

Baptism and Childrearing (1/3) – Ephesians 6:1-4

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Texts that Transform

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Bible Text: Ephesian 6:1-4
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Our Father in heaven, we pray that you'll give us understanding that we might rightly divide the word of truth, apply it, and see that word sink deep roots into our souls. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

My subject this evening is that of infant baptism and childrearing. My text is Ephesians 6:1-4 where the apostle writes,

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The church in which I was reared had one model of conversion and that model was what I would call the crisis model, so that everybody goes through this same process where there comes a point in your life when you realize that you're a sinner, you come to understand that Jesus is the Savior, you then turn and you put your faith in him, and you, then at that point, become a Christian. Typically a dramatic event. There is a very distinct before I had faith and then there's the after I came to have faith. So testimonials are always of that sort, "This is what I was before. This is what I have now become."

Well, that crisis model was problematic for me and I think it's problematic for lots of young people who grow up in the church because we are not aware of a before and an after. Our experience has been that we don't recall not believing. As far back as we can remember, we always believed. From the very beginning, there's not a time when we didn't understand at least with childlike faith that we were sinners; that we needed Christ; that we looked to him and to him alone for our salvation. That's as far back as our memory goes and yet we were brought up in a tradition where the expectation was that there would be this dramatic before followed by this transformative after without there being any significant continuity between the two phases in one's life and so we constantly felt the pressure to duplicate that model and countless times we asked Jesus into our lives but it never seemed to take because we couldn't establish the before and after. We couldn't see the dramatic change. Our lives were more understood, recognized in terms of

continuity, a gradual growth from childlike faith into a more mature adult faith that we gradually over time had grown into.

According to Hughes Old, covenant theology is reformed sacramental theology. Got that? Covenant theology is really Reformed Protestantism, sacramental theology, and the reason why he says that is because our sacramental theology was the context within which we began to understand the covenants. It was in the conflict with the Anabaptists who insisted that only adults be baptized, go back to 1524, Zwingli's in conflict with the Anabaptists who have invaded Zurich, and so in the context of these debates, Zwingli plunges deeply into a covenantal understanding of the Scriptures and, therefore, the foundation upon which one would practice the baptizing of one's infants even as in the Old Testament they circumcised their male infants. This is what we looked at last time was the covenantal basis for infant baptism so I don't want to go into more detail about that but what I do want to talk about is the way in which the covenant affects your outlook on Christian nurture; on how we go about raising our children.

After I wrote that paper that I mentioned last time, I felt like that that began to explain my experience as a child and my experience of faith in Christ. That summer I went home and began to talk about some of these ideas with my sisters and what I explained to them resonated with them as well. They, too, could not remember a time when they didn't have faith. They, too, were not able to identify a before and an after, "Here is what I was before I had faith in Christ." There wasn't a before because there was never a time that I can recall that I didn't have faith in Christ, and there isn't a dramatic after because there is a rather steady growth all through the years from childlike faith to adult faith, and I found that with my sisters as well, what I was describing resonated with them in the same way that it resonated with me.

So what does the covenant have to say with the way in which we nurture our children? Well, it's going to take me a few weeks to work this out but the first thing I want to say is this: because of our understanding of the covenant, we raise our children, Bob would want me to say we rear our children as Christians. We tell them from the very beginning, "You have the mark of Christ on you and you belong to him. The mark of Christ is baptism. The baptismal waters were applied to you. He owned you as his own at that point and you belong to him. You are dedicated to him. You are his." And even if they go through some kind of a subsequent rebellion, we continue to say that to them, "You belong to Christ." We teach them to call God, Father. We teach them to pray the Our Father, do we not? Well, an unbeliever doesn't have the right to call God, Father, and yet you'll find that people all across the ecclesiastical spectrum from a Baptist understanding to a more Reformed and covenantal understanding, they'll all teach their children to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." On what basis would they do that? I mean, thankfully their parental instincts are better than their theology because the unbeliever doesn't have a right to call God, Father. Doesn't John 1:12 say it's to as many as received him, to them he gave the right to be called the children of God? By what right do we teach our children today that they can call upon God as their Father and be confident of his fatherly provision and protection? Well, on the basis of the covenant; because God has promised, "I will be a God to you and to your children."

So our God is their God, God is their Father, so it's on that basis that we teach them to pray, "Our Father." It's on that basis that we bring them to church. We tell them they are in the covenant and they enjoy the privileges of the covenant. Now it may be that they at some point may rebel and then have a crisis-like conversion like that of the Apostle Paul on the Damascus Road, or it may be that they will stray from God like the prodigal of Luke 15 and then return to the Father who, by the way, has never ceased to be their Father even when they were off into a far country and actively in rebellion against him. More likely, though, is that their experience is going to be like that of Timothy. In 2 Timothy 3:14-15, the Apostle Paul says, "As for you, Timothy, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed." You see that he speaks in terms of continuity. "Continue in the way that you have always believed, knowing from whom you learned it," which would be from his mother and his grandmother, "and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." No crisis conversion there. No radical discontinuity between the before and the after. No dramatic transformation and change that takes place. It's continuity. There is this development and growth in a linear way in the faith that he knew from the time he was a child. That's more likely to be the pattern or here in Ephesians 6:4, "bring them up," bring up your children, "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." So it's in the Lord's discipline and instruction, not outside of that discipline and instruction but rather in that discipline and instruction.

So with our children, we're not going to demand of them a crisis conversion. In fact, what I would argue is that the ideal is that they would never know a day apart from faith in Christ as we pray and as we speak at the time that we do at our infant baptisms. That's not the most dramatic conversion story but I maintain that it's the best story. It's the best testimony. It's to never have known a day apart from faith in Christ and, therefore, to have been spared the scars that come from those who go off into the far country and in rebellion and indulge the flesh and who then have to live with the memories of their waywardness, the scars and the wounds that have marred their souls for the rest of their lives.

In Christ, that which has been consumed by the locust is restored but there still are the consequences of those years of rebellion and to have been nurtured in a Christian home, to have been nurtured in the faith, and to have learned from infancy to call out to God as Father and Christ as Savior, to have learned from the very beginning to confess your sins and look to the cross and to the blood of Christ alone for salvation and to have believed that from the beginning and to have never wandered from that from the beginning is the very best of testimonies because it speaks of the covenantal faithfulness of God that has been experienced in a family from generation to generation to generation, one following another.

So, number 1: our children should be reared as Christians. Number 2: they should be reared as sinners. They should be reared with a sobering reality that whether they believed from childhood or not, they are infected by original sin. They are not innocent. They are not pure.

I'm going to repeat a story. If you've heard it before, bear with me. I have a limited repertoire of stories. But John G. goes and speaks in a Presbyterian church and before the sermon he's looking around and there at the baptismal font, it's prepared for a baptism. There's a white rose on the baptismal font. He says, "What's the meaning of the white rose?" And they say, "Well, it represents the purity and innocence of the child." Then he said, "Well, what's the meaning of the baptism?" There's a built in contradiction here. The baptism assumes, vow number 1, it assumes that your children need the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit and if they're innocent and pure, they don't need it. They do need it. Why? Because they're infected, that's why. Because their hearts are corrupted. Because they're little vipers. They have a sin nature. They are inherently lovers of darkness and haters of the light and maybe like John the Baptist and they've been filled with the Spirit from their mother's wombs, maybe they have been trusting in God from the time they're a nursing infant like David in Psalm 22, that may be the case, does that mean there's no trace left of original sin? There's no trace left of original corruption? No, of course, it lingers. The dregs are there.

It will manifest itself in the behavior of your children. What kind of behavior? Well, the behavior of a rebel. They will be inclined toward rebellion; toward their willfulness; they will think of themselves as the center of the universe. It's true. Genesis 3:5, it's been there from the very beginning. The promise the devil makes to Eve is that, "You will be like God." That's really been the human quest from the very beginning. There's a remnant of that in every one of us, even if we're regenerate, and it is present in our children. We would be as God and to be as God means exactly what? It means we get our way. It means that everybody must obey us; that everybody must do what we require; that everybody must meet our needs on our timetable; it means that the whole world needs to revolve around us and everybody in that world needs to be serving me and meeting my needs and doing all that I demand of them. That's the way, with that understanding Christian parents rear their children. They understand that, yes, they are within the covenant, we bring them up as Christians, nevertheless, they have been seriously infected by sin.

Now, for years I have assigned to parents during their pre-baptismal counseling the reading of J. C. Ryle's booklet, "The Duty of Parents." Eventually that went out of print, we have reprinted it. Yours at IPC Press for nothing. I assign it and what I tell every couple is I say, "You must read this before we baptize your child." One of these days, I'm going to test them to make sure that they have and then confront them right before the baptism. No, I probably won't ever do that but it is such an outstanding book. It's about 32 pages, 17 principles. I think it's the best thing ever written on the subject. It is comprehensive. He deals with all of the issues. It's fantastic. Now that's not to be confused with this little booklet we just ran off by John Piper. This is another one. It's more extensive than Piper's booklet. But J. C. Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool at the end of the 19th century, I read him virtually every Sunday that I'm doing a Gospel exposition. His expository thoughts on the Gospels are priceless. You could read them as your morning devotions and work your way right through all four Gospels. Just priceless, almost as good as Matthew Henry. Not quite but almost that outstanding.

Well, he's just fantastic in this booklet on the duties of parents. He begins the booklet lamenting the shortsightedness of parents with respect to their own children in relation to whom they are, he says, blind as bats. He says, "I have sometimes been perfectly astonished at the slowness of sensible Christian parents to allow that their own children are at fault or deserve blame." I mean, nothing changes on earth and nothing changes within the Christian community. That continues to be the case today, parents who just have the most difficult time believing that their children are at fault. Somehow even somber Calvinistic parents lose sight of the fact that their children are born with what Ryle calls a decided bias toward evil. Left to themselves, uncorrected and undisciplined, left to make their own choices, Ryle says they are certain to choose wrong. Foolishness is bound up in their hearts, Proverbs 22:15. Left to themselves, shame is what they will bring upon themselves and their mothers, Proverbs 29:15. Children must be trained in the way that they should go and not left to go their own way, Proverbs 22:6. Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it, but get the implication: children can and must be trained. I could almost end the sermon that point, I believe, because there is so much fatalism about the training of children, as though if we train them we're going to somehow corrupt them. It's inevitable that they rebel against the training. No. Train your children. They're meant to be trained. "Children, obey your parents." The implication of the requirement that children obey is that parents must obligate them to obey. It's your duty to make your children obey. That's clearly the implication of the commands that we have.

So what do they need, these children of ours? According to Ephesians 6:4, they need discipline and instruction so let's see how far we get in the area of discipline. This is the negative, this is the correction: timely, constant correction is the need of your children. Why? Well, because as we noted, because they think that they're the center of the universe. They want everything done on their timetable. They want their way and they want it now and if you don't correct them, if you don't discipline them, you will have little monsters on your hands.

John Piper wrote that little booklet there, he says, out of exasperation. He says, "I am moved to write this by watching," he's speaking to his congregation, a much bolder man than I am, "by watching your children pay no attention to their parents' request with no consequences. Parents tell a child two or three times to sit or stop and come or go, and after the third disobedience, they laughingly bribe the child." He tells of a scenario he witnessed on an airplane. He says, "I was sitting behind a mother and her son who may have been 7 years old. He was playing on his digital tablet. The flight attendant announced that all electronic devices should be turned off for takeoff. He didn't turn it off. The mother didn't require it. As the flight attendant walked by, she said he needed to turn it off and kept moving. He didn't do it. The mother didn't require it. One last time, the flight attendant stood over them and said that the boy would need to give the device to his mother. He turned it off. When the flight attendant took her seat, the boy turned his device back on and kept it on through the takeoff. The mother did nothing. The defiance and laziness of unbelieving parents I can understand," he says. "I have biblical categories for the behavior of the spiritually blind but the neglect of Christian parents perplexes

me." Further he laments, "To watch parents act as if they are helpless in the presence of disobedient children is pitiful. God requires that children obey only because it is possible for parents to require obedience. Little children under a year old can be shown effectively what they may not touch, bite, pull, poke, spit out, or shriek about. You are bigger than they are. Use your size to save them for joy, not sentence them to selfishness."

Listen to the wisdom of the Proverbs. Proverbs 22:6 again, "Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." But parents, you need to train them. It's not going to happen apart from training. Train up the child and then he will not depart, but you have to train him.

Proverbs 22:15, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child." No, the child is not innocent. The child is not pure. The child is not sinless. No, there is folly, foolishness in the heart of a child. That's why you don't let them make their own decisions. That's why they need guidance all along the way. That's why they need correction. That's why they need discipline. That's why they need instruction. Why? Because in the heart of a child is foolishness, "but the rod of discipline drives it far from him." That's negative correction. That's what they need as well as positive instruction, the rod of discipline. Whatever form that discipline, whatever deprivation or pain that is involved in that discipline, that is part of what is necessary, that is part of what it takes in order to properly train up a child and drive off the foolishness.

Proverbs 13:24, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son." Oh no, I just love my children so much I could never inflict pain. Well, according to the Proverbs, the wisdom of the Bible, you spare the rod, you hate your kid. "But he who loves him is diligent to discipline." It's not occasionally discipline, it's not when they get completely out of hand disciplines, but there's a diligence about it. There's a consistency about it.

Proverbs 23:13-14, "Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with a rod, you will save his soul from Sheol." Can you believe it? The Proverb connects corporal punishment with salvation. I mean, you've got to accommodate what it's saying. It's part of the whole. It's not the last word, of course there's a positive presentation of Christ and the cross and the whole Gospel message but part of it is you show them their sin and you correct it. You show that it's a serious thing by correcting it. You don't just let it go. You don't just bypass it. You don't just ignore it. You don't just sweep it under the carpet. You withhold that rod and you're putting their salvation at risk. "Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you strike him with a rod, you will save his soul from Sheol."

Alright, let's look at some of the elements that inhibit parental discipline of children. I've got several of them that we can review. 1. Weariness. Again, to cite Piper, "If you tell a child to stay in bed and he gets up anyway, it is simply easier to say, 'Go back to bed,' than to get up and deal with disobedience." I can remember this so clearly, sitting in my big easy-chair and someone gets out of bed or somebody's cutting up upstairs and you can hear it, and you know, you just don't want to get out of the chair. "Please, don't make me do it. I'm exhausted. I've been through hurricane hour with five children from 5 to 8.

We fed them. We bathed them. We had devotions together. Put diapers on them. We put them to bed. One of them is up. Don't make me have to deal with this again." So you don't. That's Piper's point. What is it? Parental weariness. Tired of dealing with them. Just scream upstairs, "Shut up!" So you don't deal with it.

He says, "Parents are tired. I sympathize. For more than 40 years I've had children under 18." Children under 18, not 40 but we had them for 25 years. They wear you out and so you get sloppy. You get lazy and you become inconsistent. He says requiring obedience takes energy both physically and emotionally. Indeed, physically and emotionally. Physically especially when they're young and then when they're teenagers, it all moves from the physical exhaustion to the emotional exhaustion as you're dealing with them all the time about one thing or another.

The result of failing to correct them: uncontrollable children when it matters. They've learned how to work the angles. You see, this is what we forget, children are not little monkeys, they're smart. They're smarter than monkeys, alright? They're smarter than the smartest dog you've ever had. "Oh, my dog is so smart." They are 1,000 times smarter than that dog and they pick up on all of the nuances. So he says they're working the angles. You bet they are.

Mommy is powerless and daddy is a patsy. They can read when you're about to explode so they defy your words just short of that. That's exactly what they do and so you warn them once and you warn them again, and then if you're really not thinking clearly as a parent, you start doing the count to 10 thing. "Alright, I'm gonna count to 10." And what are you doing the whole time? You're just teaching them disobedience. You're just teaching them, "Well, until he or she counts to 10 and then the voice reaches a certain level of decibels and there's actual physical movement in my direction, I can defy them all the way up to that point. Then as soon as I hear that they're yelling that loud and I see the movement, up I pop and I go and do what I'm told. In the meantime, I've tormented myself, my parents, and anybody within 100 miles." Right? Everybody is miserable who is anywhere near that entire situation.

Mommy is powerless. Daddy is a patsy. They can read when you are about to explode so they defy your words just short of that. This bears sour fruit for everyone but the work it takes to be immediately consistent with every disobedience bears sweet fruit for parents, for children, and for others.

Weariness. Again, let me quote from J. C. Ryle, "If you do not take trouble with your children when they are young, they will give you trouble when they are old. Choose which you prefer." And I guarantee you want it when they're young, not when they're old. You want it now, not later. The sooner the better. You might as well get the fight over with now. Don't postpone it. Don't delay it. It's only going to be more difficult later.

So weariness is one of the great enemies of parenting in the home. In future weeks, we want to look at inconsistency; we want to look at over-indulgence; and we want to look at fear; and then we want to move on and look at provoking our children to wrath; and then

the positive instruction side of things. "Fathers," the apostle says, "do not provoke but bring them up." Fathers, this is not something you can delegate in its entirety to your wives. This is not momma's job and the apostle assigns the responsibility for the children to the father. This is the covenantal structure. The covenantal head is the father in the home and we're about to partake of a covenantal meal, we are a covenantal people. We rear our children covenantally. We help each other in the rearing of our children because we are in covenant together. We are open to what other people have to say about our children as they offer counsel and advice in helping us to rear our children.

All of those we need to talk about as we look together at going back to the whole theme of this, is that these are things that were of vital importance to me at certain junctures in my life, tends to transform. This has had a transforming impact on my whole outlook. Look, I was running around buying books for my children before I was married. It's true. I was anticipating that I would one day get married and, Lord willing, I would one day have children. I was thinking already about exactly what we were going to do as a family. Well, insofar as I could anticipate it. I think you young men need to be thinking now already about families, about being fathers and husbands and preparing for that day so that we are able to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We bring them up in the Lord as Christians but understanding that they have a sin nature and desperately need discipline and instruction.

As we pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we pray, O Lord, that we pray for our children. We pray that we would be faithful as parents and faithful as a covenant community and we pray that our children would know you, O Lord, as their Father from the beginning and never stray and never wander off into a far country like prodigals, but that they might love you and serve you all the days of their lives and it's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

So as a covenant community, we now will enjoy the meal of the covenant. The Old Testament meal, Passover, New Testament meal, the Lord's Supper. Old Testament, circumcision, New Testament, baptism. Passover, Lord's Supper. Externally different, differences of administration, the internal meaning is identical. The circumcision of Christ is baptism, the covenantal meal is the Lord's Supper in which we enjoy fellowship, koinonia, that's the language of 1 Corinthians 10, koinonia with Christ, fellowship with Christ, spiritual fellowship because there's a spiritual presence. Not to the medieval idea of transubstantiation, that there is a physical, carnal, localized presence. No, the whole Christ in the fullness of his humanity and divinity is present spiritually and so we enjoy communion, fellowship with Christ at the table and we partake of a meal that is symbolic because it is spiritual. Little morsels, they don't feed the stomach, you won't get full on them, they won't satisfy your hunger, they are representative of the spiritual meal, the fullness that we enjoy spiritually as we feed upon Christ, the bread of life. These are symbols or emblems of his death. They represent his death and they are for us spiritual nourishment. Food and drink, the Apostle Paul calls them in 1 Corinthians 10:3 and 4.

So who is invited to come and to participate in this meal? All those who are sincere believers who are walking with Christ and who have been approved by the governing body of the church to which they belong. In our case, it would be the Session. You've been approved as a communing member. That means that you've gone from being a non-communing child who is a member of the church but does not yet have the privileges of the table, to a communing member. That's when you profess your faith in Christ and publicly identify yourself as one of his disciples. Until that time comes, then you refrain from the supper. If you're in open rebellion and hostile rebellion against what you know to be Christ's commands, you have no intention of submitting to those commands, then you'd better refrain. You need to lay off until that rebellious spirit is broken. But if you are walking with Christ, though a sinner, and though walking imperfectly, that's assumed, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." We're all sinners. The meal is for sinners but it's for repentant sinners who are sincerely pursuing walking with Christ however imperfectly that walk or however imperfect that walk may be.

So if you are a member in good standing in an evangelic church and you're not a member here, we invite you to come and participate with us. If you're a sincere believer and walking with Christ, we invite you to come and to participate with us. All who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth we invite to come to the Lord's Table and find ease, refreshment and strength for your weak and weary souls. We do so with this caveat in the language of the Apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 11:27, "Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner," just out of curiosity or with a rebellious spirit, "shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup for he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly, and for this reason many among you are weak and sick and a number sleep."

So this is not a thing to be trifled with. We've confessed our sins. We have heard the words of pardon, hear now the words of institution, "For I receive from the Lord that which I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you.' Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me,' for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Let's join now as part of our further preparation in singing 422, "Twas on that night when doomed to know." This is from the Scottish paraphrases back in the 18th century, a paraphrase of the words of institution. Hymn 422. Standing together.