

The Biblical Role of Parents, #2

A Refresher on the Family

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As we come to Ephesians 6 this morning, we return to verse 4 which we started last time and now we're going to come back and try to finish this verse here today. Ephesians 6:4 which will actually lead us all into a good consideration of our life in Christ and I'm looking forward to our time together. Ephesians 6:4 says,

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

We introduced this text last time, last Sunday, and we saw that it's especially directed to fathers as opposed to parents both fathers and mothers, although the principles apply equally to mothers as well and I'd invite you to pick up a free CD on your way out to review this message if you weren't here last week. What we said was that this text presupposes a father who is a true Christian, a father who is born again, truly converted and himself growing in Christ because there is no sense whatsoever in the hypocrisy that would talk about raising your children in Christ if you, yourself, are not a Christian or if you, yourself, are not serious about spiritual growth. There is an evident incongruity in the idea that a man would send his children, as it were, to Christ without taking them there. You as a father, you as a Christian father should be mindful of your responsibility to grow in Christ. You should desire that for your own life independent of any ramifications that it has for your family simply because Christ himself is preeminently worthy of your highest affections. So Christian parenting, Christian fatherhood, flows out of true redemption and true spiritual growth in the father himself.

So a father has to be growing on his own. You have to desire these things for yourself and I think that last week's message had a certain element of being very convicting to us and I want to address something before we get into the rest of the text here today and speak to us as Christians in general and speak to us as fathers and as parents in particular. I realize that as parents, the opportunities for daily discouragement and a sense of failure is great. It's profound. It's kind of embedded into the nature of Christian life that we realize that with our families, our spouses and our children see us close-up and they see us for all of the defects that are inherent. They get the unvarnished version of us and for those of you with tender consciences, you're mindful of the way that you fall short when your temper is short, when your words are not all that they should be, perhaps when

you're, you know, you're not all for the duty that the word of God would call you to. You're mindful of how you have fallen short. Maybe you're further along in life and you look back and you see with regret how you failed and how you didn't fulfill what God would have had you to be and you understand and you're mindful of the fact that you would love to do it over but you just can't because that opportunity isn't given. As I've often said in the past, God has ordered life so that we don't get a Mulligan like in golf. You hit a bad shot, you take a Mulligan and it's like that shot never took place and you just get to hit it over again. Life is not like that, is it? We don't get the opportunity to change the things that we have done wrong.

So we are mindful of those things and while we recognize the high call of God's word, we also want to be mindful of dealing with the discouragement that can be inherent in the nature of Christian parenting. We realize that we fall short. How are we supposed to handle all of this? How do we put this together in a way that allows us to persevere, to go on, to rise to the duty to which Christ has called us while yet being mindful of the way that we've fallen short and perhaps are dealing with the bitter fruit of not having been a godly father in our lives or coming to Christ later on? Here's the key and as I trust that you are coming to understand and appreciate, the key is always found in the context of the book that you are studying and so for those of you who are moms maybe that you're right in the middle of the day to day exertion of raising very young children and it seems like you're dealing with the same discipline issue over and over and over again and you feel the weight of having fallen short or you're a dad and you realize that you're not what you should be as a parent, here's where we want to start. This is where the word of God starts us, takes us. Look at Ephesians 3 as we frame this. We need to remember as we look at the high responsibility that God calls us to and the high opportunity that God gives to us as parents, we have to remember the soil in which this is supposed to take root. It's not simply that we are redeemed and therefore this is our responsibility, we are to remember what gave rise to our redemption to begin with and what gave rise to your redemption as a Christian man, as a Christian mom, what gave rise to your redemption and the soil from which your Christian responsibility as a parent grows, all of this comes from the eternal electing love of God. God loves you. God has set his love upon you and everything flows from that.

Look at Ephesians 3:14. This precedes the instruction on Christian parenting and therefore it frames the instruction on Christian parenting. It is the foundation upon which Christian parenting is built and so we embrace our responsibility, we recognize it, we rise to it, we don't diminish it simply because we fall short of the standard and yet there is operating in the background of our mind a settled assurance and confidence that comes from the love of Christ who gave himself up for us. Look at Ephesians 3:14. Paul here, those of you who were with us a year and a half or so ago when we preached through this, Paul is praying after laying out the glories of redemption in the first three chapters, he now prays that you would grasp what he has just said, the spiritual significance of it as the springboard into Christian duty. Ephesians 3:14, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;

and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

What does that mean to you in the context of your Christian parenting? What does it mean in light of you recognize and sometimes your failures are just right in front of your face? What does it mean for a dad whose kids are grown and they have moved on and maybe they're not even talking to you know out of whatever kind of resentment of family life that has come? You start here, beloved. You start here and you look up. You look vertically and you say, "I am a Christian because the eternal God has graciously, wondrously, kindly set his love upon me that will echo throughout all of eternity." The very nature of salvation presupposes that you've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It presupposes that one of those aspects of your failure and the way that you have missed the mark with God is that you have missed the mark in your family life. You haven't been the spiritual leader that you should have been and we realize that Christ in love recognizing us in our miserable condition, recognizing us under the judgment of God for our failures, that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God has come to us in love. In love, he offered himself on the cross to pay for our sins. In love, he made us part of his family. In love, he secures us. In love, he washes us clean. In love, he keeps us so that we will be with him throughout all of eternity. We realize that God not only calls us to a high standard in Christ in our Christian families, we recognize that God has already supplied our lack. He has already forgiven and washed us away from our sins and our failures and we rest in that eternal love which loved us in our sin and saved us despite the way that we fall short, and we're rooted and we're grounded in that and we realize that everything about our sinful failings before God have been fulfilled for us, have been covered for us in the person and shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and we rest in that.

So we approach this idea of Christian parenting, we reflect on our failures from a position of strength, not because of who we are but that God has loved us in Christ and that in his love he is going to cover where we have fallen short. We're mindful of what Scripture says that love covers a multitude of sins. That's not just a horizontal matter between you and me and our families and dealing with each other, God's love for us as sinners has covered the multitude of sins that you have committed, not simply your failures in your family life. So we realize, we appreciate, we love, we rest in, we trust, we depend upon the love of God being merciful to us, being gracious to us, being kind to us, extending favor to us where judgment and discipline would by justice be merited. We rest in a saving redeeming love which has shown kindness to us despite our lack of deserving that.

We are rooted and grounded in love and so we approach it from that perspective and there is another thing that I would say realizing that this isn't always going to be the case and the experience but for those of you within Christian families where you love your children and you know that your children love you, remember also that there is loving, forgiving, gracious love coming from your children as well. I realize that's not your experience for all of you and for those of you who are children and maybe you carry some resentments about your parents, let me remind you that Christ Jesus said that your prayer should be, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Maybe

your parents are the debtors against you. Well, you start right there with your parents and say, "Father, I want to forgive them for their shortcomings," and you let that spill out over in your love and your affection to your parents as well and say, "Look, if I'm going to be a Christian young person, then that means that I need to have a gracious forgiving attitude toward everyone who has sinned against me because God has forgiven my sins," and you start that with your parents if your parents have fallen short and then that just spills over. And for you young people that are wired to love and affection toward your parents anyway, you don't know how much it means to your mom and dad for them to see your gracious loving attitudes in overlooking their faults and loving them despite it. That's very essential to a Christian family. That's part of honoring your father and mother. You recognize that your parents fall short of the glory of God just like you do and you say, "Do you know what? If God has been gracious to me as a Christian young person, I'm going to be gracious to my parents as well and I'm going to have a forgiving, loving attitude toward them as a proper response to Christ."

And for those parents like me that have children that are wired that way and, you know, you're like me and you've given them a lot of things to forgive over the years, you know, you just rest in the fact that though you have fallen short of the glory of God and you recognize your failures, you realize that those kids that are wired like that, that they love you and they overlook your sins like God has; that love covers a multitude of sins and you just love your kids that way the same way and say, "Do you know what? I overlook your sins. I love you despite the things that you've said to me. I love you despite the way that you have dealt with me and where you have sinned against me." We just need to be rooted and grounded in this love vertically and horizontally and realize that the strict measures of what the law and God's word requires, we all fall short of that, and that the balm for that wound is found in the love of Christ redeeming us at the cross and the love and balm for that in the human realm is found in not holding those shortcomings against each other within the realm of our families. We are rooted and grounded in love. That's the key. That's the soil. That's the encouragement that we take and we grow from. That's what gives us the motivation to rise to the occasion of what God's word calls us to even though we fall short.

Then there's one other aspect to it as well and that is the promise in Proverbs 22:6 that says, "Raise a child in the way in which he should go and even when he's old, he will not depart from it." That's not a promise that every child of Christian parents will become a Christian. It's not a guarantee that there won't be heartbreak in your Christian lives with what happens with your children, that's not the intention of Proverbs. Rather, it's a general principle that says in the ordinary course of events, this is what is true. This is the expectation that you can have, that your Christian parenting is not in vain even though there are times and we've had times when our kids were younger where progress in dealing with particular discipline issues was measured over the course of months not day by day and day by day it seemed like nothing was getting better. It was the same issue 10 times a day, day after day after day, and there was no visible progress from day to day. You are dealing with the same issues and spanking for the same issues again and again and again. Well, in those cases, beloved, you've got to take the long view in parenting and not expect, not demand, recognize that sin in the heart is deep and it is settled and it

takes a lot of effort to root it out and you just take the long view and you say, "Do you know what? We're not going to worry about where we're at on Tuesday," when it's Monday. You just say, "Okay, let's measure it by where we're at six months and 12 months from now and see if there is a little bit of progress measured in that time," rather than demanding or expecting that everything is going to get better as you're dealing with issues day by day. It's just not wired to work that way. Your spiritual growth doesn't work that way. You don't take big jumps from day to day, do you, in your own spiritual life. Growth is more incremental just like your physical growth.

So perspective is everything on these things as we come to what God's word says. What should we say? You know, we're talking in the context of families and recognizing that there are some single, a lot of single people in our congregation actually. We are grateful for you as we think about these things. For those of you that are single, you're approaching relationships or you're in relationships, here's what you need to be thinking about, here's what you need to really take seriously to heart as you contemplate what you ideally want in a future spouse or what you want to examine and look for in a relationship that maybe you have going on right now. You need to deal seriously with this question. You must take to heart this question: is the person in whom I am interested, whom I am contemplating for a future relationship, is their own walk with Christ growing? Is it productive? Do I see in this person the seeds, do I see the beginnings of somebody who is growing in Christ in a way that I can project that they will also help my children grow in Christ? You cannot consider a spouse simply between the two of you. You have to look beyond and say, "This person that I'm about to marry, this man or this woman that I'm contemplating, this is going to be the person who is the joint partner in raising my children for Christ and I am going to have as I enter into marriage, I am going to be joined together permanently, linked with this person under the command of God to raise our children in the nurture and instruction of Christ Jesus." Well, you want to know whether that person is going to be helping you pull the plow or if they're going to be working at cross purposes with you because spiritual matters aren't really that important to them or they have convictions that are much different than your own.

You just cannot ignore these issues. You can't sweep them under the rug and act like they're not important. We can't live life that way. We can't honor Christ that way. And for your own goodness, for your own sake, I just emphasize these things knowing that a third or half of the people in here are single and looking forward to these things, recognizing that my own daughters are in here listening to this message. You have to contemplate. You have to ask. You have to step back seriously and say, "Is this person going to go in the same direction I am with my children?" because how can you expect to honor what Christ has said is the preeminent thing and said, "Fathers, don't provoke your children in anger. Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." How can you expect to do that well if the one that you are joined to in marriage isn't going the same direction that you are? How can you expect that to work out well? Does that honor Christ when you compromise that principle? And what does it do to your children? You have to not think so self-centeredly. You have to think ahead and think about your children and say, "You know, what's going to happen if we're at cross purposes as father and mother with these children? What is the result of that going to be other than confusion to the ones that

are in my care?" You have to think about those things and you have to deal with them earnestly and you have to love Christ enough, you have to be humble and submissive enough to Christ to say, "Okay, let's consider that."

Now, as I've said many times, as I said in the messages from Ruth on a marrying kind of man and a marrying kind of woman, we don't demand perfection. We understand that people are growing as we contemplate these matters. But you've got to see something that says this is going in the right direction. Stated differently, stated in the negative, you can't say this is going the wrong direction but I'm going to move ahead anyway. How could we expect God to bless that? How could we presume on God if we were going to live life that way and say I'll compromise principles for the sake of the relationship that I want? Does that make any sense? I ask you, does that make any sense?

You see, and what happens here is and I'm just so glad that some of you are hearing this on the front end and you're on the front end of life and you're not even in these, you've got time to think through these things and develop your convictions before it comes. You know, I mean, praise God that you're in that position to be able to do that and you just think through these things and you say, "Okay, this is what's important. This is what I'm going to set my life by," and realize that in these family relationships, in these marriage relationships, we find the primary soil where our commitment to Christ is going to be lived out on a day to day basis and we want to do that right. Why? Not because the preacher said so. That doesn't matter. The reason that we take these things seriously, the reasons that we don't step back and compromise and dismiss warning signs, the reason that we do that is because we love Christ; because we love the one who gave himself up for us and we know that he loves us and he intends our good and so we approach it from that perspective as we come to God's word here today. We rest in the love of God that covers a multitude of our sins and we say, and from that, and from that remembering what we said from John 15, what we read in our Scripture passage earlier, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," that the mark of the love of God is found in your obedience to his word. From that perspective, not in a legalistic external sense but from a heart attitude that says, "Oh, oh, do I want to honor this one who saved me. Oh, is it crucial to my existence that I would reflect loyalty and obedience to his love and his commandments as the only proper response to saving love like that." Do you get it? Do you get it? Do you see how all of this is rooted and grounded in love? The objective love of God that saved you from your sins and the objective love that you have for Christ in response? How could we ever treat that too earnestly?

So rooted and grounded in love we come to see what God has to say about Christian parenting in Ephesians 6:4. Fathers, look at it with me again, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Fathers, your primary goal, young people contemplating marriage, your primary goal with your children is always ever to be set in your mind is not that they would have a particular set of financial or athletic privileges, it's not that they would have a comfortable easy life, your primary, your singular goal as a parent is to say, "I want my children to be living disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ whether that leads them to prosperity or poverty, whether that brings them to health or sickness, whether that brings

them into external blessing or whether it brings them into hardship. Whatever else I want for my children, I want them to be a disciple of Christ because only then is their purpose for existence going to truly be fulfilled." That's what matters. That's what matters. All of this other stuff is secondary, it's extraneous, it's not important by comparison.

So your goal as a Christian dad, your goal as a Christian mom, is to have it clear in your mind, have it clear in your mind not educational privileges and priorities, none of this earthly stuff that consumes the world with their parenting. You must have it clear in your mind that the singular objective that you pray for, that you work for, that you counsel toward, is that that child would become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and that that is the emphasis of everything that you do. I am grateful beyond measure as I look out and see your faces knowing that this church is filled with parents just like that. It will be Christian families that establish the fortress around young minds going forward into the degraded culture that is falling apart all around us and I'm grateful to God to see the commitments of so many young parents being manifested before our very eyes and as Dane said last week as he closed, our elders, your elders pray for you to that end consistently. So we're all in this together. We're all in this together as we serve Christ together.

Now, look at verse 4 with me again, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." The clarity and the brevity of this word should be a great encouragement to you. These are the primary principles that define everything else. If you embrace these principles, everything else will flow naturally. The things in these two resources flow from these basic principles here in God's word. Remember what the Bible says about itself, "That all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." One of the greatest, highest works that God is going to give to you in your Christian life is to be a parent; is to have one or more children in front of you to be able to disciple them over 20 years and to lead them in the ways of Christ. Now, why is that so important and why do I bring 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 into the discussion at this point? It's for you to realize this, is for you to realize that Scripture doesn't come and lay Saul's armor upon you with a heavy weight and a heavy sword and then tells you to go out and fight Goliath with it and you're clunking and clanking around and under the weight of so much different instruction and applications and checklists and all of that stuff. What God graciously does in his word is he comes to you as a Christian parent and he takes all of Saul's armor off of you, all of that heavy weighted stuff that weighs you down in conscience and binds you up with all of the rules and regulations and comes to you and says, "Here's what you need to know as a Christian parent." In the sufficiency and the completeness of God's word, you find it given to you in about 15 to 20 English words. I didn't count them before I stepped up but you see the simplicity of it. "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Let's get into this now. Last time we said, we considered the realm of parenting from this and I'm not going to rehearse it here simply to say that the realm of Christian parenting is a comprehensive scope to life. Parenting is a way of life. It is not a compartment of

adulthood where you deal with parenting over here and it's in this little closet and everything else about your life is set forth by the other things that you do and you don't think about it and you don't integrate it. The whole thing is meant to be an integrated whole. You live as a Christian and you live as a Christian parent and the way that you approach employment and church involvement and everything else in your life, your finances, it's an integrated whole. It's of one cloth. And what we said last time and, men, speaking to you as fathers, this simple principle helps frame all of your parenting. It's this, it's simple: your first priority is not your kids. Your first priority in life is Christ. If you are walking rightly with Christ, if you have sanctified Christ as Lord in your heart and you are following Christ as a born-again believer in him, your parenting will flow naturally out of that prior commitment. If you are indifferent to Christ, if you have pushed Christ off to the side and you're conscious that you've done that, first of all, I wouldn't encourage you to be real convinced that you're a Christian because it's just not, that's just not Christian thinking. That's not a regenerate mind that pushes Christ off to the side and says, "That will be an incidental part of what I do as I pursue life the way I want it." Don't think that way. But if Christ is at the center of your affections, then everything else is going to flow from that and as you're filled with the Spirit and influenced by the word of God, the Spirit of God will direct you and help you even without the checklist that so many books and resources want to grind through you. We are not here to grind you today. God's word doesn't grind us in that way. It says in 1 John that his commandments are not burdensome. So if parenting has come to seem to be a burdensome thing because of the rules you're trying to keep, let me remind you his commandments aren't burdensome. There's a whole different, you just need to have a complete revolution in the way that you think about parenting because his commandments are not burdensome. We've got 15 or 20 words that Paul thought sufficient to instruct Christian parents in his letter to the Ephesians and so we cast off the armor and we kind of limber up and we say, "Okay, God, what do you have for us here? How can we approach this?" This is true not only of parenting but all of life.

So the defining point without which nothing else matters in Christian parenting is that you're born again and that Christ is sanctified as Lord in your heart. That's the realm of your parenting and you follow it all from there. So you must be a man, fathers, you must be a man who is after God's word yourself. Your Bible should be open and your nose in it yourself. Don't think that you can lead your kids in the Bible if you yourself are not being led by Scripture, right? This is not complicated and we just don't want to make excuses for ourselves. We rest in the free forgiveness that we find in Christ and yet we don't presume upon it and ignore the implications, the ethical implications that flow from that. If you want to be a Christian dad, your Christian Bible should be open as a part of your ongoing life. Your approach to prayer, your approach to being faithful in the church, all of those things, it starts in that realm. It starts with you being a Christian man to begin with.

Okay, let's get into new material for today. Point 2. Point 1 was the realm of parenting. That's what we covered last week and reviewed just now. Let's look at point 2 here: the restraint on parenting. The restraint on parenting found in the first part of Ephesians 6:4. Look at it with me again, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them

up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Notice that Paul tells us what not to do and he tells us what to do. This hinges on the word "but," b-u-t. There is a contrast here. You need to be mindful of the negative side and the positive side of parenting and have that clear in your mind as you approach your task, your opportunity, the joyful privilege that God has given you to raise children in a Christian home. So what we are going to look at here in point 2 is the restraint on parenting and, oh, did I need to hear this when I started out as a parent. I would venture to say that many of you that are within the general range of my age and older, perhaps you were raised in a family by a father that emphasized his authority and his discipline and he wielded things with an iron hand, that's kind of how they knew how to do things back then, wasn't it? That's okay, you know, we're not here to criticize our parents because we love them and forgive them for any shortcomings that they may have had. Here's the point I'm trying to make a personal matter here, is that my dad raised us that way. He raised us with, I don't want to be unkind, but he raised us with an iron fist. He raised us with his word was law and anything that he said was what went and there would be no discussion about it. So that was kind of how I was raised. When I was converted after I left home and our family started a few years after that, but I was still probably like some of you, I was still a pretty young Christian as I entered into being a parent, being a father, and my mind hadn't yet been washed clean like it should have been through what God said in his word to fathers like we're talking about here today.

So how did I approach parenting? Well, I borrowed from what I knew in the past growing up. I borrowed from, in the early days, I borrowed from that iron hand that I had learned at the knees of my father. Do you know what I found? I found this is a miserable failure. This is not working at all. No one is responding to this and it made me have to step back and say, "Do you know what? What's going on here? I'm just doing what my dad did. Why would I do that when my dad was unregenerate?" So I had to kind of go through a process of rethinking everything in light of Scripture in terms of what is found for us here in Scripture. I had to learn a whole new way to think about parenting and sometimes I'm still in the process of learning even after 25 years of it. What we need to understand, men, as we think about parenting, as we realize that God has called us to be a leader and authority in our home, to be a spiritual guide, a spiritual force for Christ in the lives of those young people, you need to be mindful of the fact that while you have authority as a dad, it's not unrestrained. It's not unlimited. You're not a sovereign king in your home. You're under the authority of Christ. You're under the authority of God and you must be mindful not, oh, watch this, those of you listening at home, watch this, you need to be mindful not of your father's example. You don't start there and say, "Well, this is the way my dad did me." That can't possibly be the right starting point. You say, "What does God's word say to it?" And the first thing that Paul says to fathers is negative in which he puts a restraint on fathers, a restraint on their parenting. Paul had just commanded children to honor their parents in verses 1 through 3 and now with the submission of children to their parents clearly established in God's word, now he pivots over and talks to the fathers who are the ultimate authority in a Roman home. In that culture, his position was unchallenged and what does Paul say to him? His start, his first point is to restrain that sense of authority; it is to guard family life from imbalance or abuse when he says there in verse 4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger."

This is a principle that applies to all of Christian life. We need to not only know what to do, we also need to know what not to do. There are do's and don'ts in this and there are things that are wise and things that are unwise and we need to be mindful of both so that we are balanced as we're going through this. Can you imagine an airplane with one wing? That's not even going to get off the ground, and if it did, it would just crash immediately. No, you need both wings in the airplane to bring balance so that it flies properly. In the same way, dads, your parenting needs this kind of balance in order for you to flourish as a Christian father like I know that you want to do. I know that you want to and so what God's word does is it helps us to see how that works.

So Paul starts with, he starts with, isn't that interesting? He starts with a negative command, "Do not provoke your children." Now, simple point, dads, future dads, past dads, you may be the dad, you may be the father, but do you know what? That does not mean that you get to do whatever you want to do in your family. That's not true and those of you that are wired that way, your first step of responding to God's word today is to repent of that selfish arrogance that says, "Everybody does what I do no matter what," because you're under the authority of God's word yourself and God says there are things that you as the father cannot do, must not do, as a pattern of your life. What does he say? He says, "Don't provoke your children." The mere fact that there's a negative command means that God restrains your parenting to focus it in a particular direction. And what does he do? What does God do, the God who gave you life, the God who gave you salvation, the God who gave you children, the God who gave you his word, the God who gave you his Spirit, the God who gives you the hope of eternal life? What does that God say to you about your parenting? He says, fathers, God forbids you from a pattern of life that irritates your children, that frustrates them, that exasperates them and causes them to lose heart.

Look at the parallel passage over in Colossians just a couple of books to your right, Colossians 3:21. He says in Colossians 3:21, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart." For many of you, you don't need to hear this. I know you love your kids but we do need to articulate it for the sake of being faithful to God's word. Your children are not objects, they are not your property, they are people. They are individuals created in the image of God that are given to you so that you would express the love of Christ and manifest the grace of Christ in their lives and you are to respect their person-hood and to be mindful of what causes them to flourish and to restrain your parenting so that you don't violate that in their lives.

What is it that provokes and exasperates children? Well, you know, let's state it in a negative since the command is negative, let's answer that question in a negative. What provokes and exasperates children? Dads, first of all, do not be harsh and unbending in your rules and discipline. Don't be harsh and unbending. You're dealing with little hearts. You're dealing with little people. They're not intended to simply go by your strict military regiment on things as if you were the sergeant and they were the privates in the army of your family. That's not the picture so don't be harsh. Oh, you can establish your rules and it's going to differ from dad to dad. We're not talking about that. What we're saying is

don't be harsh and unbending in a way that communicates to the children that your rules are more important than they are. Please.

Along with that, these are just little tidbits of application to kind of give you a sense of what God's word would be pointing us to. Dads, don't do what I did early on. I abandoned this quickly but don't be like this, especially if you're under the influence of certain parenting regimes and parenting programs that just highlight the principle of discipline. Don't be like what I'm about to describe. Don't set your children up to fail with your rules and demands and then when they predictably fail to meet them, quickly reach for your belt in order to administer the discipline in response to it. Be mindful of what your children are capable of. If they're capable of this level here at this level, don't set it ten feet above them and then express your disappointment or your discipline on them because they didn't achieve a standard that you should have known in advance that they were never going to meet. How is that fair? You know, if your boss treated you like that at work, you would be frustrated and irritated no end. Well, how much more you as a mature man not wanting unrealistic, unattainable expectations placed on you in the workplace, how much more if you understand that should you understand that you shouldn't be like that as a dad. That's utterly exasperating and the poor little kid has no avenue of appeal beyond you if you don't embrace this restraint on your parenting. That's not right.

On the other end, dads, don't ignore them. Don't mock them. You know, if they stumble and fall, you know, you don't mock them, laugh at them in a way as if they are the object of your ridicule. That's shameful to parent that way. Dads, don't criticize your children when they've done their best to please you. Don't point out all of the faults of whatever it is that they've done. Why would you do that? Why would you inflict that kind of criticism on a heart that has expressed in what it's done a desire to please you and you would come back knowing that that's what they have done and you would come back and say in essence, "I am displeased." That's inexcusable. Shame on you if you parent that way. Honestly, shame on you. That's not right at all. Your children deserve better than that. That's not how Christ deals with you.

One other thing, dads, that I had to learn the hard way over time, still learning it, I guess, not quite so extreme but just as lethal: don't let, "Maybe later," become your standard response to their request for your time and attention. "Maybe later. Not right now." Find a way to say, condition your heart to say, "Yes, okay, let's go," because the time will come when and I'm on this side of things, with some regret, not a lot of regret but just you're just mindful of the fact that the time will come, dads, those of you with kids that are little, the time will come when you're the one wanting their time and they say, "Dad, you know, I've got to get to work. Dad, I've got other plans." And you say, "Oh, yeah, I get it now." Well, just being mindful of that you just take advantage of the opportunity. I've said so many times in private conversations, in parenting the days are slow but the years are fast and so you have to be mindful within the day to say, "Yes, I'll do that. Yes, let's go now." As opposed to saying, "Maybe later," and then you find the years have gone by and there is no further opportunity to say yes when they want you to play, when they want you to throw the ball with them. Don't provoke your children to anger. You be available to them.

You let your career maybe be compromised a touch for the sake of not provoking your children to anger. God doesn't call you to the highest most successful career, he does call you to be a disciple maker of your children. Now, having said this last time, let's just remember quickly here: you cannot save your children. You cannot guarantee that your children will be converted to Christ. That power is outside of your ability. God and God alone has the power of salvation but you can give of yourself.

You can have a restraint on your parenting that says, "Yes, I have authority. Yes, I'm going to use it. Yes, I'm going to give direction here." But you realize that God is a higher authority over you and he has placed restraints on the way that you are to parent. Don't use your position selfishly so that you can simply get what you want or that you can be undisturbed in your pursuits. Dads, dads, this is the point of everything that we're saying. Those of you that are wired toward the authority mindset toward parenting and you're over on that end, understand this: God has given you authority as a parent, as a dad, as a mom, God has given you authority so that you would use that authority to secure the blessing for your children, not so that you can insulate yourself from the interruptions that your children will naturally bring. That's why you have authority, it's so that you can be a vehicle of God's blessing to them in teaching them about what it means to follow and to know Christ.

Now, third point. We've looked at the realm of parenting, it's all of life; the restraint on parenting, don't provoke your children to anger; thirdly, the responsibility of parenting. Paul leaves the negative behind and goes to the positive side of parenting here in Ephesians 6:4. Look at it with me, he says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but," hinge, switching over to the positive side, "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." You know, my generation, the generation that preceded us, probably missed some of this understanding that parenting transcends completely the idea of simply providing for the physical and financial needs of your family. You could be a wealthy parent and an utter failure at Christian parenting if you miss this core instruction. The core instruction is not their financial well-being, it's their spiritual well-being and a particular realm of well-being at that. Look at it again, "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." God charges you to bring up your children in a particular way. Now, you would never know it from looking at the English translation here but the word "bring up," this word, "bring them up," it is the same word that is translated "nourish" in Ephesians 5:29. Look over at 5:29 speaking about husbands to wives, "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church." Men, you look at your wife and you say, "I am to nourish her." You look at your children and you say, "I am to bring them up," and you realize it's the same Greek word that is being used there. It's translated differently because the relational context is different but it has this idea of providing for the totality of their needs in a caring, loving way.

God, men, God calls you to seek your child's maturity by training, instructing, and warning them in the ways of Christ. That is at the core of parenting. You seek their maturity by training, instructing and warning them. Do you know what that presupposes? This presupposes that you understand that your children need direction; that they are born

into life ignorant at best, more scripturally speaking, they are born into life with a sinful disposition that wires them toward disobedience and sin and selfish desires and disobedient dispositions. Parents, you must understand God calls you to train them, not to leave them to their own desires. This is the utter failure of modern parenting outside of the church that says, you know, just let that kid become whatever is in his heart. That's absolutely foolish. How can you let a kid that is born with an evil disposition who is evidently wired toward disobedience, how can you let that kid go his own way and not seek to train and correct that so that he will become a person like he should be? That means that he needs to be instructed. He needs to be corrected. He needs to be trained and pointed in the right direction. What does that mean for you as a particularly Christian parent? You must communicate to them the authority of God's word. You must teach them to fear God so that, why do you teach them those principles of authority and fear and submission? I know that for some of you this sounds like that can't possibly be right. Why would you teach your child to fear God? I'll tell you why, you teach them that because you love them and because you know Scripture well enough to understand that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Your children aren't going to go anywhere right in life if they don't know to fear God.

So you teach them to honor you. You make them obey you. You teach them about sin and their need to repent and trust in Christ to be saved from sin and damnation. You teach them those things. You communicate it to them. You have them faithfully when God's people meet together so that they are hearing this from other sources as well, not just from a pulpit but just from their interactions with godly people in your midst. And especially as toddlers, you young kids, I've got bad news for you, especially as toddlers, that requires corporal punishment. Pain on the bottom corrects foolishness in the heart. Someone might say, "But won't that make them angry? Will they still like me?" Look, look, you'll be just fine if you exercise discipline when you yourself are under control, you're being constructive and you're not punishing them simply out of anger and frustration. You control your own disposition as you're exercising discipline and it will have the healthful affect that God intends upon them. I know that some of you fight that battle. I know that you're being faithful to deal with the unpleasantness of spanking, well, you stay with it. That's the right thing to do because that communicates to them and teaches them to associate disobedience with pain and you do that not because you want them to be in pain, you want that so that they are trained and disciplined away from it so that they learn to fear God, to fear authority and to respond rightly in life.

There is a passage you need to see in this regard. Look at Hebrews 12:9. This helps. It's incidental. The writer of Hebrews is actually making a different point; he's talking about God's discipline of children but he illustrates it with the way fathers discipline their own children and he helps us understand that discipline is intended to be painful, that it's going to be unpleasant at times, and we don't shy away from the discipline simply because of that momentary discomfort. Verse 9 of Hebrews 12, "we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they," meaning our earthly fathers, "they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." Verse 11, here you go, "All discipline," he's been talking about divine

discipline and parental discipline and he gathers it up under one broad umbrella and he says, "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."

Oh, parents, if I can beg you to embrace one principle to help you persevere as you're going through those difficult days of disciplining your young ones and they are defiant again and again and again and it's the same issue again and again and again, don't get lost in, don't get caught up in the day to day fight of that. Don't get discouraged in the midst of that. Understand, come to this Scripture and let it refresh your heart to say that this is about something that comes later; this isn't about the battle now, this is about later when they have been trained to love righteousness and they have been trained to be obedient. That is a great gift to give to your children. Don't back away because the cost is high and the personal effort it takes to persevere in it. You just be consistent. Stay the course and look for that future reward. The Bible says it comes later but you don't get the good fruit later unless you're willing to plow the seeds today recognizing that that is sometimes just a pain in the neck. That's okay because we have God's word to guide us and to say this is to be expected. You just keep your eyes on the prize and not lose sight of it. So God disciplines us as Christians. We say this brings a long-term good result. Now I as a parent say this will bring a long-term good result in my children. I'm going to be fair, measured, loving in my discipline but my kids are going to know that the authority in this house is not in them and their selfish desires. You must train them to associate disobedience with pain so that they will not follow their sinful impulses into bigger areas of destruction in life to come, so that when they are teenagers they are not interested in the defiance and disobedience of their peers with all of the sin that goes with that time of life. They've learned, "I don't want that." They are not going to have that response unless you teach them earlier on.

Now, as we consider these things, we think about our families, our parents, some of them gone to be with the Lord, our own interactions, you look at all of this and you realize the stakes and you say, "Man, who's adequate for these things? Who is sufficient to rise to this standard that's laid out in God's word?" Those of you that are parents, whether your kids are little or yours are older like mine are, what parent does not feel the weight of failure, of having fallen short? Which of us doesn't realize that we have had opportunities that we've been just squandered? We feel that. How do we respond in light of that? How do we respond when we see the realm of parenting that it flows from redemption in Christ and now we have responsibility, it's a responsibility that we exercise in all of life and there's restraints and there are things that we're supposed to do and we realize how superficial we are, we know that there have been times where we have been unfair and indifferent to it all, what do we say? For those of you who feel the weight and the Spirit is rightly convicting you, come back to what it means to be a Christian. Just go to your Lord Jesus Christ and just humbly confess that, "Lord, I have squandered opportunity. I have used my authority to get what I want instead of what was best for my kids. I have disciplined in anger and overreacted when restraint and love would have been a better approach. I have been lenient when I needed to be disciplined with them." You go to Christ and you just humbly spend time with him, maybe this afternoon, and you just say, "God, I have fallen short. I embrace the principles but I have fallen short and, God, I ask

you to cleanse me from my own sin against you." And you remember as you're confessing that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin, that he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and to realize that God is not going to hold that against you in your walk with him. You start there.

Do you know what? Think about it this way: Jesus Christ, those of you that are Christians, Jesus Christ died even for your sinful parenting. Isn't that sweet? Those of you with children still at your knees, still raising them, set your course by God's word and not by what your dad did. That's really fundamental. Aspire after God's word and not simply replicate what your dad did and keep the course when your progress is slow. If your children are a little bit older like mine are, some of them, all of them maybe for you, know the Lord, they are walking with Christ, you do this: you call yourself in the presence of God and you say, "Father, I am an unworthy servant. Thank you for the mercy that you have shown in my life that I have children that are such a blessing like that." And those of you that have unsaved children despite your best efforts, those of you that are still in the midst of the battle with children that aren't receiving you, embracing you, loving you like your heart would long for, don't stop praying. Don't give up. God has not written the final chapter yet. The story isn't over. You persevere and trust in God and rest in him and ask him for grace and for his power to do what you cannot do on your own. And with those things, we look at the role of biblical parenting and we say, "Oh God, thank you. Bless us. Help us. Forgive us. Give us grace as we go forward."

Let's bow together in prayer.

Our heavenly Father, have mercy and grace on our families. Help us to be the dads and moms that you would have us to be whether we're parents now or that's still in the future. And Father, for some of us where one parent is gone and another still living, for others both parents are gone or both parents are still living, whatever the case, Father, from the depths of our hearts, being mindful that your word calls us ever to honor our fathers and mothers, we thank you for the dads and the moms that you gave to us in your wisdom and in your providence. It was through them that you gave life to us. Some of them may have failed miserably, some of them led us to Christ, whatever the case, Father, we realize that they were your appointed agents in our lives for the time in which we had them and we thank you for them, Father. Where they failed, Father, from our hearts, we forgive them. Where they succeeded and pointed us to Christ, where they loved us sometimes when we were not too lovable, when they loved us through our own disobedience and dishonoring of them, Father, we thank you for that. Their tender mercy, their faithful love, was an expression of your own love toward us when we were the prodigal. Yes, Father, thank you for my dad. Thank you for my mom. Thank you for letting me be a dad to six children over these past two decades that brought far more joy to my life than ever I deserved. Lord, do your perfect work through our imperfect lives to lead the children under our authority to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray these things in the name of our gracious Lord Jesus. Amen.

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