



## A WISE WALK FOR PARENTS

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Ephesians 6:4

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Parents have a tremendous effect on their children and on society in general. Children's primary role models are their mothers and fathers. Parenting is a very difficult calling, however. Most of us are ill prepared to deal with the complexities of child raising. Considering its importance, one would think that parenting classes would be part of the standard curriculum in our schools. Compare the time you spend with your children with the time you take doing calculus problems after you graduate! Because children learn their parenting skills from their parents, they can pass on unhealthy family dynamics from one generation to the next. If I were a young parent I would organize a class that teaches about the challenges faced by fathers and mothers both now and in the future.

In our studies in Ephesians we come now to Paul's word to parents. The apostle has been addressing critical relationships in the context of Christians walking wisely, being filled with the Spirit, and submitting to one another in the fear of Christ. In our last study we saw how children should submit to their parents in the Lord. Today we will focus on how parents give up their lives to care for their children, as God designed.

Our text is but one verse, from chapter 6:

**Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:4, NASB)**

As was the case with husbands, wives and children, we wish Paul had given a little more information, perhaps some definitive rules and formulas to help us. What we get instead are concepts that we must apply through wisdom and faith. After examining this one verse we will go on to reflect on some practical principles.

While Paul addresses this word to fathers, what he says applies to mothers, too. Perhaps he singles out fathers because in the Corinthian culture, men were not quite as fatherly as they might have been. Or perhaps he knows that the father is the one who sets the tone for the home. He carries the mantle of headship, setting the mood from which the wife and children draw.

The apostle issues two commands, one negative, the other positive: "do not provoke," and "bring them up." Actually four words here bear consideration and definition.

The first command is, "do not provoke your children to anger." A father who provokes his children makes ir-

ritating and unreasonable demands on them. He is harsh and cruel and demonstrates favoritism. He humiliates, suppresses, ridicules or is sarcastic toward them. In light of what Paul said in chapter 4, this is the "old man" that parents must put off.

Parents make their children angry when they don't take time to understand them. They lack the patience and energy to deal with the complexities of childhood. Feeling inadequate, they become defensive and frustrated over the time it takes to raise children. They are unhappy and unfilled and they take it out on the kids. Perhaps they were abused by an angry father when they themselves were children.

This might be the core issue that keeps children from growing up into maturity and having a healthy and undistorted view of God, and with people, too. Children who are treated poorly and provoked to anger grow up harboring resentment, anger and bitterness. They are discouraged and frustrated. They fail to take responsibility for their own lives, and have difficulty relating to others. Tragically, they have a distorted view of God as a Father. Children who carry anger into adulthood may spend years dealing with bitterness and establishing a healthy view of God.

Now the apostle's positive command: "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." This is the "new man" in Christ that parents must put on. "Bring up" means nourish and feed. This is the same word that Paul used in 5:29, to refer to the care we give our bodies, and in the analogy for how a husband should nourish his wife. Here, parents are commanded to raise children to maturity by providing for their physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

The method they should employ involves discipline and instruction. They must raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The word discipline refers to training and instructing children in how to live and behave properly. This word is used of circumstances in which unpleasant consequences are required in order to correct. Proverbs and Hebrews both teach that the Lord disciplines his children because he loves them:

**My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD  
Or loathe His reproof,  
For whom the LORD loves He reproveth,  
Even as a father corrects the son in whom he  
delights. (Prov 3:11-12)**

**It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? (Heb 12:7).**

**He who withholds his rod hates his son,  
But he who loves him disciplines him diligently.  
(Prov 13:24)**

Children will not automatically behave when they are asked. As precious as they are, they come out of the womb as sinners. They are selfish and misbehave, so they need training and discipline. Parents who fail to do this are in for trouble. Children want to know their boundaries, so they will test their fathers and mothers. Undisciplined children actually feel neglected and insecure. This is a touchy subject, of course. While there are right and wrong methods of discipline, and right and wrong situations to impose it, remember that it is designed to benefit and train the child for his or her own good. This is what we learn in Hebrews: "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb 12:11).

"Instruction" speaks of the verbal education of a child. It also includes giving advice concerning the dangerous consequences of certain actions, helping to guide children away from hidden danger. Paul told the Corinthians that what happened to Israel was written so that it might be a warning to believers: "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11).

Parents need to be diligent students of the Scriptures to gain the wisdom they need to train and teach their children. The place to begin is the book of Proverbs, God's handbook for what and how to teach children.

This brings us now to some practical principles for parents, drawn from this text in Ephesians.

**A. Parents need to remember that children are a gift from the Lord.**

Children are a challenge. Raising them properly is difficult and demanding. How true is God's word in Genesis 3:16, "in pain you will bring forth children." They demand an enormous amount of time, money, and energy. But, first and foremost, children are a gift from God. Everything about them is intended by God to be a gift to their parents.

This is the point of Psalm 127:

**It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To retire late,  
To eat the bread of painful labors;  
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.  
Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward. (Ps 127:2-3)**

Here the blessings that children bring are contrasted with the independent, self-willed person seeking to satisfy himself. If you have children you cannot set your

own course, control your time or fulfill your plans. Parents must become servants and be ready to die daily for their children. This is how they submit in their relationship with their children: they have to trust God.

Your children are a gift from God, hand-picked by him just for you. They might have learning disabilities, be physically disabled or cause you deep pain, but even that is intended by God to be a blessing, not a curse, a gift for your good, so that you might die to your selfishness and know God's grace and mercy. Becoming like Jesus demands that we lose our life in order to gain it. We might say that children interrupt our life to give us life!

Even if we do not have children that too can be a gift from God, so that we learn to know and trust him. And of course, nothing prevents us from having spiritual children. Two weeks from now my daughter will be getting married. Only one of my relatives will be at the wedding, and yet we will be surrounded by a spiritual family that will make this event incredibly joyful. God gives us many brothers and sisters and sons and daughters in Christ.

**B. Parenting is about training and teaching, not control.**

The goal of parenting is to raise children to become healthy and mature adults. Early in a child's life, rules and boundaries must be established to protect him or her from danger and impart godly character. Children need these boundaries – and they want them. As they grow, these boundaries and rules must change so that they will make their own decisions, experience risk, and become their own person.

Parents misapply discipline when they seek to control their children. They fear for them and don't allow them to step outside the boundaries. They don't want them to risk or fail. They don't let them make their own decisions and suffer the consequences of their choices. But this merely results in making children angry. It plants seeds of deep resentment, inhibiting them from experiencing freedom, making decisions and risking failure.

Parents who control their children keep them under the law. Their rules become like God's law in the Old Testament. And, just as Israel misused God's law, and Christians continue to misuse God's law, so parents too can misuse either God's law or their own law. God's law is good, and your law may be good too, but it should be a means to the end, not the end.

The goal of God's law is to teach, correct, expose sin, and eventually lead us to Jesus. Slavery results from living under law, but God's desire is that we experience freedom in Christ. That should be a parent's desire, too. The law is not given to control but to guide. The goal is to experience a free relationship, free from guilt, shame, or emotional control.

### **C. Parenting is about acceptance and relationship, not perfection.**

Parents become misguided when they strive to produce perfect children. They can be obsessed and consumed with perfect behavior, perfect appearance and perfect grades. They want their child to be the best—the best student, the best Christian, the best athlete, the best pianist. They become consumed with external results. This is quickly passed on to children, who in turn become obsessed with performance. They know that they will find love, approval, acceptance and praise when they perform well. When they don't, they feel guilt and shame, which makes them angry. All of this leads to living under the law and seeking approval from people rather than God.

Wise parents take time to understand and know their children. They support them for who they are, not what they would like them to be. Wise parents distinguish between identity and behavior. They communicate acceptance to their children based on who they are, not on what they do. Wise parents encourage children to excel, risk and be challenged. They don't make success the basis for approval or identity.

Children need to know that their parents' love and affirmation is constant and does not depend on how they perform. They need to know that what they do does not change how their parents feel about them. Children need to know that they are accepted whether they fail a test or get an A, strike out or hit a home run, finish last in the race or first. Parents may discipline certain behaviors and indicate that certain things are unacceptable, but they still need to communicate total acceptance to their children.

Parents discern at an early age their child's weaknesses, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. You can expend a lot of time energy trying to correct, change, or strengthen your child, but your efforts will do very little to change his or her basic nature. You will focus on trying to improve the negatives instead of affirming the positives. You will become consumed with perfection rather than relationship, which is what your child really longs for.

One author put it this way: "The most important part of parenting is the quality of the relationship between you and your children, not what they wear, how they comb their hair, whether they finish in first, second, or third place, but rather how it feels to be together. When they are grown and have children of their own, none of you will remember their grades, but all of you will remember the quality of your relationship."<sup>1</sup>

### **D. Parents are not in control of their child's journey. Don't take too much credit if it suits you. Don't accept too much blame if it does not.**

God is in charge of your child's journey. This is something between God and your child. Parents would like to be in control, to make that journey free from pain and disappointment, to see all their dreams come true, but

God does not give us those options.

Our children will have to face disappointment, pain, fear, and shattered dreams. We want to save them from the things that we ourselves had to face, and yet we know that these very things were necessary in making us who we are. They were an essential part of our journey with God as we learned to know and trust him. We should not expect anything different for our children.

This means that we may hurt for them, but we should never try to circumvent the process to alleviate our pain. We teach and train them, and then wait on the Lord. We cannot guarantee the outcome, although we would like to think we can. This is a matter for God. Ultimately our children are his children. We care for them for a season, and we have tremendous influence on them, but I doubt that what we do is the determining factor. Some parents who do everything right have children who struggle in life. Others make a lot of mistakes and yet their children grow up healthy and mature. Parents need to let go of the burden of results.

### **E. The opportunity for parents is to reflect God the Father to their children, full of grace and truth, compassion and forgiveness.**

John Stott has said, "human fathers are to care for their families as God the Father cares for his."<sup>2</sup> The way parents relate to their children is a mirror for how they relate to God as his children. If they live under the law, then they will put their children under the law. If they perform to gain approval and acceptance, they will reflect this back to their children. If parents do not experience the love of God, they will look for life and love from their children. The question is: What do your children see when they look at you? Do they see a reflection of God? If they do, this is the greatest gift you can give them.

Being like God the Father means offering complete acceptance, grace and kindness to our children. We never compromise truth, but we balance it with love. These things are at the heart of God, and they should be at the heart of parents. Which would you rather have, a perfect child or a child with whom you share deep intimacy and joy?

This is at the heart of my own journey with my children. When they were young, without meaning to I communicated my acceptance of them based on their behavior and performance. My daughter was a swimmer. When she finished a race, she wouldn't look at the clock to see her time, she would look in the stands to see my face. If she saw disappointment, her heart would sink. Children look into their parents' faces to see if they are loved and accepted. They don't want to be validated by a report card or a coach. They want the love of their parents. When at last I realized what I was doing, I asked my children to forgive me. I told them over and over that nothing they did or didn't do would change the way I felt about them. That was when we began to share joy, forgiveness and intimacy.

The journey for parents is to become fathers and mothers who reflect the compassion and mercy of God. How blessed we would be if our children would write the kind of poem Wendell Berry wrote to his mother:

### To My Mother

I was your rebellious son,  
do you remember? Sometimes  
I wonder if you do remember,  
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been  
I wonder sometimes if it did not  
precede my wrong, and I erred,  
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,  
or my bed at night, so that almost  
I should forgive you, who perhaps  
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,  
causing me to smile now, looking back,  
to see how paltry was my worst,  
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,  
is the vision of that Heaven of which  
we have heard, where those who love  
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,  
the light a music in the air,  
all is unentangled  
and all is undismayed.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Judy Ford, *Wonderful Ways To Love A Child* (Berkeley: Conari Press), 4-5.
2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity), 245.
3. Wendell Berry, *Entries* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1994), 23-24.