

A FATHER'S CALLING, I (Col 3.21; Eph 6.4)

On this Father's Day, let us hear what God's Word says about what it means to be a good father.

The NT has only one exhortation directed explicitly to fathers, found in our two very similar yet complimentary texts. To put it bluntly, Paul was very concerned about fathers abusing and neglecting their children, especially their souls, and his timeless counsel is just as relevant today as ever. These divinely-inspired words are the voice of the Spirit to all who hear. Our perverse generation only gasps at physical abuse and neglect, even though spiritual mistreatment is far worse. Fathers, God warns and exhorts you this way . . .

*Don't demoralize your children;
instead raise them tenderly as Christians.*

This assumes you are a sincere Christian yourself, since no unbelieving man can or would fulfill this divine calling. It also assumes you have a humble and teachable spirit, particularly in how you relate to your children. Unless you love God supremely and your children are more dear to you than life itself, I know that you will not apply this counsel. If that is your case, I solemnly warn you of certain and severe judgment by God. You are surely unconverted, a selfish and wicked man, even though you may seem outwardly moral to others. In regeneration, God turns the hearts of fathers toward their children, so that they hear His call to love them faithfully (Mal 4.6). Then God turns the hearts of Christian men repeatedly to our children, partly by our meditation on texts like these.

Both our texts address "fathers" (Col 3.21a; Eph 6.4a) and this word goes beyond their role in conception to their ongoing relationship with their children. Although the term may include both parents, it seems fathers in particular are addressed for two reasons.

First, fathers are the greatest authority in the home. The biblical pattern of family government is patriarchal (fathers rule). Patriarchy is good, a divine ordinance, and not a sociological development—all unpopular ideas in our culture.

The father commanded a high position in the family of OT times; his word was law. In addition, one of the Hebrew words translated husband means "lord," "master," "owner," "possessor." Because of his position, shared to some degree with his wife, a man expected to be treated as royalty by the rest of his family ("Family," *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*).

The NT view of fatherhood is no different. The mother is a coregent with her husband, but the ultimate authority and responsibility for the welfare of the household devolves upon him. He must govern his wife well and she must submit to his authority in the Lord. The mother plays an indispensable role in rearing the children, but her responsibility for it is less than his.

Even these basic ideas are politically incorrect today. Fathers are usually portrayed as nincompoops, hardly even aware of what is going on with their children, much less supervising it all.

Second, fathers seem addressed in particular because they tend to need the warning against undue severity more than mothers who are more prone to overindulgence, but each should also avoid the typical sins of the other. Let us focus today on what the text says fathers should avoid.

DO NOT DEMORALIZE YOUR CHILDREN

This is really a form of child abuse and it is very prevalent. We would address the problem, the results, and specific things to avoid.

The Problem of Demoralization (Col 3.21b; Eph 6.4b). Two Greek verbs are used—"stir up, provoke, irritate" and "provoke to anger" (LEKGNT). They mean about the same thing: exasperate, irritate, embitter, aggravate, even enrage. We may tend to think that as fathers, we can do whatever we want, and it does not matter whether our children like it or how they respond to it, but we must repent of this bad attitude. Their bad response can warn of our foolishness. Miners used to take canaries underground, and if the bird died, they knew the air was unhealthy. Likewise, children can be much more sensitive than we are to our own sins and bad judgment, and God makes them respond in anger, irritation, and frustration when we do not meet their reasonable expectations.

We do not mean to suggest for a moment that you should gauge the wisdom and morality of everything you do by their response. This would exchange patriarchy for pedarchy (government by children), a child-run home, and this would be a sign of God's curse (Isa 3.4-5). Children are sinful and there will be times when your commitment to God and principle will provoke a bad response from them. But just as we tend to rationalize all our anger as righteous anger, we tend to excuse and justify provoking our children unnecessarily. Brethren, beware!

Positively and simply, God is calling us to make our children truly, deeply, and lastingly happy. This is the aim and tendency of really loving them, as in all human

relationships. As their pastor-fathers, we are to be “helpers of [their] joy” (2 Cor 1.24).

Love is the overflow in joy in God that meets the needs of others. The overflow is experienced consciously as the pursuit of our joy in the joy of another. We double our delight in God as we expand it in the lives of others (Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 141).

The Results of Demoralization (Col 3.21c). They become “discouraged” or disheartened, “sullen and morose and feel inferior and frustrated” (Amp). The verb literally means “without passion” and denotes becoming “disheartened and hence lacking motivation” (GELNTBSD). “To go about their task in a listless, moody, sullen frame of mind” (LEKGNT). What starts as juvenile anger ends as a broken spirit. The child loses zeal to please his parents, and this is one of a parent’s most important tools. “A child frequently irritated by over-severity or injustice to which, nevertheless, it must submit, acquires a spirit of sullen resignation leading to despair” (LEKGNT).

Common Causes of Demoralization. “Attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child’s needs and sensibilities” (LEKGNT). Consider Moule’s translation and expansion of our text:

Parents, do not irritate your children, do not challenge their resistance by unwise and exacting interferences, so different from the steady firmness of thought and responsible affection, **that they may not be out of heart,** discouraged under the chilling feeling that it is impossible to please, that the word of praise is never heard, that confidence is never reposed in their affection and fidelity.

These common faults demoralize children:

- When a father governs entirely by cold, bare, uncovered authority; by mere commands, prohibitions, and threats, by frowns untempered with smiles;
- when the friend is never blended with the legislator, nor authority modified with love;
- when his conduct produces only a servile fear in the hearts of his children instead of a generous affection;
- when he is served from a dread of the effects of disobedience rather than from a sense of the pleasure of obedience;

- when he is rather dreaded in the family circle as a frowning specter than hailed as the guardian angel of its joys;
- when even accidents raise a storm, or faults produce a hurricane of passion in his bosom;
- when offenders are driven to equivocation and lying, with the hope of averting by concealment those severe corrections which disclosure always entails;
- when unnecessary interruptions are made to innocent enjoyments;
- when, in fact, nothing of the father, but everything of the tyrant is seen:

Author John Angell James then asks, when fathers are guilty of these things, . . .

can we expect religion to grow in such a soil as this? Yes, as rationally as we may look for the tenderest hot-house plant to thrive amidst the rigors of eternal frost (*A Christian Father’s Present to His Children*, p. 24).

Parents and especially fathers, how can you know if you have sinned in this way? First consider whether you have a son or daughter with the symptoms. Is he or she characterized by anger, resentment, lack of motivation to please you and do his or her best? Is he or she a sullen teenager? Is candid and mutually respectful communication difficult between you and your child? Is a simple word of praise from you so rare that it evokes tears when they hear it? These may very well be the telltale signs of your failure more than theirs.

Second, if you are a father and you really want to know if and how you bother (frustrate, irritate, anger) your children sometimes, ask them. Assure them they can speak freely to you without fear, because you love them and will listen patiently and sympathetically. Maybe if they are older you should even suggest they make a list for you to study, pray over, and review frequently in the days to come. When they point out your faults, thank them, seek their forgiveness, and work diligently to overcome them by God’s grace.

Are you man enough and godly enough to hear God’s calling to you as a father? Fellow fathers, if we would all heed these wise words of counsel, this could be a Father’s Day of new beginnings for ourselves and our families. May the Lord give each of us grace to be more like our heavenly Father—always loving, kind, reasonable, and generous, and never giving us any justification for anger or frustration with Him. Amen.

Next time let us consider the positive side of a father’s calling.

A FATHER'S CALLING, II (Col 3.21; Eph 6.4)

These two verses are the only NT exhortation addressed directly to fathers. It amounts to this:

*Don't demoralize your children;
instead raise them tenderly as Christians.*

This exhortation's two parts warn of child abuse and neglect, particularly of their souls. That a Christian father would not be physically abusing or neglecting his child is presumed because it is so base and bestial as to be rarely found among serious professing Christians. Yet we Christian fathers must beware of psychological and spiritual child abuse through unnecessarily provoking them to anger or irritating them. Hence the warning,

DO NOT DEMORALIZE YOUR CHILDREN (Col 3.21; Eph 6.4a-b). Our first sermon covered this.

Another common fault even of Christian fathers is neglecting to raise their children as Christians or at least a substantial degree of failure in this responsibility. This is our focus in this second sermon. The rest of this message will expound Eph 6.4c, "but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." Here we have two general traits and two specific aspects of good fathering.

These are the only means to promote true and lasting joy in our children, our aim as loving fathers.

INSTEAD, RAISE THEM TENDERLY AS CHRISTIANS (Eph 6.4c)

Failing in this is a form of child neglect almost completely unrecognized, even in the church, because it is not physical. "Child neglecter" is a heinous label, but paste it on the forehead of every man who is not devoted to rearing his children as Christians.

"Father" is not just your office with respect to your children, but your ministry to them. "Fathering a child" is more than siring them; it is a continual calling until they grow up and leave home. Even then you have a role to play. You cannot "baby-sit" your own children; it is called fathering. A TV commercial showed a father and his toddler who was crying and throwing food while mom was out shopping, and he says with a sigh, "Where is your mother?" We laugh, but this exposes the unbiblical attitude that mothers should raise the children instead of fathers.

Admittedly in some respects a good mother is bound to be closer to the children than a good father. The newborn infant needs a mother more than a father, and since the home should be the primary sphere of a mother's work and the site of child-rearing, she is bound to spend more time with them, as a rule. The mother has

an indispensable role to play in childrearing (cf. 1 Tim 5.10, 14).

Nevertheless, that this exhortation is addressed specifically to fathers suggests that they have the primary responsibility for godly childrearing. Fathers have a duty to supervise everything pertaining to the spiritual, theological, moral, intellectual, and emotional development of their children, and to do much of it themselves.

What Good Fathers Are

Good Fathers Are Tender. The text implies this in two ways. The Greek word for "bring up" can mean to rear children to maturity or to nourish them, and I believe both apply. The idea that fathers should rear their own children would have shocked many a first century pagan. As MacArthur notes (in loc.),

Mutual love among family members was almost unheard of. A father's love for his children would have been hard even to imagine. By the Roman law of *patria potestas* a father had virtual life and death power not only over his slaves but over his entire household. He could cast any of them out of the house, sell them as slaves, or even kill them—and be accountable to no one. A newborn child was placed at its father's feet to determine its fate. If the father picked it up, the child was allowed to stay in the home; if the father walked away, it was simply disposed of—much as aborted babies are in our own day. Discarded infants who were healthy and vigorous were collected and taken each night to the town forum, where they would be picked up and raised to be slaves or prostitutes.

The "nourishing" aspect of the word is the most tender, however. It has the idea of providing with spiritual sustenance and enrichment. Sometimes it was coupled with "cherish." Fathers have a responsibility not only to nourish their children's bodies with good food, but also their souls. We must daily set before them matter for their inner being and lead them to receive it. With God's blessing, physical, spiritual, and intellectual growth is the result (Luke 2.40, 52), and they become much like us who have set a good example (Luke 6.40 ESV).

Providing spiritual food is in itself a tender act, but notice another hint of tenderness. The word "but" is a strong contrast in the text. Bringing them up is the positive alternative to needlessly irritating them. Therefore the Amplified renders it, "rear them [tenderly]" and Calvin translated it "let them be fondly cherished." The things prohibited and required are

mutually exclusive. Fatherly love must replace tyrannical anger.

Good Fathers Are Christians. Surely the prepositional phrase, “of the Lord,” modifies the whole expression, not just “admonition.” Further, it is not just counsel to teach your children about religion. It means you must be like Christ in character and ministry, and all your fathering should be distinctively Christian, unlike unconverted fathers. Your whole approach should exhibit a Christian and biblical philosophy of child rearing, showing your own ultimate and personal allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. You should be able to point to every part of your child’s upbringing and say, “it is of the Lord.”

The man who does not make the religious character of his children the supreme end of all his conduct towards them may profess to believe as a Christian, but certainly acts as an atheist (John Angell James, The Christian Father’s Present to His Children).

Oh, brethren, that is a high standard with vast implications. Please stop and ponder them. Surely this implies you will take reasonable measures to protect them from the counsel of the ungodly, especially in their more formative years (1 Cor 15.33; Eph 4.14). You should beware of ungodly friends, ungodly media, and ungodly education in your child’s life. You would not let anyone molest their bodies, so why their souls? You would keep them from drinking poison, so why would you let them drink in the poisonous mindset of secular and godless influences? Sometimes we hear people of questionable judgment criticize any parental protection of our children’s minds, but tender young plants call for the shelter of a greenhouse.

Your greatest responsibility toward your children, then, is to rear them tenderly in the Lord.

What Good Fathers Do

Two very rich and important words further explain the form of our fathering, and they complement each other perfectly. Both are a form of teaching. We must review these quickly.

Good Fathers Teach By Discipline (Gr. *paideia*), so most English translations render it with good reason. One reliable reference book says it means “to provide instruction, with the intent of forming proper habits of behavior” (GELNTBSD). This is not the Greek idea of simply imparting information but the Hebrew one of forming character that results in holy living. The most accurate phrase for this word is, perhaps, “teaching by discipline.” Consider its use in other passages: 2 Tim 3.16 (last phrase, “disciplined training in righteousness”) and Heb 12.5-11 (in every verse either a form of chasten or correct). God’s painful discipline of His children is proof

of His love, a mark of sonship, an incentive to reverence, a way to profit us, an occasion of grief, but also a producer of the peaceable fruit of righteousness. In every respect this describes the character and effects of a godly father’s discipline of his own children. You fathers must enforce righteousness in your child’s conduct, even with the rod, as every child’s natural depravity requires. Teaching children your expectations and setting boundaries are not enough because I guarantee you will meet with resistance. Sometimes we hear a parent say, “My child has never needed a spanking,” but they are wrong. Several passages in Proverbs clearly expose this folly (Prov 13.24; 19.18; 22.15; 23.13-14; 29.15).

Oh, listen, my fellow fathers. You must lay down the law in your household—God’s law. You must insist on compliance in your children as Abraham did (Gen 18.19). This isn’t mean; it is an imitation of our heavenly Father. Disciplined training of your children is your right, your mandate, and your solemn duty. You cannot make your children become sincere Christians, but you can and should make them act like Christians by good discipline.

Good Fathers Admonish and Instruct (Gr. *nouthesia*, again, most translations). This amounts to teaching them God’s Word—imparting its contents to them, and counseling and admonishing and rebuking and encouraging them from it as a constant part of your relationship with them (cf. Deut 6.6-7). You fathers must teach God’s law and enforce it; the combination is what God requires of you. Blessed is the man whom God chastens and instructs from His law (Psa 94.12 KJV), and blessed are the children whose earthly father does the same. Usually God blesses this to save them from their sins (Prov 22.6). You must give your children a Christian and biblical education, and insist that they live up to it while they are in your household under your authority.

For practical self-examination, ask yourselves these questions. Are you tenderly rearing your children by disciplined training in righteousness and daily instruction in the Scriptures? Are you making sure they get an education in all things that reflects and promotes a Christian and biblical worldview? Couple faithfulness in these with a studious avoidance of irritating our children needlessly, and you have a brief description of God’s call to fathers. May the Lord forgive all us fathers our sins, give us the wisdom and grace to fulfill our calling, and may He have mercy on our precious children. Amen.