

Having considered vv1-3 and the primary responsibilities of children towards parents, we now come to v4 and the apostles exhortation to parents towards children—this he puts in a negative—“provoke not your children to wrath” and a positive—“but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord...”—we’ll consider the negative this morning leaving the positive to next week...

We find in the relationship between children and parents something similar to husbands and wives—just as husbands are assist their wives submission by tempering their authority with love—so too—parents are to use their authority in such a way to make the obedience of children a delight, Barns—“It was the duty of the wife to obey—but it was the corresponding duty of the husband to manifest such a character that it would be pleasant to yield obedience...In like manner it is the duty of children to obey a parent; but it is the duty of a parent to exhibit such a character, and to maintain such a government, that it would be proper for the child to obey; to command nothing that is unreasonable or improper, but to train up his children in the ways of virtue and pure religion...”

- I. A Simple Explanation
- II. Practical Suggestions
- III. Helps

I. A Simple Explanation

A. Its primary focus

1. The apostle Paul makes very clear who his primary focus in this verse was—“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath...”
2. That Paul meant primarily fathers and not fathers and mothers, is obvious from v1 where he used the word “parents” and v2—“honor thy father and mother...”
3. If the apostle had meant to use the word “fathers” as representative of father and mother he could have used the same Greek word he did in v1...
4. But he specifically chose the Greek word that simply means “fathers”—thus we learn—it is primarily the responsibility of fathers to raise and train their children...
5. Notice a few obvious deductions—[1] it’s not primarily the responsibility of mothers to train and raise children...
6. This of course does not deny that mothers have a central and important place in the process, a fact seen from v1—“children obey your parents” and v2—“honor your father and mother...”
7. But it is to say that fathers have the ultimate responsibility to oversee the multifaceted process of child rearing and training...
8. Nor does this imply that fathers must personally perform the many activities child rearing or training entails...
9. For if you remember—the man was instructed to leave the home to labor in the field—leaving the woman to labor within the home...
10. But the point is—it’s fundamentally and primarily the responsibility of fathers to delegate and oversee that the task is being accomplished...
11. The husband is not only head of the wife, but fathers are head of their families—and accordingly, the apostle doesn’t say—“and you mothers, but, instead—“and you fathers...”
12. But [2] it’s not primarily the responsibility of the church to train and raise children—there’s become an increasingly popular approach to child rearing, which leaves it to the church...
13. But brethren—the Scripture doesn’t say “elders” but “fathers”—“and you, fathers...bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord...”
14. But then [3] it’s not primarily the responsibility of the state—to simply ensure that your children get to the bus-stop is not enough...
15. Children are placed in daycare until they’re four—sent to preschool until they’re five—and then put on a bus for next 12 years until they are eighteen...

16. Yet our text plainly tells us—“and you fathers...”—that is—fathers are responsible to oversee the process of their children’s education...
17. Thus it has to be bore in mind that the “bringing up and nurturing” of this text includes all that is necessary in raising children...
18. This includes instruction in all areas—academics, character and religious things—and it includes discipline and correction...
19. In short, as we will begin to see next week, child rearing includes the whole child—their physical, social, mental, and spiritual development...
20. And all of this is primarily the task of fathers—for as the head of the home—it is his task to oversee the entire process, from start to finish—delegating the particulars as they think necessary...
21. Jay Adams—“The reason [the apostle] addresses the fathers is that what the mothers do, the fathers are responsible for. In addressing the fathers, he is addressing the one in whom God has vested His authority for discipline. The father is the head of the home. The father is the one who ultimately must answer to God for what happens in his home...”

B. Its basic meaning

1. The basic meaning of this phrase hinges upon the single Greek word translated—“provoke to wrath”—it literally means—“to incite or inflame to anger...”
2. It refers to any behavior that would unfairly create an angry response on the part of the child—that would temp their children to sin...
3. This, obviously, does not mean that parents are never to do anything that would make their children angry...
4. If this was the case—then children might rightly tell their parents never to discipline them, for that might make them angry...
5. But it does mean that parents, and in particular fathers, are not to treat their children in any manner that might arouse in them a rebellious and angry disposition...
6. They are not to treat their children in such a manner as to temp them to carnal and sinful anger—to provoke them to wrath...
7. Col.3:20-21—“Children, obey you parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged...”
8. Here the apostle shed’s light upon the meaning of our phrase—fathers are not to anger their children in such a way that leads to discouragement...
9. The word translated “discouraged” means “to loose heart, or to feel like giving up...”—the imagery is that of the wind being taken out of a sail...
10. We could paraphrase the text—“Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, unless you take the heart out of them...”
11. Thus the anger referred to in both passages [Eph.6:4, Col.3:21], is that of a frustrated anger—an anger that frustrates the child...
12. An anger that discourages, disheartens, or depresses a child—parents [especially fathers]—are not to provoke their children to wrath...
13. Thus this exhortation is directed to fathers—not only because they have primary responsibility—but because they have a tendency to provoke their children...
14. This was a tendency especially within first century paganism—where fathers would often treat their children little better than slaves...
15. William Barclay—“A Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his fields even in chains, he could take the law into his own hands, for the law was in his own hands, and punish as he liked, he could even inflict the death penalty on his child...”

II. Practical Suggestions—or, five ways not to provoke your child

A. Be consistent in discipline

1. Perhaps one of the most common ways we can provoke our children to wrath is by inconsistent applications of discipline...
2. And by this I primarily refer to an inconsistent use of the rod—you let them go today but you spanked them yesterday for the same thing...
3. One day you allow them to act in any way they want with no ramifications and the next day you discipline them for the smallest offence...
4. And brethren I don't mean to be impolite, but it's my conviction that the primary reason behind such inconsistency is nothing less than sheer laziness...
5. It simply takes too much time to discipline your child for that behavior, and so you act as if you didn't see it or else as if it wasn't wrong...
6. And then finally after several offences, you've had enough and you discipline your child—but can you imagine how confusing this must be to the child...
7. Martyn Lloyd-Jones—“There is no worse type of parent than he who one day, in a kindly mood, is indulgent and allows the child to do almost anything it likes, but who the next day flares up in a rage if the child does scarcely anything at all. That makes life impossible for the child...”
8. But brethren if we are not to provoke our children to wrath then we must be careful to maintain a general consistency when it comes to discipline...
9. Every single time our children disobey their needs to be a dependable response on the part of the parents—children need to see in their parents a consistency of disposition...
10. Think how confusing it would be if our Heavenly Father would change from day to day in the way He dealt with us...
11. If it's wrong today and right tomorrow—how frustrating it would be if we never knew what kind of a response to expect from God...
12. I wonder what kind of a mood He's in today—is He going to be strict or lenient—is He going to address my behavior or act as if it didn't happen...
13. But instead the Lord says of Himself in Malachi 3:6—“for I am the LORD, I change not....”—and of our Savior we read in Heb.14:8—“He is the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever...”
14. Ps.89:30-33—“if his sons forsake My law And do not walk in My judgments, 31 If they break My statutes and do not keep My commandments, 32 then I will punish their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. 33 Nevertheless My lovingkindness I will not utterly take from him, nor allow My faithfulness to fail...”
15. Notice [a] when discipline should be administered, v31—“if they break my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod...”
16. Notice [b] how discipline should be administered, v33—“nevertheless my lovingkindness I will not utterly take from him, nor allow my faithfulness to fail...”

B. Have clear expectations

1. Here is another sure way to provoke your child to anger—confuse him as to what your expectations for him are...
2. There are at least three ways this is done—[1] fail to have any expectations—by this I mean you simply leave your children to fend for themselves...
3. You fail to make clear what is expected from them—there are no clear guidelines as to what they can and cannot do...
4. Think of a country where no clear standards are given—no clear laws as to what's right and what's wrong...
5. Parents you listen to me—if you want to provoke your children to wrath then you simply leave them to themselves without any clearly defined expectations...
6. But brethren, how contrary is this to the way God parents His children—for He's made explicitly clear what His expectations are for us...
7. Micah 6:8—“He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God...”
8. The Lord has spelled out His expectations with perfect clarity—He's verbally given them upon the pages of Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation...

9. Gen.2:16-17—“and the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die...”
10. Notice—[a] there were clearly defined expectations, [b] the consequences were clearly spelled out, and [c] they were implemented appropriately...
11. But [2] change your expectations too often—every week the home has a new and revised set of rules—last week they could—this week they can’t—next week they can...
12. Have you ever worked for an employer who always changed his expectations—you never knew what to do, because he didn’t know what he wanted you to do...
13. We might refer to this as the confused approach to parenting—the house is in a constant state of confusion and turmoil...
14. Jay Adams—“When rules change day by day, a child doesn’t know where he stands. When rules are enforced only at the parents’ whims, the child becomes confused. Such rules are really no rules. They tend to provoke exasperation...when discipline keeps changing day after day, kids finally throw their hands into the air and say, ‘What’s the use in trying to keep rules; you never know what they are’...”
15. Now this doesn’t mean that rules can never change—but it is to say, that generally speaking—we need to clearly define our expectations and then stick to them...
16. Think of the Lord, how He’s given to His people the same moral standard from the beginning of time—while some of the ceremonial laws have changed, fundamentally, the Lord expects the same thing from us as He did from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...
17. We could say, within the household of God there’s been a consistency of expectations—children under the new dispensation have the same basic expectations as those under the old...
18. What a blessing it is—to have all our children grow up within the same household, to basically the same expectations...
19. But [3] a lack of harmony between parents—by this I mean parents who are not in harmony as to what their expectations are...
20. This may be due various reasons—perhaps there’s no communication between father and mother, and they simply don’t know what the other has said...
21. Or else, there’s disagreement between father and mother and so when father is gone the mother modifies her expectations to reflect her preference...
22. Oh my dear friends, there are fewer ways I assure you, to frustrate your child to wrath, then to display disunity between father and mother...

C. Have realistic expectations

1. Here I refer to parents who impose too high of a standard upon their child—a standard that exceeds God’s standard...
2. Now I’m fully aware that in our society far too little is expected from our children, for example, some think it’s absurd that we expect our children to sit still for an hour-long sermon...
3. Children, we are told, are unable to sit still for such a length of time, you’d be demanding too much of them—such a thought as this is absolutely foolish...
4. But then on the other hand is the tendency to expect too much from our children—both in terms of performance and understanding...
5. We must remember our Father, of whom we read about in Ps.103:14—“for he knows our frame; he remembers that we *are* dust...”
6. There are two things I want to say under this point—[1] beware of having too many rules—we must keep in mind the example of our Father who summarized His moral expectations into Ten Commandments...
7. Our Savior summarized them further into two—“You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself...”
8. More is not always better—for the more rules you have the more difficult it becomes to enforce them, and the more temptation to ignore them...
9. But [2] beware of having overly strict rules—this too is a sure way to provoke our children to wrath—putting unreasonable rules over them...

10. There is no doubt that a Christian home will be considered as overly strict by most people—but brethren—we must be sure there are no legitimacy in that claim...
11. Thus we must be sure that our homes are not characterized by mere negatives—you can not do this, you can not do that...
12. Think again of our Father in paradise, Gen.2:16—“of every tree of the garden you may freely eat...”—His parenting was merely negative...
13. Now brethren—listen to me very carefully—when it comes to working out some of these principles not all of us will agree...
14. You may allow your children to do some things that I won’t—and vice versa—but I trust we all agree on this point—we must beware of having overly strict rules...
15. Matt.11:28—“take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light...”

D. Practice what you preach

1. This is truly a sure way to provoke your children to wrath—expect them to honor their authorities, and yet at the same time dishonor yours...
2. For example, let’s say there was a set of parents who often spoke in a dishonoring way of their own parents, pastors and employers...
3. How hypocritical it would be for them to then severely discipline their own children, when they speak in a dishonorable manner towards them...
4. Or in fact it would be hypocritical for parents to discipline their children for any behavior that they opening partake of without repentance...
5. For example, think of a father who after yelling at his own wife, then disciplines his child for yelling at him...
6. Does this mean that parents must first be perfect before they can discipline their children—no, but it does mean that they’re generally obeying the will of their heavenly Father...
7. To put it simply—our children can tell whether or not our religion is genuine, and I assure you, there are fewer ways to provoke them to wrath, then if our behavior on Sunday fails to harmonize with our behavior on Monday...
8. What a tragedy it is, if the only religion our children see is that on Lord’s Days—you want to turn your children further from the things of God, who force upon them the mere shell or form of religion...
9. Brethren our children are not blind—because they live with us they see the way we act towards our wives and others—they know what we do with our spare time...
10. Behavior is largely imitative—this doesn’t imply that religion is obtained merely by imitation—but it is to say—one sure way to raise a household of skeptics is to fail to practice what you preach...
11. And fathers let me say specifically to you—our religion is only as good, as it’s worked out in our homes in the sight of our families...
12. But this is the beauty of family life—for just as they see us sin and fall short—they also see us own our sins, acknowledging them to God and others...
13. They get to behold true religion as it’s worked out in a fallen world with remaining corruption—they see us rejoice in the Lord and repent in dust and ashes...
14. And fathers let me add here as a side—a sure way to provoke your children to wrath is failure to admit when you’re clearly wrong...
15. You see we are to teach our children the nature of true religion, and isn’t it true that no small part of this religion entails the confession and repenting of our sins...
16. One wonderful way to teach your children how to confess their sins before their parents and God, is to display before them the nature of true and heartfelt repentance...
17. In a very useful book entitled, *Child Training Tips: What I wish I knew when my children were young*, in a chapter called *Exasperating your child*, the author gives 25 sure ways to exasperate your children...
18. Notice what made number one on the list—“Never admit you are wrong. Always be right. Acknowledge no mistakes—excuse, justify, and rationalize every error...”
19. Children let me say a word to you—while it is true your parents should practice what they preach—regardless if they do or don’t—you are still obligated to obey them...

20. Matt.23:2-3—“The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do...”

E. Give proper commendation

1. A fifth and final way we can provoke our children to wrath is to fail to give them proper praise and a sense of approval...
2. [1] Beware of a chronic faultfinding—if all we ever say to our children is always critical and disapproving we will quickly take all wind from our children's sails...
3. John Abbott—“Some persons get into such a habit of finding fault, that it becomes as natural to them as to breathe. Nothing pleases them. In every action, and in every event, they are searching for something to disapprove. Like venomous reptiles, they have the faculty of extracting poison from the choicest blessings...”
4. [2] Provide encouraging praise—brethren, with few if any exceptions, people thrive in the context of proper commendation...
5. I think of one of my daughters, who flourishes when I openly praise her—“Sweetheart, that is a wonderful job...”
6. For example, think of the 8 or 9 year old child, who struggles sitting still during the worship service—and yet for the last two weeks they've been unusually attentive...
7. What a perfect opportunity for the parents to sit the child down after the service, and say to him—Son, you've done a wonderful job for the past two weeks in sitting still and being attentive to the preaching...
8. You know, a sure way to provoke your child to wrath, is to fail to recognize their attempts at improvement—it's a sure way to take the wind out of their sails...
9. But oh what an encouragement it would be, to put your arm around your child, and say—Well done—good job—mother or father has been noticing your improvement in this area, and we want you to know it...
10. This can be illustrated in our Savior's letter to the church at Ephesus, Rev.2:2—“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary...”
11. Notice He begins with a list of commendations, and He then says in v4—“Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love...”
12. In other words—He first provides appropriate commendation—and then He points out their faults or sins...

III. Practical Helps

A. Be observant

1. This, I think is fundamental to good parenting—understand that each child is different and must be observed as to his particulars...
2. Not all of our children have the same strengths and abilities—for example, one may excel in reading and the other in math...
3. One may be more intellectual another more hands-on—I'm continual amazed how diverse my five children are...
4. This of course does not suggest that we fail to impose and expect a consistent morality from all of our children—I'm not suggested that we show any favoritism by expecting less morality from one child than another...
5. But what I am suggesting is that we observe the differences that exists in our children, in terms of ability and preference, and that we deal with them accordingly...
6. For example—I have one child who responds well with a gentle rebuke—often times I don't even need to apply the rod and she breaks down and repents from her sin...
7. But then I have another child, who almost always needs to be formally disciplined, and often times harder than the rest...

8. Now what a tragedy it would be if I simply applied the heavy hand without distinction to both girls—it would in fact amount to excessiveness toward the one girl and would drive her to wrath...
9. Let me ask you a question—doesn't our Father know His children by name, and deal with each one as an individual...
10. While there's a single standard and no favoritism, nevertheless there's the understanding that not all of His children are identical...
11. We could say that God is an observant parent—He knows each child by individually and personally—and deals with them accordingly...
12. One sure way not to provoke our children to wrath is to get know each child—know then enough to deal with them individually...

B. Ask questions

1. Here I primarily mean that fathers ask their wives and children, how they've been doing in this particular area...
2. This doesn't mean that fathers bend or mold their expectations after the desires of their children in a hope to keep the home happy...
3. No—I do not mean this—the father must make his decisions, before God, and often times against the wishes of his children...
4. But my point here is this—fathers, would be wise to enlist the input of their children, especially the older ones, as it's offered in a respectful and appropriate manner...
5. What a useful thing it may be, for the father to on occasion, perhaps during family worship, to simply ask his children if he has provoked them to wrath...
6. My wife on occasion will sit me down and ask me if there are any actions that she's doing, that displeases or dishonors me...
7. In short she is asking me—“How am I doing...”—she's wondering if she pleases me—she's wondering if she's honoring me...
8. And what drives such a question—two things—[1] the desire to improve, and [2] the awareness of her native weaknesses...
9. This is to say—she feels how insufficient and lacking she is—and so she humbles herself to ask me—how is she doing...
10. Now this I suggest is an appropriate practice for the husband to ask his wife—to ask her how he's doing in leading and loving her...
11. And by the way, it's also an appropriate practice for members of the church to ask their pastors, how they're doing in esteeming and loving those who are over them in the Lord...
12. Well brethren, the principle is similar in reference to parents and children—it's not inappropriate for fathers, to seek to know what their children thinks of them...
13. My friends, there has been an innumerable amount of parents, who never knew what their children thought, and all along they were embittered and angry towards them...
14. What a tragedy it is, to have a child grow up and leave the home, never expressing such thoughts, and never having them relieved, if possible, by the parents...
15. My brethren, it is my desire to know what my children think—I desire to know what's going on within their minds and hearts...

C. Pray fervently

1. Here I want to remind parents and especially fathers—that just as children are to obey their parents in the Lord so you are to obey your heavenly Father in the Lord...
2. In other words—you are to obey v4—“in the Lord”—that is—because you are in the Lord—because you are in Christ...