

## Family: Children and Parents

### Ephesians 6:1-4

*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.*

– Ephesians 6:1-4

### Introduction

“First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes . . .”

Do you remember chanting that little ditty as kids, usually when you were teasing someone? Do kids still chant that today?

It is fitting that the Apostle Paul, having addressed husbands and wives in the relationship of marriage, now turns his attention to the relationship between children and their parents. God consistently makes a strong connection between marriage and having children in His Word. When God created man and woman and marriage, He blessed the world’s first married couple and said, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.”

That verse is at the beginning of the Old Testament. At the very end of the Old Testament, many centuries later, God reaffirmed His purpose in connecting marriage and child-bearing. In Malachi 2, God addressed His people and says:

*And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. (Mal. 2:13-15, ESV)*

Now, of course, some married couples cannot have children, for a variety of reasons. We should sympathize with and support those couples in any way we can. But ours is the first culture in the history of the world to view children as a burden and not a blessing, the first culture in which married couples regularly choose not to have children. This is not God’s design and is not the normal pattern for marriages. Even today, most married couples do have children.

So, the question we are called to address this morning is this: What should the relationship between children and their parents look like in a Christ-centered home? Well, Paul very simply and powerfully addresses children first and then parents.

## I. Children

### A. Obey Your Parents

Children are told simply and clearly: “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*” This is a command from the Apostle Paul, very clear and unambiguous. Yet in our culture, this reality, like many others, is being questioned and challenged. Should parents have the right to tell their children what to do? Should children obey and honor their parents, or should they be given their freedom and independence at a young age, so they can decide for themselves what they want to do?

Paul says children should obey their parents “for this is right.” So, what makes it right?

Children, I am convinced that if you really understood two things clearly, this command would appear very clearly to be very right. What are these two things? If you understood how much your parents love you and how much life experience they have, then you would see how very right it is for you to obey them.

Think about it this way: If you were going to do something new and dangerous, would you want someone to show you how to do it? Wouldn't you want someone who you could trust and who had done it before themselves? Let's say you want to go skydiving, for example. Would you go with someone who had never done it before and who didn't really care that much about you because they were just focused on surviving the experience themselves, or would you go with someone who had been skydiving before and who was focused on helping you skydive safely? Or maybe you want to climb Mount Everest. Would you go with a skilled, experienced and dedicated guide or just with a group of your friends who had never been before either?

Well, growing up well in this world is both more dangerous and more difficult than skydiving or bungee jumping or mountain climbing. Life is fun and filled with great opportunities, but it's also filled with real dangers of many different kinds. Thankfully, God has given you parents – people who love you more than anyone else in the world and who have been through all of the stages of life that you're going through or will go through. So, you have experienced guides who love you more than you could ever imagine.

Here's the truth, though: You won't really have any idea how much your parents love you until you have your own children. Almost instantly, you'll want to call your parents and thank them for all they have done for you and apologize for every giving them a hard time growing up. So, it is right for you to obey your parents because they are your God-given life guides – trustworthy because they love you more than you know and they understand what you're going through because they've been through it themselves.

But you are not just to obey your parents because it is right. You are also to obey them “in the Lord.” This means that your obedience to your parents is not ultimately about them – how wonderful they are and how much they know and do for you. Your obedience is “in the Lord” – that is, it is done unto the Lord, as an act of obedience to Jesus.

### B. Honor Your Father and Mother

When Paul says it is right for you to obey your parents, he then quotes from the Ten Commandments, “Honor your father and mother.” He does this so you will see that it is not just right to obey your parents because they are your parents – who love you and who have lived life and have wisdom based on experience – but it is also right because God has commanded it.

What does it mean to honor your father and mother? Well, honor includes obedience, but it is more than that. The word Paul uses for “obey” means to listen with the intent of doing what is said. So, it really means to pay attention to what your parents say and to do it. To honor your parents includes that, but it includes more, too. It means that you should thank them, respect them, speak well of them, pray for them, love them and even forgive them. Yes, your parents need forgiveness, too, just as you do. As much as they love you and as much life experience as they have, your parents are sinners, too, and they sin against you regularly. So, part of honoring them is forgiving them.

For adults, we need to remember that the fifth commandment is not one that expires when you turn 21 or when you start your own family. Just as your children are called to honor you, so you are still called to honor your father and mother. You don’t necessarily need to obey everything they tell you anymore, but you should still listen with respect. They still love you and have still lived more of life than you have. You are still to thank them, respect them, speak well of them, pray for them, love them and forgive them.

### **C. God’s Promise**

But God doesn’t just tell us to honor our father and mother because it is the right thing to do. He also promises us a good, long life if we honor our parents. Now, we need to be clear about this promise: God makes different kinds of promises in the Bible. Some are absolute guarantees, but some are statements of the way things generally work for most people most of the time. Many children who honor their parents die at a young age or have a difficult life, for different reasons.

But how is it that honoring your father and mother will lead to a long, good life? Think about what happens when you obey your parents and honor your father and mother:

1. You listen to their advice and follow their wisdom, which sets a pattern in your life of being teachable and of wanting to walk in the path of wisdom.
2. You develop self-control and learn to restrain your impulsive desires.
3. You learn to respect other people and to get along well with others, probably especially your brothers and sisters, which will translate to getting along well with others as an adult.
4. You learn to see things from a more mature and outside perspective, which helps you develop the ability to look beyond your immediate circumstances and consider the long-range and big-picture perspective on your situation.

All of these qualities, which you develop as you obey and honor your parents, are the kinds of character qualities which generally lead to a good, long life. So, as hard as it is sometimes, you do benefit for life when you discipline yourself to obey and honor your parents.

## II. Fathers

### A. Why Fathers?

In verse 3, Paul turns his attention from children to fathers. It seems a little strange that Paul specifically addresses fathers here. In addressing children, he made sure to include both parents, fathers and mothers, in the commands to obey and honor. But now that he turns his attention to addressing the parents, he speaks directly to the fathers. Why?

Well, fathers are the head of the home, the leader of the family. The leadership responsibility of fathers means that they are the ones who are supposed to set the tone and the agenda for parenting. It is also commonly the case that it is fathers who need to hear the advice of these verses more so than mothers. Nevertheless, we should not read these verses as applying exclusively to fathers. Paul here addresses fathers directly and includes mothers as those who are called to the parenting partnership with the fathers.

### B. The Negative: Do not provoke.

Paul begins his instruction to fathers with a negative: “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.*” This is significant. Fathers are the only group in this section – which includes wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants and masters – to be addressed first in the negative. Sometimes fathers can love their children so much and have such strong desires to see their children doing well, but this love is affected by our sinful desire to have absolute mastery and control and can manifest itself in ways that are exasperating to children.

Fathers are called to leadership. In the family, they are called to oversee and direct the upbringing of their children. They also love their children and want what is best for their children. But fathers are not in control, not really. We can't make our children obey and honor. We can't make our children be all that God wants for them and all that we know they need to be. And so we can get easily frustrated by patterns of sin and immaturity we see in our children, because we're sinners who struggle with wanting too much control and not trusting God enough. Instead of being driven to our knees in prayer by what we see, we are driven to be angry, controlling, demanding, harsh. Our passion comes out of love, but what comes out is so tainted by our sin that it's not loving anymore.

So, Paul has to tell us, “do not provoke your children to anger.” How do we provoke them to anger? We can do this in many ways, but let's focus on three. We provoke our children to anger when we . . .

- When we have unrealistic or impossible expectations of them, especially ones they're just too young to be able to meet.
- When we get angry and over-react when they disobey.
- When we're unpredictable – what's allowed on Monday is disallowed on Tuesday and then allowed again on Wednesday – all depending on our mood and inclination and not on principle.

When we are unrealistic, over-reactive or unpredictable, we frustrate our children. We erode their trust in us and make it harder for them to obey and honor. We cause an anger that is toxic to our relationship with our children.

Now, the reality of being a sinful man in a fallen world is that we will, at times, fail to exercise the wisdom, self-control and consistency we desire to have. When that happens and we do provoke our children to anger, it is important that we immediately confess our own sin, even before we deal with the sin of our children in being angry with us. We will need to address their anger, too, but first we need to try to calm down, calm the situation, set the example in confession and reconciliation, and then engage in correction and instruction.

This confession and reconciliation not easy to do. It requires a great deal of humility and trust in the Lord, which we need the Holy Spirit to give us. But it is vital that we do this, not only for our own sake, but also so our children can see in us a model of what they should do when they sin. And Paul gives us this negative command about anger first because the training and instruction in the Lord that we're called to do really can't happen effectively in a relationship that is characterized by provocation and anger.

### **C. The Positive: Bring them up in the Lord.**

But the goal is not just to stop the anger. Paul follows his negative command immediately with the positive: *“but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”* Father are to seek to bring up their children, to nurture and nourish them, in the training or discipline and instruction or admonition of the Lord.

#### **1. Training/Discipline**

The first word Paul uses to describe the upbringing of children is a broad word for training and instructing. It is focused on skills as well as knowledge, on life as well as learning. We could see this first word as focused on the modeling and mentoring we're called to do. We are to demonstrate for our children what it looks like to live a Christian life. Our children learn much more by watching us than they do by listening to us, so this broader word for training and discipline is key and of first importance.

Our children will learn to pray by watching us pray and by us praying with them. Our children will learn how to be kind and how to forgive as they see us modeling that behavior and as we mentor them in that behavior. Our children will learn to make the worship of God a priority as they see us make it a priority for them and our family.

#### **2. Instruction**

The second word Paul uses is focused more on verbal instruction – both content knowledge and also verbal correction. Our children need to know the truth about God and His ways, about Christ and salvation. They need basic Bible knowledge, basic theology and a basic understanding of the principles of the Christian life and a Christian worldview. We need to teach them regularly and faithfully in all of these areas.

For many of us, this means that we have learning to do, but one of the best ways to learn anything is to teach it to others. So, commit yourself to teaching your children, and you will find you learn so much in the process.

Finally, don't miss that little phrase "of the Lord." It is the training and instruction of the Lord which is the calling for us as Christian parents. It is not ultimately our goal to see our children obey us, honor us and grow to become like us. We need to aim higher. They need to know the Lord, to love the Lord and to follow the Lord. We cannot save them. We are not the Holy Spirit. But we can be instruments in the Lord's hands to train our children in what it means to follow the Lord, so that when God changes their hearts and saves them, they will know how to walk with Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

I cannot think of anything more rewarding and more challenging than marriage and parenting. Nothing tests our faith, exposes our sin, humbles our pride and develops our dependence on God than our marriage and our child-rearing. Ultimately, a proper understanding of roles and responsibilities, a clear list of duties and obligations will only get us so far. We need the Lord. We must not trust in a program or even in a clear set of principles and priorities. We need Jesus. We need to seek Him in His word, in prayer, in worship, in fellowship passionately and purposefully. Only He can save us, day-by-day!