be asking for your time anymore. You're going to be asking for theirs. And it's not going to be the same. I say that not to lay guilt trips on anybody, but just we have to live in the moment and take advantage of it.

I remember one particular thing. My son, he was four or five, you know maybe ten or twelve, I don't remember, but we've thrown the football. We'd played. You know what dads do with their sons, we did that a lot. You come home after you've been at work. It's been a long day. Things are on your mind. He comes, and he says, "You want to go out and throw the football?" And I said, "Oh Daniel, not tonight. I don't want to do this tonight." And I remember, it convicted me, in the most gracious way Nancy said something to me at the time. These weren't the exact words, but the theme of it was, "You're not always going to have the opportunity to go throw the football with him. You ought to go out and throw it with him now, even if you don't feel like, because you're not always going to have that opportunity later on." That was the theme of it. It was much briefer and more direct than that.

And so I pulled myself up off the chair, and we went out, and we threw the football, and we had a great time, and let me just say something else and be a little bit too transparent for the good of what I like to be. But in terms of exasperating children and doing it the wrong way, there is something that I want to encourage fathers with to approach things differently than what I did one time. This stands out in my memory and nearly brings me to tears every time that I think about what I did. Daniel was two or three years old. We had been out front in our old house in California doing something, playing football, and I

was doing what a dad should do at the time. Well, he needed to go inside and go to the bathroom. He's just a little guy. He's hardly knee high, just to give you an idea. He's two or three years old at the point. Oh, this just makes me sick. Why did I get into this? Now, I can't get out of it, right? Now you're going to know this awful thing in my past. And he toddled into the house, and I heard him starting to come back out. And so I hid behind a bush. I thought this was funny at the time. I hid behind the bush, and he came out, and he's looking for me in all the sincerity and earnestness of that simple little young heart, and he can't find me. I can see him, and he's looking around. "Dadda? Dadda? Where are you, Dadda?" And at that moment, in that vulnerable little moment, I jumped out, and I scared him, and I don't remember exactly what I did, but it was like, "Ahhhhhh!" I thought that was funny at the time. Immediately, his reaction convicted me, and I knew that I had done something very, very bad. I scared him so bad. I just saw him. He was just trembling, and he stamped his feet at me, and he said something that was true. It was kind of funny and saddeningly cute at the time. He stamped his feet, and he looked at me in the face, and he rebuked me, and he said, "Bad Dad!"

And he was right. What was I doing? What was I thinking? This tender hearted little boy just looking for his dad wanting to play, and I hide from him, and I scare him deliberately so that I can have a laugh at his expense. What is wrong with a dad that does that? And I was a seminary student at the time. I provoked him. I sinned against God with that awful moment in my parenting. And I regret it to this day. I mean, I understand Christ has forgiven me. I understand that God is not going to hold this against me. And today Daniel doesn't even remember it except on the second hand story that I tell him. And he doesn't hold it against me, as far as I know. If you hear anything different, just whisper it in my ear. But that was very bad, because I provoked him for no good reason.

One other thing that you can say about provoking your children, the restraint on parenting. You don't need to humiliate your children by disciplining them in front of others, especially their siblings. You don't need to do that. You can take them and find a private place, and address them privately, and deal with their sinful behavior in private. You don't need to expose them to that kind of correction privately. And this is what Scripture does for adults. This is the way that Christ tells us in the body. If your brother sins, go to him privately. Go to him one on one and address him. Address him privately, and if your brother repents, you know, you have won your brother. Well, you know, just apply that to your children who are much more fragile than an adult, and respect them enough to discipline them in private. Their siblings don't need to see your correction of them any more than you would like to be publicly rebuked for something that you had done in the workplace or at church or something like that. None of us would like that. Well, just carry that over. Do unto your children as you would want adults to do unto you. This is just the first principle of love.

And by the way, you know I don't use that word nearly enough in my preaching. It's going to be one of the many marks against my preaching that I don't talk in these terms enough. I don't know what's wrong with me. But all of this parenting that we're talking about. These are just out workings of loving your children. This is just an out working of love. These aren't rules that say, "Oh, I got to keep these rules." This is what you do with

children that you love and care about. And so this is just an out working of love, an out working of love from a Christian parent who says that I have received the love of God in my own life. That God loved me. Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. Well, now I have a realm where God has directed me, “This is how you love your children.”

Thirdly, we have talked about the realm of parenting, the broad scope of it. We have talked about the restraint on parenting. Don't exasperate your children. Let's talk about, thirdly, about the responsibility of parenting. We see that at the end of verse 4. And we have already talked about this a lot so I can kind of summarize this. In the responsibility of parenting, point number three, Paul turns from the negative to the positive side of parenting. He said, “Don't do this, but instead by contrast,” verse 4, “do this. Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” To bring them up, this is very interesting to me. Bring up, that verb “bring up” is the same word in Greek that is translated “nourish” in chapter 5 verse 29. No one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church. Husbands are to nourish their wives, Ephesians 5, and they are to nourish their children in Ephesians 6. And it's translated differently I think just because of the different relational context, I guess, is what the translators were thinking, but what we're talking about here is that God calls you, men, and by implication mothers as well, God calls you to seek your children's maturity by training them, and instructing them, and warning them in the ways of Christ. And there is something very, very, very important that is assumed in this command. Scripture presupposes that you understand that your children are fallen creatures who are in need of direction, discipline, and instruction in order to become the adults that God intends them to be. Your children are not little angels. And most of you know that. Most of you know that. Most of you understand that your children are born with sinful hearts and that, you know, from their helplessness where they don't have any opportunity to manifest that, as they start to grow and get to be twelve, eighteen, twenty-four months, it starts to come out, doesn't it? And our children have angry tempers, selfish desires, lazy hearts, and disobedient dispositions and a parent that doesn't recognize that is going to train their children in an entirely bad way. Children are not to be objects of your veneration and worship. Rather God calls you to understand that they are fallen beings. They inherited a sinful condition from you. You passed along your sinful condition to them in procreation. And as a result, they have inherited a sinful nature from you and it is your responsibility to train them and to discipline them so that that sinful nature is corralled and minimized while you are praying to God to give them a new heart in Christ.

And so God calls you to train them, not to leave them to their own devices. Parents should not be raising their children without discipline. This can only lead to chaos. Children are not meant to run around like wild animals and to just express whatever is in their heart. Christian parents should know that what's in their heart is deceitful. Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart of man is deceitful above all else and is desperately wicked. Who can understand it?” Well, it's your responsibility as a parent to train them and not just let that sinful nature run its full course. Scripture says that parents that do that are treating their children as though they hate them. You can find that in the book of Proverbs. So you have to train them. You have to speak to their mind and apply discipline to their bottoms to correct them. Teach them the authority of Scripture. Teach them to fear God so that they

know their place in God's world. They're not the boss. They're not the central object of the world.

Parents need to teach their children and require them to honor them. Children must honor their parents first of all as a vertical responsibility to God. This is what God requires of them, to honor their parents. And so parents have a responsibility to teach their children that and to discipline them when they don't. This is what Scripture means when it says, "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." And over time you are teaching them, teaching them about sin, showing them their need to repent of their sin and trust Christ to be saved from eternal damnation. And I am sympathetic with parents that have older children that are utterly defiant to this kind of instruction. I know what a heartbreak that must be for you to have children that defy you at the very point of your own obedience to God. I get that. But don't give up. Persevere. Keep doing it. Keep praying. Don't be intimidated into silence by them. And teach them preeminently that they need to repent and trust Christ for their salvation from eternal damnation. They need to understand the doctrine of hell. They need to understand that they will stand before the judgment seat of God. Don't fill their minds with false ideas about what their future can be. "You can be whatever you want to be." That isn't true. That's ridiculous. What a silly thing to fill a child's mind with, that you can be whatever you want to be. James 4 says, "You don't know what your life is going to be like tomorrow." One thing that you can teach them with certainty is, "My child, one day you're going to stand before the judgment seat of God, and you need the Lord Jesus Christ to be prepared for that moment." Someone says, "But if I discipline them, won't that make them angry? Won't they hate me if I correct them?" No, it doesn't work that way. They'll learn to respect you. And with respect comes love. And you'll be just fine if you exercise your discipline in a controlled way rather than striking them with anger. Have yourself under control, and then apply the discipline that God calls you to do.

There is a passage you need to see in this regard. Look at Hebrews 12. Hebrews 12:7. Talking about how God disciplines believers, and we have looked at this recently, so I don't need to dwell on it here. It is for discipline that you endure. "God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." You see a father disciplines his own son, but he doesn't discipline someone else's children. So if you're not having discipline from God, if you don't know something about that, then there is a reason to wonder, "Am I believer or not?" Because the father disciplines his children. That's a background to what we want to see in verse 9. "Furthermore, we had had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seen best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful, yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Discipline in the home is sorrowful at the time. It's unpleasant. There is confrontation involved. And there is anger, and tears, and all of that stuff. You as a parent have to rise

above that, see the big picture, see that God has called you to bring your children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, see the pattern in which God deals with his own children, and then carry it out as the Lord gives you grace. And so we train them, and we discipline them, so that they associate sin and disobedience with sorrow and with pain, so that their hearts learn at an early age “disobedience is painful. I don’t want that. I will obey instead.” So that they don’t follow their sinful impulses.

Well, let’s sum this up with a word that Paul said about ministry. Let’s sum it up, these things about parenting, with a question here. Who is adequate for these things? I have already shown you I am not. Who is adequate for these things? Who is adequate to teach the ways of God to a sinful soul? Who is adequate to overcome their own carnal tendencies, and their own laziness, and their own spiritual defects, for lack of a better term, in order to raise a child in the way that he should go? Who is adequate for these things? What parent that has lived for any length of time, and has any kind of sense of biblical reality, and isn’t just swallowed up in a suffocating self-righteousness, what Christian parent doesn’t feel the weight of failures and squandered opportunities? And what adult parent with a wayward child doesn’t feel the weight of that from day to day? Which one of us is adequate in light of all of the things that God’s word says in our own short comings, and sins, and our own disappointments in these things? These things hurt. These things hurt. We know that there are times where we have been unfair, we have been indifferent to our children, or we haven’t don right by them. Well let me just end on a word of grace. Those of you who feel the weight of this, as I’ve expressed in the message about my own parenting, go humbly to Christ, because he is the friend of sinners just like you. In all of his moral perfection he has compassion on sinners just like you. And you can go, and you can confess your sins, even of things that have distorted your children, you can go and confess that knowing that he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, that the grace of God covers even your sinful parenting.

Isn’t that a wonderful word to know? And to know, and you don’t need to turn here, but I just want to end on this note, to know that as we are praying for our children as they are growing up, as we are praying for them as adults and seeing the trajectories and things like that take place, but when we go to our Christ, and when we go to our God, and bear their names on our heart before the very throne of God, that he hears us with this kind of spirit expressed by David in Psalm 86. This isn’t a verse about parenting, but it’s a verse about God, and it’s a verse written by a man who had his own terrible failures in parenting, children that rebelled and even sought to dethrone him. David said this as he was contemplating, praying to God, and he was praying in a time of affliction and need. Let’s turn to Psalm 86. You feel the weight of your parenting? Let’s look at the first five verses. Just read the first five verses of Psalm 86, and then we will close. Psalm 86:1. “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am afflicted and needy. Preserve my soul, for I am a godly man; O you my God, save your servant who trusts in You. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to You I cry all day long.” “O God I cry to you all day long for these children, oh God!” Verse 4, “Make glad the soul of your servant, for to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul, for You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.”

If you bear the weight of wayward children, bear the weight of failed sinful parenting, and now the opportunity to correct it is over, take heart in this abundantly forgiving God who is good and ready to forgive. Go to the Lord Jesus Christ who in love extended his hands at the cross, voluntarily yielded himself to the nails, and the whips, and the crown of thorns, in love wanting to bear the weight of your sin in his own body so that you might be forgiven and set free. Go to him, and let him be the answer to your own bruised and wounded heart. And if your children are young and there is still opportunity, go to him and say, "O God, give me the grace to fulfill what You want me to be as a parent. Be abundant in Your lovingkindness to me. Be abundant in Your lovingkindness to my children, because God I call on You in faith and in trust that You'll be who You say You are to me."

Let's pray.

Gracious God, be merciful to each one in this room. We're all the products of parenting, and we have, many of us, have been parents over the years. Father, every situation, every child is different, but the principles are the same. And so we simply look to You for grace, and I pray for Your grace on every wounded heart here. I pray for Your grace upon every wayward child represented here. I pray for Your grace upon the young ones still at their father's knee. Father, give each father, each mother grace. Give them abundant measure of Your Holy Spirit to do well in what You have set before them. Help them by Your grace. Help them to trust in Your grace. And Father, let them be instruments of Your grace, vessels of grace to their own children, so that every one of the children represented in this room, O God, would one day be saved in Christ, would one day be led safely into Your heavenly kingdom. We ask You to perfect the work that You have begun in our church and in each one of our lives. Perfect it, O God, until the day of Christ Jesus our Lord. We pray in his name, Amen.

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