

“Parenting: The Formation of a Child”

Colossians 3:20-21; Ephesians 6:1-4

Take your Bible this morning and turn with me to the third chapter of Colossians, where we will read in a minute from verses 20-21. And just like last time, I also want you to turn to a similar passage in Ephesians 6:1-4. We’ve been in Colossians 3 where we have been taking a look at what the Bible says about the most fundamental of relationships that we have—our family relationships. The apostle Paul has been explaining the practical ways our lives should reflect what we have been given in Christ. In verses 18 through verse 1 of the next chapter, he shows how we are to draw on these resources as we seek to build godly marriages and families. Having seen what Paul says about marriage as being the foundation of a home, we need to pay attention to what he now says about parenting and the formation of a child’s life.

I read that when Thomas Edison was a boy, he struggled in school. His teachers complained that he was distracted and incapable of learning. One day he came home with a sealed note from his teacher. His mother opened it, read it silently, and with tears in her eyes, read aloud to her son:

“Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him, and it doesn’t have enough good teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself.”

Years later, after his mother had died and Edison had become one of the world’s greatest inventors, he found that old letter tucked away in a drawer. The note actually said, “Your son is addled. We won’t let him come to school anymore.” Edison wrote in his journal: “Thomas A. Edison was an addled child that, by a hero mother, became one of the greatest of men.” His mother refused to let her son be crushed by discouragement. And that single act shaped the trajectory of

his entire life. That's the difference that a mom or dad can make, a point that Paul now makes. (Read)

When people hear the word 'parent,' in rush all kinds of thoughts and feelings, some positive and some negative. One may remember the joy of having a devoted dad who was always there, or the comfort that comes with a tender mom. Another may remember the horrors of an alcoholic father, or the loneliness created by an emotionally absent mother. However, the Scriptures hold out hope to every parent. Because no matter what kind of home you came from, it is really never too late to start doing right in that all-important parent-child relationship.

I heard about a young pastor took his pastorate while he was still in seminary. One Sunday he preached a sermon that he titled "10 Rules for Raising Perfect Children." After a couple of years, he graduated from seminary, he and his wife had children. He dug out the old sermon but decided to re-title it, "10 Suggestions for Raising Healthy Children." When his kids became teenagers, he burned the whole thing and preached a sermon just called, "Help Me Jesus!"

Being a parent is both a wonderful privilege and a sobering responsibility. The psalmist said:

Psalm 127:3—"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward."

When it comes to being a parent, we may be a lot like a guy I heard about who was at the grocery store. He was pushing a cart that contained, among other things, a loud screaming baby. As the man proceeded along the aisles, he kept repeating softly, "Keep calm, George. Don't get excited, George. Don't yell, George." A lady watching him with admiration said to him, "You sure are certainly

to be commended for your patience in trying to quiet down little George.” To which he said, “Lady, I’m George!”

It takes patience and responsibility to be a parent. But you and I are not left without both instruction and divine power. The same Spirit-filled context for marriage also applies to what Paul has to say about children and parents in the home.

A lot of historians believe that there was a seismic shift that took place in American culture among the post WWII generation with regard to authority and institutions. I read a quote by cultural critic Annie Gottlieb who identified the 1960’s as “the generation that destroyed the American family.” She said:

“We might not have been able to tear down the state, but the family was closer. We could get our hands on it. And...we believed that the family was the foundation of the state...We truly believed that the family had to be torn down to free love, which alone could heal the damage done when the atom was split to release energy. And the first step was to tear ourselves free from our parents.”

Perhaps what makes her assessment the most chilling is the connection that she makes between the family and the nation. She understood the fact that society is no better than the combined culture of the individual family units that make up that society. Destroy the family, and you destroy the nation. Scripture says that the collapse of the home is always the precursor to the unraveling of society. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul described with detail what this looks like when a society abandons God:

Romans 1:28-30—“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents.”

The same thing is said in:

2 Timothy 3:1-2—“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents...”

In both cases where Paul describes the unraveling of our society, a common symptom is the breakdown of the home that leads to collapse. There is a connection between godlessness and a lack of morality.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones — *“If you have ungodliness you will always have unrighteousness. But the tragedy is that the civil authorities, irrespective of which political party is in power, all seem to be governed by modern psychology rather than by the Scriptures. They are all convinced that they can deal with unrighteousness directly, in and by itself. But that is impossible. Unrighteousness is always the result of ungodliness; and the only hope of getting back any measure of righteousness into life is to have a revival of godliness.”*

Just as no building rises above its foundation, no nation ever rises above the strength of the family. It is the family that the apostle Paul deals with in these verses. Having addressed the relationship between husbands and wives, he now addresses the relationship that ought to exist between children and their parents. The first thing that we see involves:

1—Children and their OBEDIENCE (Col. 3:20; Eph. 6:1-3)

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord...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.”

Paul turns his attention to the children in the congregation in verse 20. Which means that Paul saw them as being as important as any other group. And the one thing he wants children to understand is obedience. It is the fundamental building block of the home and all of life. Whether a home is made up of Christians or not, obedience is what makes a family work.

The requirement of obedience

Notice the command there in verse 20—“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” The same thing is stated in Ephesians 6:1, “Children, obey our parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Paul is writing a letter to the church in which he addresses the children directly. He doesn’t call on the parents to tell their children to obey. Rather, he wants the children to be in the assembly where his letter was read. He speaks directly to children within the home and says that it is right that a child obey his or her parents.

“Obey”—*translates a Greek word that means to stand or hear under; to be under another’s authority*

The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament as a military term. It is the same word that applied to a soldier obeying his orders. It means to listen with an attentiveness and respond to what is heard. Children are to do what their parents say. It isn’t something that is up for debate, neither is it a matter of suggestion. It is a divine requirement from God Himself.

The realm of obedience

This is not simply an instruction for children to obey their parents. Paul takes things a step further when he says obey your parents in everything. Ephesians 6:1 says to obey your parents 'in the Lord.' That's the key phrase. It is the same emphasis that we saw with wives who submit to their husbands 'as to the Lord.' It is the same emphasis given to husbands who are to love their wives 'as Christ loved the church.' Implicit in the idea is that children are to obey their parents and so demonstrate their obedience to Christ. When children obey their parents, they ultimately obey the Lord. Our children first learn to come under the Lord's authority by coming under our authority. They learn something about submission to God by learning to submit to our authority as their parents.

The reason for obedience

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Look at the phrase there at the end of verse 1 where Paul says 'for this is right.' In other words, this is righteous in the sight of God. Children are to obey mom and dad in the fear of God, for this is right. It is reflective of the order with which God has designed the family. It is how God has ordained leadership within the home. Again, keep in mind how the enemy tries to corrupt the design of God for marriage and family. He wants to divide husbands and wives, and he also tries to disrupt the important relationship between children and their parents.

The devil does this in a number of ways. He may tempt a mom or a dad to make their children an idol. Or sometimes sin and self-centeredness may lead parents to abandon their children altogether. One thing that I've noticed even in Christian homes is the tendency for the tail to wag the dog. So that parents are obeying children rather than the opposite. When a child is not made to be under

obedience he is set on a course in life that will lead to destruction. If they don't learn to submit to the authority of mom and dad, there's a strong likelihood that they won't show it anywhere else when they get older.

The result of obedience

You will notice in verses 2-3 that Paul reaches back into the Old Testament and references the fifth commandment which says, "Honor your father and mother." When he says 'obey' in verse 1 it refers to action, and when he uses the word 'honor' in verse 2 it refers to attitude. Children are to obey their parents in both action and attitude. I heard about a little boy whose mother wanted him to sit down but he wouldn't sit down. Finally, she took hold of him and sat him down in the chair. He looked up at her with defiant eyes and said, "You may make me sit down on the outside, but I'm still standing up on the inside!" Attitude is just as important as actions when it comes to obedience.

To 'honor' one's father and mother is to hold them in the highest respect. It means we show them respect and love, and bring honor to them by the way we live. That is why verse 2 says that 'this is the first commandment with a promise.' What was the promise? Look at verse 3:

"...that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

The Lord had rescued His people out of Egypt and was bringing them into the Promised Land. If they were to faithfully live as His covenant people and be blessed in the land, they needed to understand that it was dependent upon the condition of their homes. The implication is that we're to obey our parents because this is God's design, which, if violated, could very well shorten our lives. I know for a fact that I nearly shortened my life when I disobeyed my mom and dad! (Illus. of living room rug)

Obedience is a protection that safeguards children. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and engraved them on two stone tablets. Scholars even think that the first four commands were on the first tablet, while the next six commands were on the second. This would be a literal picture of how the ten commandments are divided into two categories:

- The Godward responsibilities
- The Manward responsibilities

Love and worship of God comes first, and once genuine love for God is in place, love and the wellbeing of others will supernaturally flow out of our lives. The commands that deal with our relationships with others begin with this fifth commandment. This is significant, because when He instructs us on how to relate with each other, God begins with the home. Genuine love for our neighbor always begins at home.

Philip Ryken — *“The relationship between parent and child is the first and primary relationship, the beginning of all human society. Under ordinary circumstances, the first people a child knows are his parents. God intends the family to be our first hospital, first school, first government, first church. If we do not respect authority at home, we will not respect it anywhere.”*

If a child is taught to honor and respect authority at home, that child will only grow up to show honor and respect everywhere else. Now, the second thing involves:

2—Parents and their OBLIGATION (Col. 3:21; Eph. 6:4)

“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged...Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Having described the responsibility of a child to his parents, Paul now emphasizes the responsibility of parents to their children.

A parent's importance

In both Ephesians and Colossians, Paul uses the Greek word that has been translated as ‘fathers.’

“Fathers” —*the Greek word is the masculine noun ‘pater’ and places the leadership of the home on the father; could very well be translated as ‘parents’*

The word applies to the male head of household, but also encompasses both of the parents in its application. The same Greek word is used in Hebrews 11:23 when referring to Moses’ mother and father and is often translated as ‘parents.’ And so Paul is not simply limiting the importance of parenting to just the man. Both parents are profoundly important in a child’s life—emotionally, spiritually, socially, and developmentally. Scripture and common experience all affirm this to be true. Here’s a way to think about it:

- Parents are important for shaping a child’s identity

Children learn who they are largely through the eyes of their parents. A parent’s words shape a child’s sense of worth. A parent’s affection shapes a child’s sense of security. A parent’s example shapes a child’s character. In Proverbs, a father or mother’s instruction is described as a “garland of grace” on their child’s head (Prov. 1:8–9).

- Parents are important for providing a child’s primary discipleship

Long before school, peers, or church exert an influence on their life, parents set the spiritual and moral trajectory of a child's life.

Instruction (Prov. 4:1–4)

Discipline (Prov. 13:24; 29:17)

Modeling godliness (Prov. 20:7)

Much of who a child becomes is 'caught' rather than 'taught'—they imitate what they see.

- Parents are important for a child's first picture of God

A child learns what love, justice, compassion, and authority look like from a parent's tone, consistency, and presence. A parent's faithfulness becomes the frame through which the child eventually understands the faithfulness of God.

- Parents are important for providing stability and security

A stable, loving parental presence is one of the greatest predictors of a child's emotional health. Children thrive when they know someone is watching out for them, that someone will be there tomorrow, and someone loves them without condition. When parents are absent, inconsistent, or harsh, children often live with anxiety, resentment, and difficulty trusting others.

- Parents are important for setting boundaries that lead to wisdom

We all need boundaries. Boundaries protect a child from danger and foolishness, but they also form the habits that lead to maturity. Proverbs ties obedience to parents with long life, prosperity, and wisdom (Prov. 4:10; 6:20–22; cf. Eph. 6:1–3).

A parent's influence

The culture in Ephesus was heavily influenced by Roman thought and custom. In those days, Roman law stated that a father had the power of death and life over the members of his household. Often, a newborn baby would be placed at its father's feet who would then determine its fate. If the father picked the infant up, the child was allowed to stay in the home. However, if the Roman father walked away, then the infant was disposed of.

Seneca — *"We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge a knife into a sick cow. Children born weak or deformed we drown."*

You say, "Well, that was then and we've come a long way!" According to reports, the primary cause for children being in foster homes today is not divorce, financial destitution, or death of their parents, but simply the disinterest of their parents. Neglect is one of the most devastating forms of abuse, and the most common. Just ask our friends at the Baptist Children's Homes.

Such blatant disregard for life is a direct result of the curse of sin. I'm sure I don't have to work very hard to draw lines of comparison to where we are today. We could spend all day talking about the symptoms and manifestations of sin. But we must keep coming back to the core issue, which is the depravity of the human heart.

Ephesians 6:4 says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." Other translations say it this way, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children." Parenting can exasperate us, but we're not to exasperate our kids. Eugene Peterson says it this way, "Fathers, don't frustrate your children with no-win scenarios. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master."

Paul is saying that parents must not provoke their children in such a way that they completely lose control and kick against authority. There is a particular application here in the way a father relates to his children. The idea is that through his actions, a father can push his child over the edge, he can 'goad' them toward a life of anger, bitterness, and resentment. How so? Through:

- unreasonable demands for perfection
- constant nagging over minor infractions
- not leaving enough room for freedom of expression and personal growth
- lack of encouragement and affirmation
- harsh, unloving rebukes or cruelty
- public embarrassment (of particular importance to me)
- verbal or physical abuse
- inconsistent discipline, not being involved in their lives
- showing favoritism over one child or another (we saw this illustrated in the way Jacob treated his children and the discord it caused in the home)
- unfair or extreme discipline that doesn't match the offense
- overprotective hovering that stifles growth ('helicopter' parenting and 'lawnmower' parenting)

A parent's instruction

Having dealt with the negative, Paul now deals with the positive. In the last part of verse 4, he outlines the right way for parents to raise children. Parents, and in

particular fathers, are to ‘bring them up.’ The word he uses there is the same word used in 5:29 translated as ‘nourishes’ and refers to the nourishment of one’s own flesh. He’s saying that just as Christian husbands are to ‘nourish’ their wives as they would their own bodies, fathers are also to nurture their children. They must ‘bring them up’ with nurturing.

He uses the terms ‘discipline’ and ‘instruction’ of the Lord.

“Discipline” — *word that means training and nurturing; a balance of love and limits*

It means that we must be intentional when it comes to the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of our kids. It implies there’s a delicate balance of unconditional love as well as solid boundaries. I read something by Ray Stedman that I thought was so profound:

“There are two styles of parenting that tend to produce rebellion in children: indulgence and harshness. Both make a child feel unwanted and insecure. An over-indulgent parenting style leads a child to wonder, ‘Don’t my parents care about me enough to set boundaries and give me discipline?’ The child grows up into a spoiled and immature adult, expecting always to get his own way, and never caring about the needs or feelings of others. An overly harsh parenting style makes a child think, ‘My parents always hurt me, they’re unfair. I’m going to harden my emotions so that they can’t hurt me anymore. When I escape my parents’ control, I won’t be anyone’s victim anymore. I’ll do all the shouting and bullying and hurting!’”

Bringing up children with discipline avoids such extremes. This same word is used in:

Hebrews 12:5-8—“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.’”

The immediate context of this passage is the great hall of fame of ‘faith’ chapter, Hebrews 11. The great examples of faith all had to endure their share of trials and hardships. No matter what adversity they faced, it was evidence of God’s formative discipline in their life. God is always using a variety of means to bring discipline to our lives as His children. And no matter how painful those means may be, they are always expressions of His love and grace because of the end that He has in mind for our lives.

“Instruction”—*exhortation and teaching; putting in mind the things of God above all else*

Older translations use the word ‘admonition.’ The idea is that parents use their words to teach and impart godly wisdom to their children. We see this in Proverbs:

Proverbs 1:7-9—“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.”

And perhaps the most well-known verse is this one:

Proverbs 22:6—“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

“Train up”—*comes from a Hebrew word that means to dedicate or consecrate*

Notice it says ‘train up’ not jerk up or force in. The Hebrew word means creating and cultivating a thirst for that which pleases God and will be for the wellbeing of the child. In other Semitic languages, it referred to the roof of the mouth and described the custom of a midwife when weaning a child. It describes a process of creating a taste for something.

“Child” —*the Hebrew word is na’ar and is used to refer to young people in all stages of growth*

In Exodus 2:6, Moses is a three month old na’ar. And in 1 Samuel 1:22, it describes Samuel who is yet to be weaned. Just a couple of chapters later, it describes him as a young lad serving Eli in the tabernacle. Genesis 21:12 uses the word to describe Ishmael as a preteen. Genesis 37:2 uses this same word to describe Joseph at 17 years old. The point is that while it can refer to an infant, a toddler, a child who is entering teen years, or a 17 teen years old—it speaks of a child still living under their parent’s roof or in the care of their authority. So that our children are ours for ‘training up’ before we eventually launch them out on their own.

“The Way He Should Go” —*the Hebrew word is ‘derek’ and means way or road; characteristic manner*

We parents commonly think there is but one way a child should go—our way. We have an idea for their lives. But notice the emphasis of the verse is ‘the way he should go.’ The idea is that we receive our children from the hand of God, not as soft, pliable lumps of clay, ready to be molded into what we think they should become. The idea is that each child comes with a set of abilities, intellectual capacity, and a way of perceiving and thinking, all of which are endowed by God. They are each unique. We can surely influence them and mold them to a certain

degree, but even our best efforts have limits. So that when you put all of this together, here's a paraphrase of what Proverbs 22:6 implies:

“Cultivate a thirst, initiate a hunger, create an appetite for spiritual things in the lives of children of any age, as long as they are living under your roof, and do it in keeping with the way they are bent—disciplining the disobedience and the evil while affirming and encouraging the good and the beautiful. And as those children begin to grow into adults, their paths will be aimed directly toward the Savior, and they will continue to walk toward Him.”

Before I finish up, Dr. Howard Hendricks once summarized some principles for godly parenting with what he called ‘Seven Pointers for Parents.’ Here's what he said, and you should write these down:

1. **Provide an atmosphere in the home that builds warm, close personal relationships.** Make sure the home is a place of belonging and acceptance. That means spending time with your children, so that they know you and you know them.
2. **Be a good example to your children.** Your faith and values will be more likely caught by your kids than taught to your kids. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Kids need to see that you are human, and big enough to accept grace and forgiveness. Then they will grow up into adults who can forgive and accept forgiveness as well.
3. **Allow gradual emancipation from the apron strings of parental authority.** Begin early to feed them responsibility, a little at a time. Evaluate the results and adjust their freedom according to their ability to handle it.

4. **When children need guidance and counsel, provide a relaxed, informal setting.** Spend time building a warm relationship with your child so that he or she will be more willing to accept your counsel.
5. **Set limits.** Children want and need the security of boundaries and restrictions. But discipline your children only in a context of love. Your children will not accept your limits unless they know they are loved, and you tell them you love them not only with words, but more importantly with your time, attention, and genuine interest.
6. **Apply the law of natural consequences as they grow up.** As your children grow in their ability to make decisions, let them decide—but also let them live with the results of their decisions. If we make all their decisions for them, they will lose confidence in their own ability to make decisions. If we bail them out and shield them from the consequences of their decisions, they will grow up with an irresponsible attitude, expecting never to have to deal with consequences. In some cases, it's healthy for children to make mistakes and accept the consequences—as long as they are not consequences that cause lifelong harm.
7. **Most importantly, surround your children with a fortress of prayer.** Trust the Spirit of God to care for them, cover for your inevitable occasional mistakes, and bring your children to a place of faith and maturity.

One of the greatest challenges that stares us Christian parents in the face is the necessity of giving our children back to the One who gave them to us in the first place. It reminds me of the life of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 who asks God for a son, then gives him back to the Lord. We must ultimately remember that we don't own our kids—they are entrusted to us for a season.

A.W. Tozer — *“Everything in life which we commit to God is really safe. And everything which we refuse to commit to Him is never safe.”*

I have never lost anything that I have given to God. That is true whether it be money, time, concerns, or kids. Hannah had longed for a son. She agonized in prayer over it. And now that she had been blessed with little Samuel, she gives him right back to the Lord. She could do that because she ultimately knew that she wasn't losing anything. But the more we hold on to things with a selfish grip, the greater the likelihood of loss. Parents, nothing is more important than raising the next generation in the fear and admonition of the Lord. What politicians are trying to do right now, what people are trying to fix right now, God has given you the mastery over. I came across an old proverb that said something about:

“One generation plants the trees, another gets the shade.”

In other words, our generation lives in the shade of trees that were planted by our ancestors. The ideas of our parents and grandparents generation determined the kind of civilization we inherited from them. And our generation's ideas will shape tomorrow's culture for our children. The problem today is that there isn't any shade. America gave up on the family a long time ago. We're now reaping the bitter harvest. But that is where we at Hopewell church have an opportunity to stand out. We can plant some trees that will shade future generations from the blistering heat of an anti-Christian world.

Chuck Swindoll — *“Never forget that the world doesn't watch our behavior in church on Sundays or in Bible studies on weeknights. They watch us at home. They see us at work. They notice how we treat our parents. They pay attention to how we raise our children. They notice when we labor at our occupations with integrity...In all of these realms—marriage, family, and work—we are to be*

subject to one another in the fear of Christ. In this way we will demonstrate to all people that not only are we saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, but we are also living lives under the control of the Holy Spirit.”

There's no such thing as perfect parenting. You may feel like you've dropped the ball. But all you can do is the best you can with where you are and with what you have. Commit it to Jesus in faith. There is no such thing as pain-free parenting. Pain is a natural part of the family process in our broken world. You moms know better than anyone that pain is how the family got started. And the aches and pains, the heartaches and heartbreaks will continue to intrude into our homes as the years go by, whether we like it or not. That's why faith in Jesus Christ is vital to a happy, healthy home. Children, obey your parents 'in the Lord.' Fathers, bring your children up in the discipline and instruction 'of the Lord.' Our homes must be distinctively cross shaped. It was at the cross that the Son laid down His life as a sacrifice for sin in perfect obedience to His Father. For that reason, the Father has bestowed upon the Son the name which is above every other name! It is at the name of Jesus that every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.

Is He Lord of your life, and is He Lord in your home?