

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

(Ephesians 6:4)

Introduction

For the past five years now, I have been praying for the salvation of my grandchildren, after twenty years of praying for salvation of my own children. I pray weekly for the salvation of the children of church members. Coupled with this, I pray daily for the parents of my grandchildren – and I pray weekly for the parents of the children of fellow church members.

If I was asked to summarise my prayers for parents, I would characterise them as prayers for gospel-driven parenting. I pray for parenting that prioritises the gospel, for parenting that makes the gospel in the life of children the ultimate and greatest and most important goal. As R. W. Dale once wrote, “Parents should care more for the loyalty of their children to *Christ* than for anything besides. More for this than their health, their intellectual vigour and brilliance, their material prosperity, their social position, their exemption from great sorrows and great misfortunes.”

Parenting should demonstrate the power of the gospel by seeking and asking and experiencing forgiveness. Parenting should be strengthened by a church that is committed to the gospel.

This is the context of this simple but deeply profound verse concerning parenting. Though this passage is not exhaustive, nevertheless two commandments are given that, if obeyed, provide a framework for gospel-driven parenting: First, don't stir up your children, but, second, do raise up your children. And this is to be done by pointing them to the Lord.

This, of course, is the context of this whole passage (5:18ff). The context of all these exhortations is the gospel of Christ.

I conclude, that since this short verse is placed within the overall context of the passage, it would almost be redundant to say much more. These words summarise the responsibility of fathers. They are to raise their children to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and God as their Father. The goal of Christian parenting is for fathers to lead their children to another Father (5:1). The “training and admonition” that a father provides for his children is “of the Lord” precisely because its object is the Lord.

Who is meant by “the Lord”? Which person of the Trinity is being referenced? It could be argued from the context that it refers to Christ. In the broader context (5:1–2), it might be

referring to the Father. Since the law referenced in 6:1–2 was given by the Father, the Father interpretation may be strengthened.

Regardless, it is clear that Paul desires fathers so raise their children so that they will find themselves one day “in the Lord” and therefore under *his* training and instruction. Paul desires Christian fathers to so raise their children that they will become “dear children” of God (5:1).

O that God would help us to raise our children that they will one day be able to join us genuinely and sincerely praying, “Our Father.”

But the question is, how do we get there? What, according to this text, is required for fathers to lead their children to the Father? I would suggest at least four things: (1) Fathers must be present; (2) fathers must not provoke; (3) fathers must parent; and (4) fathers must pray.

Fathers Must Be Present

It is obvious from the subject of this verse—“fathers”—that God expects fathers to be present.

Unfortunately, many commentators and preachers are too quick to change the emphasis of v. 4 from the intended audience (fathers) to what is assumed to be the larger audience (parents). But clearly Paul has fathers on his mind. We can say that this verse, with its two commandments, is with reference particularly to fathers. The assumption is that there is a father in the home—and in the church.

The assumption is that the father is responsible for the outcome of childrearing. He is responsible for how parenting is done. Ferguson captures this well: “There is a beautiful harmony and integrity running right through the Christian life. We have been the recipients of great tenderness at the hands of Christ. Husbands have been called to show great tenderness to their wives. They are now called as fathers to express this tenderness to their children.” This flows from the context of loving and caring headship and loving and respectful submission.

Fathers in the Pew

As with the children (v. 1), the assumption is that the father is gathered with the saints to receive instruction with a view to comply. But this also implies that fathers will be present in the home with what they have gleaned from the gathering.

The father who is truly present assumes this God-given responsibility for the raising of his children. The present father submits to the ever-present Father. As Lloyd-Jones once said,

“If parents but gave as much thought to the rearing of their children as they do to the rearing of animals and flowers, the situation would be very different.”

I am a part of our neighbourhood watch WhatsApp group. I always dread it when a message comes through from someone who has picked up a stray dog. I know that, for the next thirty minutes, notifications will flow through from people who express how cute the dog is and urge the need to find a good home for the dog. I have nothing against dogs, but it always strikes me that people are often less concerned about children than about animals.

There are a few things that can be said about a present father.

The father who is present is teachable. He knows that he needs instruction and knows where he needs to get it – from God’s Word.

The father who is present is present because of the gospel. Paul was writing these words to believers. It is doubtful that a pagan (cf. Acts 19) would be present – at least not regularly – as the body of Christ gathered. Our day, so characterised by nominal Christianity, is different – at least in the West. So, do you gather by the gospel?

The present father is present *for* the gospel. He wants to be equipped in order to equip others – beginning at home. Fathers must therefore be teachable.

Fathers Must Not Provoke

Fathers, says Paul, “do not provoke your children to wrath.” “Wrath” means to enrage, agitate through jealousy (cf. Romans 10:19; 11:11). The NIV exhorts fathers to not “exasperate” their children, while the NEB commands father to not “goad [their] children to resentment.” We must be careful to not sinfully stir them up in a wrong way.

This does not mean that fathers (or parents) must dance around issues of right and wrong and correction and instruction. What it means is to be careful to avoid unnecessary stirring them to sin.

What happens if fathers (and mothers) do not obey this commandment? According to our text, they will make their children angry. They will discourage them in their responsibility to obey and to honour their parents (Colossians 3:21). If children are provoked to anger, it provides the devil with an opportunity for even more sin (4:26–27).

The command to not provoke children requires some restraint by fathers. The gospel-driven father will be instructed and therefore restrained by the gospel. This is necessary because of the vulnerability of children and the sinfulness of fathers.

It has been noted that children, because of their position in the order of the family (compounded by their sinful hearts and by the sinful hearts of those who have authority over them), are in a vulnerable position. There is always the danger that fathers (and parents) will unintentionally and ignorantly misuse their authority, or that they will wilfully and intentionally abuse their authority. Parents are bigger, and there have the ability to overpower their children.

This is why Scripture offers this prohibition. Paul exhorts fathers (and parents) to treat their children motivated by a worldview informed by the gospel (see 4:1ff). As in the previous pericope, the one who is “head” can make it either easier or more difficult for the ones they lead by how well they fulfil their responsibility. Hence, “Do not provoke but ...”

The call, as with husbands to wives, is not to emphasise our authority but rather to exercise *restraint*. If we want our children to be self-controlled then we need to be self-controlled. “He is stressing,” writes Ferguson, “that a father does not have the right to ‘lord it’ over his children. A domineering spirit is not a divine instrument. Commandment is always given by God in the context of grace; grace with a view to obedience – these are the ways in which the Lord gives blessing. Fathers should imitate the Father in this regard.”

The gospel driven father will be concerned about producing biblical humility, not belittling humiliation. When this text is expounded, often practical advice is provided about how one could provoke their child to anger and therefore what should be avoided. This is helpful.

For instance, parents should avoid showing favouritism in the home. Besides the fact that it is plain wrong, partiality may provoke and should therefore be avoided. Another thing to be avoided is a harsh tone, as well as being too demanding, or being unreasonable. I might add that the need to always have to “win” the argument can discourage a child’s spirit. When, for example, a young child will not greet an adult, you *can* win the argument by forcing it, but you may discourage the child in the process.

These are all helpful suggestions. But the problem is that no list can possibly be exhaustive. It is far better to work with a principle. And here is the principle to work with: The goal is never humiliation, but humility.

The Bible exhorts us to humble ourselves and promises that, when we do, the Lord will lift us up (James 4:10, etc.). We need to help our children to humble themselves before the Lord and, essentially, this is what parental discipline and instruction is designed to do. Remember, the goal is a gospel-centred and driven child. We want our children to obey “in the Lord.” We want them to be motivated by Jesus Christ and his gospel. So helping them to see that they are to submit to Christ, and therefore to his appointed authorities is

vital. They need to be taught humility. Humility is *good* for the heart, but humiliation *crushes* the soul. Too many parents are guilty of this.

I have experience this before, as an adult. Thankfully, because I have been a Christian for some time, I have been able—through some hard work—to convert it into a lesson in humility. But most children do not have the maturity to do so. The result is that they are either sinfully angered or hopelessly discouraged.

Humility—biblical humility—produces hope. Humiliation produces hopelessness. Don't raise hopeless children.

Note that the key to this is to keep the child's heart before you. *Shepherding a Child's Heart* has become proverbial since the publication of Tedd Tripp's book by that name. It is helpful for us to consider this concept when disciplining and instructing our children. Don't crush it; rather, shape it.

In short, the gospel driven father will aim to build up, not to stir up.

Father's Must Parent

When my children were younger, there were times when my wife had to be away from the home for meetings and events. She would sometimes be asked what was happening with the children. When she would respond that I was watching them, people would sometimes say, "Oh, Doug's babysitting?" She would always respond, "No, he's parenting."

This is not a redundant statement. It is one thing to father a child; it is quite something else to raise that child. We call this *parenting*. And it is the father's responsibility to be sure that it is done—and that it is done righteously.

Paul exhorts fathers to "bring them up." The word translated "bring them up" means to rear to maturity, to cherish or to train. Paul uses the same word in 5:29 where he writes of people who "nourish" their own bodies, comparing that to the way that Christ cares for the church. He raises the church to maturity (4:15-16) and parents are to do the same for their children.

What it means in 5:29 relates to what it means in 6:4. As God lovingly and patiently "brings up" his children, so fathers are to lovingly and patiently bring up their children. Since they are forbidden to speak falsehoods, they are forbidden obviously to do so in their homes. (Lying parents discourage their children from obedience.) They are prohibited from letting anything corrupt or destructive come out of their mouths (4:29-31).

And this would include in their homes towards their children. As God has forgiven them in Christ, so they are to be tenderhearted, forgiving their children (4:32).

Do parents think like this? Do they aim at *Christlike* character, or do they aim for character as the *world* defines it? Is your ultimate goal in childrearing to produce children who are polite, respectful, self-disciplined, obedient to the rules, and hard-working (as students, athletes, workplace)? These are all good things, but they are meaningless, ultimately, apart from the main thing. Rather than stirring up our children, we are to *raise up* our children.

Fathers who are present help mothers to be present. This raises the point about mothers and their responsibility. It is the father's responsibility to ensure that the mother is present. Just as he, in a particular or unique way, is to be present, so the mother in a particular and unique way, is to be present. This is the father's (husband's) responsibility. Paul made this clear in writing to his young friend Titus:

But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

(Titus 2:1-5)

Gospel-driven fathers assume their responsibility to train and discipline their children. The word translated "training" speaks of tutorage—of education. By implication, it speaks of disciplinary action or chastening. It is used elsewhere of "training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16) and of discipline or chastening (Hebrews 12:5, 7-8, 11). In classical Greek, it spoke of education, of instructing and training youth—including training the body.

This was a huge concept in the Greek context. It involved the complete training of the child, in every way. Just looking at the definition shows us this. It involved the intellectual, physical, spiritual and even the emotional training of a child. So, what we have here is a worldview issue. Fathers are responsible for the discipline necessary for the disciplined development of the child. We can say that the father is responsible to provide his children with a Christian—as in Christ-centred—gospel-saturated education or worldview. Gospel-driven fathers assume their responsibility to instruct and admonish their children.

Gospel driven fathers therefore assume their responsibility to saturate their family with the Scriptures of truth—with the "admonition of the Lord."

"Admonition" translates the Greek word *nouthesia*, which means to call attention to. By implication, it speaks of mild rebuke or warning—of instruction. A related Greek word is

noutheteō, which means to put in mind or, by implication, to caution or reprove gently. It means to admonish or warn.

Nouthesia is used in the Old Testament, which was “written down for our instruction” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Paul uses it also to speak of “warning” those who stir division (Titus 3:10). The related word is translated variously as “admonish” (Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 4:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 14), “instruct” (Romans 15:14) or “warn” (Colossians 1:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:15).

Gospel driven fathers are therefore students of the Scriptures. They study the Scriptures so they can lead their children according to the Word (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). How else can a father instruct if he does not have the proper tools.

Fathers Must Pray

The point that Paul is making is that fathers should raise their children in such a way that they will submit to the training and instruction “of the Lord.” That is, that they will heed the gospel with the discipline that it calls forth. But any half-awake father will realise the enormity of this task and the impossibility if left up to us. Therefore, he will pray!

A. W. Pink once wrote, “Prayer is not so much an act as it is an attitude—an attitude of dependency, dependency upon God.” The gospel-driven parent understands the gospel and therefore understands that salvation is of the Lord. And he prays accordingly, and lives in dependence upon God. A conviction about God’s free and sovereign grace will go a long way towards protecting parents from needlessly provoking their children towards repentance and faith. In other words, such parents will be patient, waiting upon the Lord.

The gospel driven parent will pray about his inadequacies and failures as a parent. He will pray believing! And such a gospel driven father is a progressing father. Such a gospel driven mother is a progressing mother. As Howard Hendricks wrote, “Children are not looking for perfect parents; but they are looking for honest parents. An honest, progressing parent is a highly infectious person.”

Fathers, be saved by the gospel, and keep on being saved by the gospel. Be, therefore, a gospel driven, present, non-provoking and praying parent. Your children will thank you—forever.

AMEN