

Teaching the Next Generation: Ephesians 6:4
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The fall season is an exciting time of year. College students are arriving in town to begin a new semester. Children and youth are getting ready to go back to school. Football season is about to begin! In the life of our church, our small groups will begin new studies, we're starting a youth Sunday School class, our adult Bible study will start a new quarter, and we're also completing our transition from the Beechview building into downtown. In light of these new beginnings a few things have been on my heart to address, and so I want to take three weeks to address these things before getting back into the book of James. I want to talk this morning about teaching the next generation. This morning we met with the youth of our church and their parents and discussed our vision for the Grace Church youth ministry. Just a few weeks ago we had Vacation Bible School. We have children's Sunday School classes and Kid's Club. And all of these things have been on my mind. And what I want to do in this sermon is present a biblical vision for teaching the next generation, in the home and in the church. Next week I'm going to wave a banner for small groups and talk about the importance for all of us to be part of a small group. And the following week I want to speak about evangelism. God has called us to a great mission here in this city, and we all need to be encouraged and inspired to share our faith with others, wherever God places us. Those are the three things that have been on my mind and heart, and I want to use these three weeks to address them. And then I'll be eager to get back into the letter of James.

Turn with me to the letter of Ephesians in the New Testament. I want us to look at 6:4, and then we'll look at some other verses in Ephesians later.

Here's the point that I want to stress in this message: it is the responsibility of parents, and specifically fathers, to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Toward the end of this message I'll talk about the role of the church in this task. But first I want every parent here, and especially fathers, to see your weighty and joyful responsibility to bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

In this passage, which is known as the household code, Paul first addresses wives and husbands in 5:22-33. Then he addresses children and fathers in 6:1-4, and finally slaves and masters in 6:5-9. Let's read 6:1-4, focusing on verse 4. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a

promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

The Responsibility of Fathers

In verse 1 children are commanded to obey their *parents*. In verse 2 Paul quotes from the Ten Commandments, “Honor your father *and* mother . . .” But then when he switches to the other side of the relationship he focuses on fathers. Verse 4 is addressed to fathers. Paul does the same thing in Colossians 3:20-21, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”

Fathers have the primary responsibility for how the children are raised. Mothers, obviously, play a huge role in raising the children, and this verse is applicable to mothers as well as fathers. But what we see here is that the father is the one ultimately responsible for the spiritual development of his children. In chapter 5 of Ephesians, in the passage dealing with husbands and wives, we learn that the husband is the head of the wife. And his headship applies to the family as well. God has structured the family so that the man is the head of the home. He has been given the authority and the responsibility of leading his wife and his children in a way that honors God and points his family to Christ. God has given us, as husbands and fathers, the very important task of training our children in the ways of the Lord. We are responsible to teach and train the next generation within our homes.

Paul describes this task first by saying what it should not be, and then saying what it should be. It should be done, NOT by provoking our children to anger. Now, this has to be balanced with the second half of the verse. And therefore we know that not provoking your children to anger does NOT mean that we don't discipline them or instruct them. And many times when we discipline and instruct our children they're not going to like it, at least in the moment. It may make them angry. So this first command to fathers in verse 4 is not saying that we should appease our children in every way so that they will not become angry. It means don't anger them unnecessarily. Don't provoke them without reason. The NIV says, “do not exasperate your children.” Andrew Lincoln, in his commentary on Ephesians, says, “This involves avoiding 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" (*Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 406).

Parents, and especially fathers, we need to be patient with our children. We need to check our own hearts and fight against being impatient, which will cause us to be overly harsh. We need to fight against being selfish, which will cause us to make unfair demands. We need to fight against pride, which will cause us to abuse authority and humiliate our children. We need to pray to be patient and loving parents who bring our children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

I was so convicted by this just the other night. I had been studying this passage during the day, and then I came home and I feel like my behavior was just the opposite. I was irritated by things that shouldn't have irritated me. I responded harshly to some things that were not necessarily acts of defiance, but just mere childishness. That's an important distinction to understand. If a child is defiant, there needs to be discipline. But if it's just a matter of childishness, if the child isn't as focused as I would like him to be, or not as efficient as I would like him to be, that's just part of being a kid. And if I get irritated by those things, it's my problem, not the child's problem. If I respond harshly in those situations, then I'm provoking my child to anger. I'm going to exasperate my child.

I think the key here is remembering that my position of authority over my children is not about me. It's about God. My authority in the home is not about getting everyone to act according to my preferences, my agenda, my schedule. My authority in the home is about teaching my family the ways of God and leading them into an enjoyment of God. Therefore, as parents, we shouldn't be battling with our children over things that simply annoy us. That's something we need to deal with in our own hearts. The task of parenting is not about us. It's about God, and training our children to fear Him and love Him and follow Him. So when my children disobey, the main issue cannot be that they've annoyed me or inconvenienced me or embarrassed me. The main issue must be that they have disobeyed God. Tedd Tripp, in his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, says, "If you correct and discipline your children because God mandates it, then you need not clutter up the task with your anger. Correction is not your showing anger for their offenses; it is rather reminding them that their sinful behavior offends God. It is bringing His censure of sin to these subjects of His realm. He is the King. They must obey."

If I think of my children's disobedience primarily as an offense against me, then I'll be more prone to get angry and then provoke my children to anger. But if I recognize that God has put

me in the position of authority, and He has commanded my children to obey me and to obey my wife, then I can deal with disobedience by pointing out the sinful attitude or action that has been done against God, and reminding my child that I'm under God's authority, too, and it's my responsibility to discipline them.

This leads us to the positive command in Ephesians 6:4. The verse began with a negative command, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger . . ." And now comes the contrasting positive command, "but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

There's a balance here that fathers, particularly, need to strive toward. There's a biblical balance that characterizes true manhood. Men cannot be passive, on the one hand. God has appointed us to be the leaders in the home. But on the other hand, we cannot be overly-aggressive. We must not be the dictators of the home, but rather servant leaders. Just a few verses earlier in Ephesians, in 5:25-27, we find this instruction to husbands. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

So husbands can't be passive, on the one hand, or overly-aggressive, on the other hand, but should be servant leaders. And a similar balance is necessary in the task of fathering. On the one hand, we need to be firm and authoritative as the one primarily responsible for the spiritual development of our children. We shouldn't be passive fathers who just try to be our child's best friend, and we simply appease them by giving them what they want. That is neglecting God's instructions here. Then it's not only the child who is disobedient, but the father as well. On the other hand, though, we shouldn't be overly strict to the point that we are harsh and critical and demeaning. The ideal is humble, loving leadership.

Well, let's look a little more closely at the second half of this verse. The verb translated "bring up" is also used in 5:29, where it's translated "nourish." This is the command to fathers: bring up your children, nourish your children in these things. And there are two things—discipline and instruction of the Lord. There's a lot of overlap between discipline and instruction. The two go hand-in-hand. We must correct our children and punish them for disobedience. Proverbs 13:24 says, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." It's not an easy thing to discipline our children, but if we truly love them we will discipline them.

We must also instruct them, teach them, counsel them, warn them, according to God's Word. We must teach our children who God is, that He made all of creation and that He is the sovereign ruler of His creation. We need to teach our children about sin, pointing out the sin in their hearts and admitting that there's sin in our hearts, too. This can be done so effectively in the midst of discipline. Pointing out that their behavior has not only hurt others and been disobedient to their parents, but they have sinned against the holy God of the universe. And then we must point them to the cross of Jesus Christ, where God poured out His wrath against sin on His own Son. Jesus died in the place of sinners, so that everyone who trusts in Him will be forgiven. This is the Gospel. And this is the God-centered message that needs to permeate our homes. At the meal table, in the car, at bedtime, in the morning, in the evening. This discipline and instruction needs to be woven into the daily life of the family. It can't be limited to those times when the child does something really bad, and we respond with discipline. It can't be limited to times of family devotions when we set aside time for focused instruction. It must include those things, but it also has to be part of our conversations at other times as well.

Listen to Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, 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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

This is an awesome responsibility, parents. To be on the lookout for teachable moments. To continually be looking for opportunities to talk about the Lord. To connect the dots for your kids of how God relates to all of life. There are endless things we can talk about, and everything we talk about relates to God in some way. So as you're sitting in your house, and as you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise, instruct your children in the things of God.

As you instruct them, and as you pray for God's grace to instruct them well, remember that your instruction includes much more than the words you speak to your children. They live with you. They watch you. They know you. And they will see what kind of difference the Gospel makes in your life. If you're ornery and impatient and selfish and angry and discontent, and then you sit down to teach them about the Gospel, what kind of effect do

you think that will have on a young person? On the other hand, if your children see you confess your impatience and selfishness and anger, and they see you fighting for joy in the Lord, then you'll be communicating something very different. Our children need to see in us a passion for God. They need to see that we are desperate for God, that we cling to the cross of Christ and that we go to the Bible for help and for hope. It's with that kind of passion that we must instruct our children.

We need to teach them the Bible, and as they mature teach them how to study the Bible themselves. We need to teach them about prayer and how to pray. We need to teach them about evangelism and missions, and pray that God will guide them in such a way that they won't waste their lives on the things of this world but instead use their time, talents, and resources for the kingdom.

Last Sunday we were in Midland, MI, and we attended the church that we normally go to when we're visiting Midland. And after the service we were talking to the pastor's wife and asking how their kids were doing. Their oldest son is studying at Moody Bible Institute to become a missionary. We commented on how wonderful that is, and she said, "We tell our kids, whatever you want to do, do it overseas." Their daughter wants to be a teacher. They tell her, "That's great, why don't you be a teacher overseas in some place where people don't have an opportunity to hear the Gospel." They have instilled in their kids a passion for missions from the time they were young, and they're efforts are bearing fruit. We need to have this kind of mindset with our children.

But doesn't that go against the way we're wired to think and feel about our children! Our tendency is to say, Stay here! Stay close to home! Don't go away. But instead our attitude and encouragement to them should be Go! Go wherever God leads! Go overseas! Not because we don't like you. We love you dearly. But we want your life to count for the kingdom. So follow wherever God leads you, and if He leads you overseas (which would be such an exciting thing) then, by all means, GO!!! That kind of passion will have a profound impact our children.

Parents, I encourage you to seek the Lord passionately in your personal life, and pray for the grace to lead your families well. Don't be seduced by the comforts and pleasures of this short life. Look to what matters. Look to eternity, and bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. What a beautiful thing it is when fathers are taking the lead in the marriage and in the family, and the parents together are working to teach their children about the Gospel, and children are coming under conviction of sin and turning to Christ for forgiveness and then are humbly obeying their parents. This is what we should be praying

for in our families—pleading with God to have mercy on us and on our children. Let’s pray that, for God’s glory to be seen in our families and that we would have the great delight of seeing Him work in us and through us.

The main point of what I’ve said thus far is that fathers are the ones primarily responsible for the spiritual development of their children. I want all the parents here, and especially fathers, to understand that you cannot leave this task to someone else. You cannot outsource this. You can’t contract it out to a Sunday School teacher or a youth group or a Christian school. Those are wonderful things that may assist you in your task of instructing your children in the ways of the Lord. But it’s you, dad, who is ultimately responsible. You must be involved. You have to know what’s going on. You can’t just send your kids off to a Sunday School class or a Vacation Bible School and think that you’ve done your job.

The Role of the Church

With that point firmly established, I hope, we can now talk about the role of the church. To do this, I invite you to look with me at Ephesians 4:11-14. "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

In light of this passage, let’s think about the role of the church in the spiritual development of our children. I’ll mention three things. First of all, Christ has given to the church these various individuals (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) for this purpose: verse 12, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” We are the saints—everyone who has been born again, everyone who is a genuine Christian. And we come together as a body of believers and one of the things that happens is that we are equipped for the work of ministry. In Sunday School, in the worship service, in small groups, we are equipped for the work of ministry. For those in this room who are parents, one of our main ministries is the discipleship of our children. And we need to be equipped for that task. We need to be taught the Sunday School hour. In the worship service we need to be edified and inspired and convicted and instructed. We need the accountability and fellowship of a small group.

As parents, as fathers, we're responsible to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. But we can't do that on our own. And God doesn't intend for us to do it on our own. He uses preaching and teaching and fellowship within the body in order to equip us and edify us so that we can then minister to our families. So, first of all, the church's role is to equip and edify parents so that they can do the ministry work of discipleship in the home.

Secondly, the church also supplements the discipleship that is going on in the home. It doesn't replace the teaching that should be going on in the home, but it supplements and complements it. I am so thankful for the godly Sunday School teachers in this church! It has been such a joy to Stacy and me to know that our young children are learning God's Word in their Sunday School classes, and that they're learning from people who are passionate about the Lord. Our children need that. They need to see a passion for the Lord in the home, and they also need to go to church and develop relationships with other adults who love Jesus and love the Bible and want to see God's Name magnified.

This is also why we want children in the worship services. We want them to experience, on a weekly basis, a group of believers worshipping the Lord. They may not understand much of what's going on. Most of what I say will probably go right over their heads, at least for the young children. But they can learn that this is something special. This is something unique. This is serious and important and wonderful.

So the role of the church in the spiritual development of children is to equip and edify parents, to supplement the teaching that is hopefully going on in the home. And then thirdly, it is also the role of the church to stand in the gap for children who do not have two Christian parents in the home. We saw in Ephesians 6:4 that fathers have a responsibility to love and discipline and instruct their children. But what if there isn't a father in the home? Or what if the father is not a Christian? This is an area where the church needs to play a significant role. Children with one parent, children with no parents, children with unbelieving parents—they need to be incorporated into the family of believers in such a way that godly men and women in the church become spiritual fathers and mothers for these children. The church needs to seek out these children. And the church needs to stand in the gap to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

My encouragement to fathers, to mothers, and to all of us, is to recognize how awesome and glorious this task is, to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. For those who have children in the home, this is our time (a very short time) to have influence our kids very powerfully in the ways of the Lord.

For those with adult children, there's still time to influence your kids in godly ways. And for all of us, there are plenty of opportunities to equip and edify parents, to supplement the training that is going on in Christian homes, and to stand in the gap for those children who need godly role models in their lives.

I'll close with these words from Psalm 145, which summarize what we desire to do in teaching the next generation. The psalmist, David, says, "One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts." This is our delightful task, as parents, and as a church. Let us teach the next generation. Let us commend to them God's works and declare to them God's mighty acts.