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Ephesians 6:1-4

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A CALL TO FATHERHOOD

What would you think of a husband who decided to delegate his responsibility for loving his wife? It's not that he had stopped loving her; it's just that he had come to realize that to do the job right, he needed professional help. In fact, it would be better for his wife if he hired a professional to do the job for him. After all, the professionals know all about their area of expertise, and the man is just an ignorant sinner. So, he delegated this difficult responsibility to a professional.

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But don't we do exactly that with our children? Our culture long ago gave up on the notion that the father is responsible for bringing up his children. We rely on schools: public and private; we have Sunday School for our children's religious education. In the home, fathers have given over this responsibility to their wives. None of this has biblical sanction.

I am not saying that it impossible for Bible-believing Christians to have a child in school, in Sunday School, or be taught things about life by his or her mother. What I am saying is this: God speaks clearly in Ephesians 6 (and elsewhere, too) to fathers as the ones responsible for bringing up children. The most solemn language possible is used in making this charge to fathers: raise your children as Christ raises the church. Only after a time of the greatest self-analysis and prayerful contemplation of what our mission in life is all about should we consider delegating the responsibility of bringing up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord to some other person or institution.

This morning we are going to look at Ephesians 6:1-4. Especially in verse 4 we will find a completely different model for fatherhood than what we see operating in our culture today. We will look at three different Greek words, and in them we will discover the basis for the high and holy calling of fatherhood.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (NASB)

Last summer I spent one morning with you examining ways that we might show honor to our parents. The

writing or speaking of a tribute is one magnificent way of doing that, as we have seen this morning in the tributes paid to fathers on Father's Day.

Let us focus on verse 4: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." First, let's glance quickly at the negative command in verse 4: Fathers are not to anger, or provoke to anger, their children. On the surface, it might look like fathers are supposed to tiptoe carefully around their children. After all, one mustn't anger them. But that is not what Paul is saying. He isn't talking about single incidents of provoking anger, but a pattern of communication that creates a habit of anger in a child.

Given more time, we could dwell profitably on this subject. But since I want to dwell longer on the positive commands in verse 4, and since I also believe that the best way to avoid raising angry children is to focus on how to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, I am going to skim past this issue.

Bring them up

Now let's look at the second part of verse 4: "Fathers, bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Here we find the three key words I mentioned a moment ago: bring up, discipline, and instruction. In my research, these three words point to a whole different model of fatherhood than we see in our culture today.

To "bring up" in Greek is *ektrepho*. This is a rare word in the New Testament. In fact, it is only used twice, both times in Ephesians. In addition to 6:4, Paul also uses the word in 5:29, where he says: "for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes (*ektrepho*) and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church."

Even though the word is only used one other time, it is a very powerful usage. A father is to "bring up" his children with the same kind of nourishing that our Lord Jesus lavishes on his church. We often hear that a man is to love his wife as the Lord loves his church. Here we find that a father is to nurture and bring up his children in the same way: as Christ does the church. The charge given to fathers could not be more solemnly stated.

There is an implication in these verses that I don't want you to miss. Paul addresses fathers in these vers-

es. All of Scripture does this. It is the man who is explicitly given the command to raise and nourish his children. It is the father who is held accountable and is standing before God on this issue. What can we do?

First, fathers need to admit to the task. The Lord has put the responsibility for raising (in the fullest biblical sense) children into our hands. We must abandon the notion that we can fulfill these commands by delegating this responsibility to someone else. No one can take the place of the father in this awesome responsibility. The mother, the school teacher, relatives, friends, institutions of the secular world—none of these has this responsibility. And even if we do choose to delegate the task, God still holds us to the responsibility.

Second, we must beware of thinking that a half-hearted effort comes close to meeting the biblical standard. This is what our culture would have us think: that by providing consistent discipline, in the narrow sense, at home, and having our children attend Sunday School, that we are bringing up our children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord.” No. The commandment is much bigger than that. Fathers are commanded to transmit a whole world view, a value system—the Lord’s value system—to their children. A father is to be the source of intellectual and moral understanding for his children.

Discipline

Just how much “bigger” is this commandment for fathers? What is the content of the father’s upbringing of his children? The word *ektrepho*, bring up or nourish, gives us the style, the how. But what about the content? Paul addresses this in the second half of verse 4: fathers are to nourish and bring up their children so that their character is formed by the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The word discipline (*paideia*) is a huge word in Greek. When I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, one of the first books I had to read was called *Greek Paideia*. It took the author three volumes—over twelve hundred pages in small print—to communicate his understanding of the ancient Greek notion of *paideia*. To him it meant nothing less than the total cultural system of the Greeks: the values that one generation passes on to the next. In the NT, the word is used primarily to indicate something very close to what we would mean by the word “discipline” today. Yet we cannot ignore the word’s cultural context. No Greek would have understood *paideia* to mean decisions about whether to spank or have a time out. To them it was an all-embracing term which defined an entire culture.

Paul commands fathers here to be the vehicle by which one generation transmits its values and world view to the next. What is the biblical perspective on science and the arts? How is the Christian to be mentally

prepared to watch a movie or read a book? With what intellectual and moral background should a Christian enter into political discussion and debate? What understanding of music does the Christian have when he or she rides to work and listens to the radio? What is the grid through which the Christian views everything in the world? That grid is the Christian’s *paideia*, and it is one of the prime tasks of a father to build that grid into his children.

If I can put this from a different point of view, it all boils down to Scripture. Christian *paideia* comes from understanding and applying the Word of God. This requires living a life that is steeped in the scriptures: they are read, sung, meditated upon, puzzled over, researched. And the whole process, fathers, is communicated between you and your children.

Instruction

But it is not all just intellectual. Paul also commands fathers in Ephesians 6:4 to nourish and bring up children in the “instruction of the Lord.” What does that mean? The best sense of the Greek word here, *nouthesia*, is instruction in the sense of a warning. I was at a workshop once where I heard some great examples of how fathers can “warn” their children. A pastor from the Sacramento area was telling how he had learned that he needed to role-play situations with his children so that they would really come to understand the situations they found themselves in. He would actually talk and act out situations like this with them:

- You are at a friend’s house and someone turns on the television. You and your friend are not watching the show, you are doing something else, but you can see that the show is on. You know that it has totally inappropriate content and that you are not permitted to watch it. What can you say and do?

- On the way home from school you and your friends stop by the 7-11 for a snack. Afterwards, one friend reveals that she has stolen something from the store. What should you say or do?

The examples could be multiplied. In fact, all we have to do is take the strange and uncomfortable and dangerous situations we got into as children and use them as examples. Instead of watching TV or “doing nothing” some night, you could make these role plays into a kind of charades game with your whole family. Wouldn’t that be fun?

I believe that there was a father in the OT who understood all about this kind of role playing and word-picture painting. He beautifully fulfilled the commandments in Ephesians 6:4 and, fortunately for us, he did it in writing, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That man wrote the Book of Proverbs. And do you know where he got his words? Listen to Proverbs 4:1-4:

**Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father
And give attention that you may gain understanding,
For I give you sound teaching;
Do not abandon my instruction.
When I was a son to my father,
Tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,
Then he taught me and said to me,
“Let your heart hold fast my words;
Keep my commandments and live.”**

This man got his words of wisdom from his father, and he began receiving them when he was a very young boy. What a wonderful picture! And, is there any aspect of life that is not touched on in Proverbs? Hardly.

How can we summarize and then implement the commands Paul has given us in Ephesians 4:6? How can we begin to turn in a radical way against the on-rushing avalanche of a dark and ignorant culture? I can tell you that it feels impossible at times. But much of what God commands us to do sounds impossible at first. We know we cannot fulfill his commands by works of the flesh or following the law, either. Ultimately, I think we will find this to be a matter of priorities. And for most fathers here in Silicon Valley, the danger point will be placing our role as physical provider for our families higher than our role as the moral head and spiritual leader of our children. Our jobs are less important than our children. My guess is that we have an intellectual understanding of this already. But have we integrated it into our lives?

Let me ask you to ponder just a few questions. I don't mean these to be legalisms. Please think about your answers to these questions and then talk them over with your Heavenly Father, who longs to give you grace and hope in this area.

- Do you read the Scriptures with your children in a routine or systematic way at home?

- How much do you know about what your children are taught in school, Sunday School and public, private or home school?

- Do you sing with your children?

- Do you discuss with your children what they see on television or hear on the radio?

- When was the last occasion you used dinner time to have a discussion of some political or social event or issue in the light of God's Word?

- How do you use those “natural moments” of communication with your children, in the car, at night before bed, at mealtimes? If you don't have any of these “natural moments,” ask yourself why.

- Do you pray with your children?

- Do you know what your children are interested in and good at? Have you encouraged them in these areas recently?

If you feel the need to change your behavior in any way as a result of thinking about these things, then I strongly encourage you to pray first and then act slowly next. Take one idea and try to implement it. One of the great temptations, especially for fathers, is to barge into a situation and “fix it.” But, the issues here are too big for that kind of nonsense. After falling on our face before the Lord, we need to slowly and yet confidently begin to make changes as he leads us.

As we honor fathers on Father's Day, let us acknowledge the high and holy calling of fatherhood. Let us repent of our distance from the biblical ideal, and ask our Heavenly Father for the courage, insight and love to come back to the way he intends us to be.

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