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Colossians 3:21

18th Message

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# GUARDIANS OF THE HEART

SERIES: *THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*  
*LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #2*

Our passage today is only one verse:

**Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they do not lose heart.** (Col. 3:21, NASB)

It may sound really easy or really challenging to you, depending on where you are in life. When my kids were a lot younger, it sounded easy to me – but now, with 7 kids and 27 years of experience as a father, not so much! Most of us who have been parents for any length of time will freely admit that at one point or another we have blown it big-time with our kids. In fact, I suspect that many people in this room right now are burdened with struggles when it comes to parenting your kids. And though advice for parenting abounds, learning it and putting it into practice can be two very tall orders.

The good news about this one verse is that, beyond the challenge we read at first glance, there is a key that unlocks a *new, heavenly role* for relating to our kids that's full of life and hope – for them and for us, too.

## Background

We're in the second week of our series on how to live in relationships. Our main text in this series is the latter part of Colossians chapter 3, in which Paul gives guidelines to three pairs of people: wives/husbands, children/fathers and slaves/masters. Last week, we started on the first pair and looked at children, and we saw that Christian children are urged to *obey their parents in everything* as an expression of their desire to please the Lord. Today we will look at the corresponding position in the pair – fathers. Those of you who aren't fathers will probably see parallels to your situations at work, in mentoring kids or in your other relationships; and you kids – well, this is your day to get some insights into how you can encourage your dad as he helps you grow up.

Now you might remember that the theme of Colossians is very exciting – it's what Paul calls becoming “complete” or “mature” in Christ (Col. 1:28). You might also remember that the first 17 verses of chapter 3 are about resurrection life – “seeking the things above, where Christ is” (verse 1). We are to lay aside the old ways (verses 5-11) and instead put on something new and exciting (verses 12-17), something drastically different – the ways of God Himself ... compassion, humility, gentleness, patience – and especially love. Then, in verses 18 and following, Paul gets very specific and gives a carefully chosen exhortation to each role – basically, directions for becoming mature in everyday relationships in the home. Let's take a look at what he says to fathers.

Our verse divides naturally into three parts: First, there is the address, “Fathers.” Second, there is the command, “do not exasperate your children.” Third, there is the reason or consequence of the command, “that they may not lose heart.”

## The address: Why only fathers?

We might naturally begin by asking, shouldn't this passage be addressed to both fathers *and mothers*? After all, in the prior verse,

Paul said children were to obey their *parents*. But the Greek word for “parents” in verse 20 (*goneus*) is different than the word for “fathers” in verse 21 (the masculine noun, *pater*). So why did Paul address only fathers? (Some have suggested it's because men need more help!)

In the Roman world of Paul's day – especially among non-Christian and non-Jewish households – the love of a father for his children was not valued and was not all that common. In fact, under the Roman law of *patria potestas* – *power of the father* – a father had power of life and death over his children, grandchildren and any slaves. He could throw his children out into the street, sell them as slaves, beat them, or even kill them, with no fear of repercussion from the government. So for a father influenced by Roman law, Paul's command for children to obey their parents might seem like a green light for dad to engage in heartless domineering. So Paul balances the obedience command (given to children) with this counterweight of instruction to fathers. The bottom line is that, for the men of Colossae, Paul's exhortation was a *radical departure* from the culture of the day. Now the men must see themselves not as superior but rather as servant-leaders like Christ. This has relevance today for both fathers and mothers – both can slip into being domineering, so we need this word today as much as ever.

I also think it's fair to say that kids need their dads to be *involved* servant-leaders – they suffer when we are absent or uninvolved. Fathers bring something unique. But it's hard to be a Christian father. Some of us had a good model in our own dad, like I did, and that helps. The best dads take their cues from God's word and their model from Jesus Christ Himself (Col. 3:17). To be like Jesus in the way we manage our household is the greatest expression of love a dad can give to his family.

Now Paul goes on to give one imperative to fathers – one thing to avoid in the path of parenting: *whatever you do, don't exasperate your kids*. So what exactly does that mean?

## The command: Don't exasperate your children

Let's first be clear that “children” here can refer to children of any age, though the likely focus is children who are still under regular parental guidance. In terms of this word, you stop being a child when you go out to establish your own independence and your own life. Of course, it is certainly possible for parents – perhaps especially fathers – to exasperate even their adult children, so in that sense this is a lifelong responsibility for us.

The word for “exasperate” (NIV “embitter”) basically means, “to stir up, stimulate, irritate or provoke.” It can be used positively or negatively, but here it is negative, with a root that means contention, strife and wrangling. And its tense indicates it is an ongoing action – so Paul is basically talking about *continual agitation* – like *habitual nagging*. It does not mean that parents are never to say or do anything that makes their children feel irritated. It is really saying, “Fathers, do not *keep on irritating* your children. Don't keep *hammering away* at them, *nagging* them, pushing their buttons. We will look more closely at what this looks like in a minute.

We find a similar expression in Ephesians 6:4 – “do not provoke your children to anger” – though the Greek word is a little different there. It means to “rouse to wrath.” The word for “exasperate” in Colossians 3 seems a little stronger, since its result is not just anger but *brokenness*, as we see from the next phrase – “that they do not lose heart.”

### The reason or consequence: That they do not lose heart

The Greek word for “lose heart” here (NIV: “become discouraged”) means to become timid or be “disheartened, dispirited or broken in spirit.” In this context, it probably involves a sense of the child being so overpowered that it is useless trying to please their parents, or God – like the deck is totally stacked against them. This word is similar to another Greek word that has a similar meaning – to “not be renewed” – and is often translated to “lose heart.” It appears in contexts of prayer, ministry and regular daily life (Luke 18:1; 2 Cor. 4:1; 2 Cor. 4:16; and Gal. 6:9).

I have personally seen this kind of disheartened spirit in several of my boys at times, in part because of some approaches I took with them. I did not realize it was so discouraging to them, but parents and children don’t always see things the same way! In both cases, I realized over time that I needed to change and approach things differently. That is what this verse to fathers is about.

In fact, this phrase about not losing heart is the key to the verse – Paul is saying that a key part of being a father is *to protect or guard the spirit of our kids* – to be a *guardian of their heart*. And isn’t that just what God is toward us? He watches over us and teaches us in ways specific to us, yet He never lets us be overcome by more than we can handle with His Spirit (1 Cor. 10:13). He wants to help us soar, not be sunk (Is. 40:29-31). So being a *guardian* means paying attention to how each child is responding to our parenting and what causes them to lose heart.

### Exasperation in practice

Well, what *do* fathers (and mothers) do that exasperate their children and cause them to lose heart? In Scripture, “exasperate” is used only twice in the New Testament, and “lose heart” is used infrequently as well, so it’s challenging to get a clear picture of what it looks like. Elsewhere, I found lots of lists seasoned with the pain of experience, including one with 25 items on it. That seemed like an impossibly high number, but reading the list was helpful since some of the items had been outside my awareness. In that same spirit, let me list 12 items that I think ring true, and comment briefly on them. If you are not sure which of these you are prone to, ask your kids – or your spouse. These are not necessarily the “magic 12” to post on your refrigerator and avoid doing, but rather as we look at them, you might ask God to reveal to you a few that might need attention in your life. These will round out our picture of not losing heart, which is so important from Paul’s perspective. I call this list the “Disheartening Dozen.”

1. **Uninvolved or distracted** – not spending enough time with them; not engaging in training them. Deuteronomy 6 calls us to be instructing our kids all along the way, so how can we do that if we are not around them and involved with them? A survey in one town indicated that fathers spent only 37 seconds a day with their small sons – probably not enough!
2. **Unrealistic expectations** that they can never meet. We push our children to excel – in school, sports and other activities, social situations, and even Christian growth and service. We also tend to put *our* expectations and standards on them instead of

working with who they are. We tend to try to “fix” our kids when they don’t meet our expectations or wishes. But our mindset is wrong – we are not the owners of our kids, we are their shepherds, the stewards. Our job is not to produce the child we want, it is to shepherd the child we have. Prod to make them more mature, yes ... but push so much that they lose heart, no. Children need to be treated like unique people and not things.

3. **Perpetual fault-finding**; nagging them to death is perhaps the most obvious way cause our kids to lose heart. Author Tedd Tripp says, “It’s no wonder many teens do not accept instruction from their parents. They are suffering under the cruelty of their parent’s harsh words. Any instruction is lost to a wounded spirit and deepening alienation.”<sup>1</sup> We would do well to learn to let *some* poor behavior go. After all, does God zap *us* every time *we* do something a little out of line? As Tripp adds, “You have no biblical obligation to censure your children for everything they do that is irritating to you.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus seemed to state truths once, or at most a few times. He leaves it up to us to obey. Generally speaking, that seems to illustrate a better approach than relentlessly harping on the kids.
4. **Making discipline too severe** can also easily cause kids to lose heart. Especially when we get frustrated, it can be easy to let the discipline be greater than the offense. As *guardians of their heart*, we need to remember that it is power from within – not pressure from without – that is ultimately effective.
5. **Failure to show affection and communicate approval**. Someone recently told me that each of us needs 16 hugs a day to reinforce our positive sense of self. I can’t find that in Scripture, of course, but plenty of people can attest to the power of a hug or a meaningful handshake. And many can attest that a parent’s words of acceptance and support – or on the other hand words of criticism – hit home to kids in ways that no one else’s words can.
6. **Impatient or angry instruction**. It can be very easy for us dads to forget that these are kids we are dealing with, not seasoned adults – and we can get impatient. Worse, when we get really frustrated with the behavior of a child, anger can become the driver of our “instruction.” Many years ago, I asked a father of grown kids for his top two pieces of advice to me as a young dad; I forget one, but the other was “*Never, ever* discipline your kids in anger.” I wish I could say I have always followed that advice! But I share it this morning because I still think it is a good goal.
7. **Never admitting you’re wrong**, nor be vulnerable. Many of us think that, as parents, we need to be right all the time. We can even rationalize that by telling ourselves that it gives kids confidence to know they have a smart parent. While it’s certainly smart to pursue wisdom and impart it to our kids, perhaps the most important truth we can impart to them is that we are weak and the Lord is strong. A couple of years ago, a good friend of mine came face to face with the fact that he had a serious addiction that he had kept hidden from his family and friends. He ultimately made the courageous decision to come clean, tell the truth and apologize – first to his wife, then to his grown kids, then to others. He tells me often of the amazing restoration that has occurred in his family relationships because of his decision.
8. **Inconsistent standards**: not keeping promises, and saying one thing, but doing another. This can also include playing favorites between kids, and all of it can cause kids to think they just can’t succeed.

9. **Not listening.** How easily we dads get consumed with responsibilities outside the family, and distracted by information overload (think e-mail, texting, internet...). Do we pay attention and look our children in the eye when they talk to us?
10. **Overprotection** – not letting our kids make choices of their own. This is of course more of an issue the older the kids get, when they can get to the point of thinking, “when does my life get to be mine?” While it’s natural for us to want to protect them from things that can hurt them, sometimes we go too far. I love the picture of this in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: Frodo *had* to carry the ring – the other eight members of the fellowship could not do it for him, much as they wanted to. When they tried, things got ugly. Instead they learned to just protect him in a limited way and encourage him as best they could.
11. **Lack of fun with dad.** A friend recently told me that the kids in the kindergarden-1st grade class at a local elementary school were asked, “What is a Daddy?” These were my friend’s three favorite responses:

A boy named Sean said, “A daddy is someone who makes money to buy you toys. Daddies play all day Saturday and Sunday and they take you to the park.”

A girl named Jenny said, “A daddy is someone who is nice. My daddy plays games with me after school. Daddies love and care for their children and mostly daddies are there to make good meatloaf.”

And a girl named Nichole added, “Daddies kiss their children and they take care of them. Daddies are the best. They like to play. Daddies go to work to learn how to play with children. Daddies love their kids.”

Which four-letter word appears in every quote? Play. We can have fun *with* our kids. We sometimes think our kids are going to miss out on life if they don’t do all these organized group activities when, in fact, they might be missing out on the important things in life *because* they are doing so many of these things, since there is little place left for fun with family.

12. **Many or all of the above** – Any one of the above items can dishearten a child, but several delivered concurrently can be devastating.

The Disheartening Dozen is far from a complete list. We could come up with more items to add. But I don’t think it’s important to do that or to pin down a definitive list – and Paul does not try either. I think his point is broader – that as fathers we need to be *guardians of our child’s heart*, and avoid abusing our power and authority over them. Paul wants us to learn to watch how our kids are doing and learn what in our parenting might cause them to lose heart. Before we look at how to do that, we need to pause and address those who think they have blown it.

### A word to those who think they have blown it

If you are disheartened by your part in your parent/child relationships, I offer you just one thought – don’t try to fix it all at once, but do take the next good step. That might be to:

**Seek the Lord’s forgiveness and healing** – He is a big God and can make the crooked straight and give us beauty for ashes (Is. 61:3).

**Admit you’re wrong.** If you are at fault, you might need to go to your child and admit it (James 5:16).

**Find help in the body.** You might need help from people, so draw from the community of believers around you. Tremendous love and resources are in this body.

**Resist the devil.** You might need to resist Satan’s condemning thoughts about your shortcomings (James 4:7). He wants you to believe you cannot change and cannot be forgiven. God says otherwise.

**Accept God’s grace.** God longs to give grace, even to the most wayward of sinners. He is a forgiving God who is bigger than all our mistakes. His mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23). And even when we fall short, He loves us, to the point of rejoicing over us with singing (Zeph. 3:17).

I wonder, “What did Adam think about when he looked over his descendants and thought back to parenting?” (I think Adam lived to see the eighth generation after him.) Did Adam just engage in self-criticism and say, “I really did a horrible job of parenting!” Or did he also see God’s forgiveness? Can we look back and consider the fathering *we* received and say, “My dad did the best he could?” And to our point this morning, *can we give ourselves the same grace?*

So if exasperating and disheartening our kids is the poison to avoid, and since God forgives us and allows us to start afresh, what is the antidote? What is the better way with our kids? What positive things can we do to be *guardians of their hearts?*

### How to encourage instead of exasperate

Our parallel verse in Ephesians 6:4 – which ends with “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” – tells us what our approach *should* be in fathering. There Paul gives us *four clues* in the four Greek words:

#### Bring Them Up

First, “bring them up” means “to nourish to maturity.” It is also used in Eph. 5:29, where a husband is told to *nourish* and cherish his wife, as Christ does the church. The word suggests tenderness, not power or strength. One of the best things we can do to nourish our kids is to learn to *speak tenderly and graciously* – not belittling them, or yelling at them.

The apostle James describes the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8), and he urged everyone to be “slow to speak and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20). In contrast, Isaiah and Proverbs describe the kind of speech we should long to have – speech that “sustains the weary one with a word” (Is. 50:4) and “gracious words [that] promote instruction” (Prov. 16:21, TNIV).

My wife is a master at this. When I come face to face with a child who repeatedly does not do something we have asked him to do, I get frustrated and tend to get angry, raising my voice and “laying down the law” – obey now or else! In contrast, Sue speaks gently but firmly, and sometimes with humor, pointing out why what we’ve asked them to do is appropriate and why their response is not in their interest. My approach tends to alienate. Hers communicates the same standard but does so with loving support. It is positive and constructive, inspiring and encouraging. It remembers that the person is more important than the problem – that the child is more important than the car he dented, the homework that’s late, the lawn he didn’t get around to mowing, and even our desire to be right all the time. Isn’t that how God works tenderly with us?



## Discipline

The second clue, “discipline,” is better translated “training.” This word means more than the rod of punishment; it means “the whole training and education of children.” It involves teaching about all of life through words and example. One important thing every dad should model – maybe the most important thing – is to love his wife. This is what kids see every day and will remember, even more than what we say. Come back in two weeks to hear a lot more about what loving your wife looks like! We could spend several weeks looking at what it means to train our kids, but today I will just mention one foundational aspect of it: To train up the *whole* child, we need to walk some paths *with* him so we can teach as life happens (Deut. 6:6-9, NASB). I have done this with my older kids by participating with them in the hobby of Civil War reenacting, allowing us to naturally discuss life issues as they have come up, and more recently I have been trying to do likewise with my 20-year-old by serving as an informal advisor as he launches a Christian youth theatre program. When our kids come to us with ideas that are outside our experience, we don’t have to brush them off, but can engage *with* them.

A friend recently told me about a 10-year-old boy who developed a love for fixing up old trunks. His dad thought it was a little odd and didn’t do anything to support it, so on his own, the boy searched for and found a local man who specialized in restoring old trunks. He contacted the man and asked if he could come to his shop to meet him. The man said he would do one better – he told the boy to bring an old trunk with him, and said he would teach him to restore it. He would not do it for him, but would show him the way and would work alongside him to help him learn. That man modeled how our heavenly Father is with us, and how we should be with our kids. It doesn’t mean we have to participate in every interest of our kids – just being interested and listening and offering support can often cover it. In the end, though, they ought to see in their human father a picture of the heavenly Father, who is regularly present and supportive.

## Instruction

The third clue Paul gives is “instruction,” which means “admonition, exhortation, counsel,” to “place before the mind.” To exhort and counsel our kids, we should learn how our kids are “bent” or designed. God treats each of us as a unique person, and we should do likewise with our kids. What some of my kids found frustrating in my approach, my other kids found perfectly reasonable. Different kids even in the same family need custom fathering. Proverbs 22:6 is a principle, not a promise. It does not say, “train him to do what is right, and when he is grown up he will always do what is right.” It says, “train him *according to his God-designed bent*, and when he is grown he will tend to live consistent with that bent.” So to be *guardians of their heart*, we fathers have to pay attention to how God has designed each of our kids, and what kinds of things cause each of them to lose heart. That does not mean having different moral standards, but it may mean our approach will differ from child to child.

The fourth clue takes us to the One who is all in all:

## Of the Lord – the One to whom we belong.

The apostle John tells us very directly, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). And Paul’s lead-in to the whole section we’re studying on relationships is to “put on love” (Col. 3:14) and “do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). He writes the same thing to the Christians in Ephesus where he urges them to “walk in love, just as Christ also loved

you and gave Himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1). And Paul devoted a whole chapter of one of his other letters – chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians – to describing in detail what real love looks like. I spent some extended time studying and teaching that chapter earlier this year and found myself not only challenged but transformed as I learned more about the love God calls us to. The best way to learn not to exasperate your kids and cause them to lose heart is to become more like Christ yourself – loving always.

I don’t do any of these four things consistently well, but I do them much better today than I did several years ago. I’ve learned that our parenting is a two-pronged activity of God: He is using us – even with our limitations and imperfections – to teach and raise our kids to be godly adults, and in the process, He is transforming us toward greater maturity in Christ. In other words, we are not just the dispenser of knowledge and wisdom; we are also the receiver of the Spirit’s transforming work in us. And the good news is that there is hope for us and for our kids because the Lord promises to bring us to maturity in Christ if we submit to Him (Phil. 1:6).

## Conclusion

Our one verse is simple, but deep. It calls us to a process, to growth. Each day is just one chapter, and the next chapter is still to be written. Keeping our hearts fixed on Christ, we are to be satisfied with progress toward maturity in Him—not expecting perfection now, either in our kids or in ourselves.

So if children are supposed to relate to their parents in obedience, parents are essentially instructed to *guard their kids’ hearts* as they instruct, so the kids’ growth is not too difficult. My responsibility as a parent is to nurture and train them without exasperating them – without piling on such high demands and expectations that they give up and think they can never succeed. It’s a fine line and it involves learning to speak tenderly, walking alongside them, paying attention to how each child is bent and becoming more like Christ, living His love to build them up and not make them lose heart.

Ultimately, all our fathering should be patterned on God’s fathering of us. They ought to see in their human father a reflection – an imperfect one, of course – of the heavenly Father in his tenderness, companionship, patient guidance, and most of all in His loyal love. We are deeply loved by our heavenly Father, even in our shortcomings. The more we grasp His patience and unconditional love toward us, the more we can be an agent of that grace and love to our kids. The best path to being a better father (or mother) is to become a more godly person – one more like Jesus, more driven by *agape* love. The best news is that the outcome is a certainty – God promises to be with us always, to lift us up when we fall and to increasingly conform us to His likeness. Ultimately, He is *the guardian of our heart* – we in turn do the same for our kids.

1 Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* (Shepherd Press, Wapwallopen, PA, 1995), 232.

2 Tripp, 233.

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