

EPHESIANS #93 6:4 pt.1 3-22-15
DOS AND DON'TS FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS

(Ephesians6) Just a few years ago there was a TV show on ABC called *Super Nanny*. Who here has watched any of those shows? I watched a couple and found it kind of interesting. It's about a woman who goes into some kind of dysfunctional home, with out-of-control kids, and then coaches the parents in a very hands-on way. In my opinion, there are lots and lots of homes in need of the Super Nanny touch. And there were times in the our family history when I would have welcomed a visit from the Nanny myself. But even more than a visit from a Super Nanny, what will help parents and families and ultimately society, is coming to grasp and apply the principles for parenting set forth in the wisdom of God's word. I really believe that comprehending and applying Biblical teaching in this area can make a world of difference in our homes. I am reluctant to teach too much on this because I know many of us will not find it immediately relevant, but, if you listen, you will hear life principles that can apply in many ways. So, we will devote today and two more Sundays to a biblical look at parenting.

And I start this morning by speaking to the kids here. I have a special request of you today. I want you to make sure that your parents are listening and taking good notes, OK? I suggest you children take time over lunch to quiz your parents to make sure they have paid attention. And if they cannot recall what we learn today you insist, on the basis of my pastoral authority, that your parents skip dessert. Okay? Ephesians 6:4 is where we start. It follows the instruction given to children, instruction to obey and honor their parents, and it says **4** *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

This morning we will hang our thoughts from this text on four main hooks or headings. And the first of those four observes the particular addressee of the passage. Who does God speak to here? Fathers. (R) Why the fathers? We know there were women in the church; they are addressed in the previous chapter. We know that the instruction of the verse would apply equally well to mothers. Why does he say *fathers*? He does it here and he does it in Colossians 3:**21** *Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.* The only answer is one of conjecture. But I am going to suggest that Paul speaks primarily to fathers for two reasons. One being that fathers need to hear this more than mothers. There is a certain natural sense for nurturing present in mothers that dads don't have. In any culture I know of, and the animal kingdom to boot, the number of neglectful fathers outnumbers the neglectful moms by a wide margin. More than moms, dads need to be told to come home from work, turn off the TV and pay attention to the children.

The second possible reason why Paul addresses the fathers is that they are the appointed leaders of the parental team. Even though mom might actually spend more time caring for the needs of the children she is the associate caretaker, not the head. And the direction of her motherly activities is to be set by the Father in the home. In the days of the apostle, whether the family was Jewish or Gentile there was no question about the location of authority. Father was king. And you can imagine how many fathers would abuse their position. Under Roman law a father had absolute power over the members of his own family. It was his right, which many exercised, to let a child die at birth, or actively kill it afterwards. He could sell his kids as slaves, make them work in chains, whatever he chose to do. There were no custody battles in those days. Children were the father's property. By Roman law, their freedoms were boundless. But not by God's law. Christian fathers are not to be like pagan dads. Their authority has already been established in the previous verses in Ephesians 6, but now God says they are answerable to Him and must be fathers who rule in tenderness and wisdom. Many dads aren't interested in that. Primarily because that takes time. Time away from the job, from the bars, from the computer. Non-Christian dads often want little to do with the kids, at least until they can throw a football with reasonable accuracy. James Dobson describes a study done of middle-class American fathers who were asked how much time they spent interacting with their one year old children. The average reply was 20 minutes a day. When researchers attached microphones to the dads and checked on it they discovered that these dads were actually spending 37 seconds per day with their small children. 37 seconds! 2.7 interactions of 10-15 seconds each. Come on Dad! God says that you are the one primarily responsible for the upbringing of those children. Studies done of prisoners show overwhelmingly that the primary common factor in their early lives was the absence of father or a minimal amount of time with him. There is a reason, fathers, why the Lord is picking on you here. With authority comes responsibility. Rise up Oh men of God. Have done with lesser things. Give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the king of kings, who commands you to bring up your children in His way.

Now, before I move on, I need to speak to you mothers about this, because I know what will happen in some homes if dad gets convicted on this point and decides to become the father God says he should be. You mothers think that sounds great, but when it happens you won't like it. Uh-uh. Your idea of an active father is one who helps you raise the kids the way you want them raised. Here again responsibility and authority go together. Mom is the Associate parent, not the head. And many of you mothers, because that's the way it has been, or that's the way it was in your family growing up simply expect that the child-raising is your business. You want dad on board but you

have no desire for him to be the captain. God says that He must be an active parent, but also that He is to be the leading parent who gives direction and guidance in the whole matter of child-raising. That means you mothers must be emotionally ready to become co-captains when the rightful captain of the parenting ship takes his God-appointed place.

Now, let's move on to our second heading for the day which is the thing fathers are commanded not to do. What we parents are not to do is mentioned first. 4a *Fathers, do not provoke your children.* The historic first rule of the medical practice is to do no harm. And that also is the first rule of parenting. Parents have a much greater capacity to insure their children's misery than to insure their happiness. Listen to that again. Parents have a much greater capacity to insure their children's misery than to insure their happiness. A census taker went to a home and asked the head of the house how many children they had. He said, "We have three." The census taker asked if they had plans for more children and the man said, "Oh no, we would never have a fourth child." So emphatic was he about not having a fourth child that the census man asked why not. The fellow explained that he and his wife had read that every fourth child born in the world is Chinese. He said, "We don't want to raise no Chinese kid." What were those parents missing? They missed the fact that who the parents are does affect what the kids are and do - for better or for worse. There is no absolute rule of course. Crummy parents may end up with great kids and great parents with crummy kids, but the idea of no-fault parenting is not God's idea. And this is a thoroughly serious and sobering reality for parents. The impact we have on our children is enormous. James Ryle is a former pastor, and a traveling speaker now. He tells the story of how his father was thrown in prison when James was 2. At age 7 James was placed in an orphanage. At 19 he wrecked a car and killed a friend. He sold drugs to raise money, was caught and sent to prison. While in prison James accepted Christ and upon release went into the ministry. Years later, when he had a family of his own, James decided to find the father he had never known. When they got together the conversation turned to prison life which they had both experienced. When his father found out what prison James had done time in he was taken aback. His father who had been a welder said, "I helped build that prison." In that remark James Ryle saw an illustration of his early years. He concluded that before Christ set him free he was living in a prison that his father built. Some of you have been doing that haven't you? We have habits of mind and body and soul ingrained into us by our parents. Some parents have given us houses to live in, others have given us prisons to overcome. Parents can do great damage to their children. The word of God says, *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.* Colossians 3:21 *Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that*

they will not lose heart. This is a very common thing isn't it? It is very easy for parents to exasperate and provoke children. By our foolish choices we can fill our kids with rage or drain them of positive motivations. Before we move on to talk about how to build our kids up we need to talk about how to keep from tearing them down. I want to mention briefly seven ways that parents often exasperate and provoke their children. Last week it was seven ways for children to honor parents. Now seven ways that parents may provoke children. These I don't recommend. Think about these parents. I know I have been guilty of several of these. You too may find reason here for repentance.

First, some parents provoke their children to anger through harsh treatment. This may be the most obvious way to do this, but many of us are guilty. We yell at our kids, and discipline them in anger. And many of us, at some time or another, have gotten physically rough with them as well. Maybe you have heard people argue against spanking of kids because it teaches them violence. That is an unreasonable remark but what is true is that angry, volatile parents tend to breed angry, volatile kids who will take their anger out first of all on their parents. Parents you can damage your children thru harsh treatment.

Secondly, you can provoke your children by overprotecting them. This is the error of the very conscientious but faithless parent who is afraid to ever let go. That child who is built to fly on his own is not going to appreciate your restraints very long. Those behaviors you see as loving your child are rooted in your own selfishness. Trust God and give them some freedom to fail, give them some freedom to risk, give them some freedom to learn on their own.

Thirdly, parents often exasperate children by their own inconsistency. The child who is allowed to hit his brother today but tomorrow gets disciplined for it is a candidate not only for confusion but for bitterness. Consistency in parenting is critical. This is why parents cannot lead with their feelings. What constitutes a punishable offense is not determined by how angry you happen to get about it. You must be principled as a parent, in your own life and in your parenting. And principles do not change.

Fourthly, parents may exasperate children by setting our expectations too high. You can set them too low as well, so this requires great wisdom as parents. I know I struggle constantly at this point, to know where the line is between challenging them and frustrating them. But understand parents, that your kids can't do everything quite like you, and they won't. A fact of nature is that when beautiful, graceful butterflies have babies, what do they have? They have caterpillars. That has to be awfully disappointing for butterflies who go through that difficult process of transforming

from one to the other - to see that their kids are just like they were when they were kids. Slow and creepy. Bummer! But that means you don't expect them to fly right off do you? You show some patience, you offer sufficient instruction and assistance and you give them reasonable goals for where they are in life.

Way to provoke your kids #5 is to play favorites. This is the mistake of Jacob. You'll remember how he honored Joseph over all his other sons, and what good did it do? Joseph ended up an Egyptian slave because of it. Jacob ended up a grieved father and eleven brothers became guilt-laden kidnapers. God doesn't expect you to like all your children the same, but he does expect you to love them equally.

The sixth way to exasperate a child is by refusing to listen to him or her. This will come across as totally unreasonable and it is. It is treating your child like a nobody whose opinion and viewpoint is irrelevant. I remember sitting through a hearing one time in which the fate of my case was determined in my presence but without any opportunity given to me to defend it against opposition. That I was voted against was irritating enough, but that the vote was taken without me being able to plead my case was seriously provoking. Parents, you are placed in the position of judge. Your rulings will not always be popular but you must take the time to listen and try to understand your child.

Finally, the seventh way to exasperate a child is by discouraging words, negative remarks about who he is and what he has done. You need to understand that your child's self-concept is greatly shaped by what comes out of your mouth. And if what they hear coming out is a consistent critique, a running commentary on their failures, you aren't perfecting your children you are destroying them. They won't be motivated to meet your high standards they will be motivated to quit trying. I am a fan of the author, Garrison Keillor and his stories about the semi-fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. Do any of you know the town motto of Lake Wobegon that Keillor repeats so often on his radio show? It says, *Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average.* That is classic, but properly understood, there are no average children. We parents must communicate to our kids that they are special and precious and capable. One responsibility of parenting in which many of us, and I include myself, fail in regularly is that of praising our children, demonstrating our approval and pleasure in what they have done. Too often we do exactly the opposite by letting them know how disappointed we are with them. There is a place for that, but not as a regular diet. One father who saw what he was becoming wrote a letter to his son in which he said this:

Listen Son, I am saying this as you lie asleep, one little paw crumpled under your cheek and the blond curls sticking wet on your damp forehead. I have crept into your room alone. Just a few minutes ago, as I sat reading my paper a stifling wave of remorse swept over me. Guiltily I came to your bedside. These are the things I had been thinking, son: I had been cross towards you. I scolded you as you were dressing for school because you didn't wash your face well enough. I took you to task for not cleaning your shoes. I called out angrily when you threw some of your things on the floor. At breakfast I found fault too. You spilled things. You gulped down your food. You put your elbows on the table. You spread butter too thick on your bread. As you started off to play and I went off to work you waved and called, "Goodbye, Daddy!" I frowned and told you to sit up straighter. Then it all began again in the late afternoon. As I came up the road I spied you playing marbles, on your knees. Your had worn a hole in your pants. I humiliated you before your friends by marching you into the house. Clothes are expensive, and if you had to buy them you would be more careful, I told you. Do you remember, later, when I was reading in the den and you came in, timidly, with a sort of hurt look in your eyes? When I glanced up over my paper, impatient at the interruption, you hesitated at the door. 'What is it you want?' I snapped. You said nothing, but ran across in one tempestuous plunge and threw your arms around my neck and kissed me, and your small arms tightened with an affection that God had set blooming in your heart and which even my neglect had not withered. And then you were gone, pattering up the stairs. Well, son, it was shortly afterwards that my paper slipped from my hands and a terrible, sickening fear came over me. What habits have I developed? The habit of finding fault, of reprimanding - this was my reward to you for being a boy. It was not that I did not love you; it was that I expected too much. It was measuring you by the yardstick of my own years. And there was too much that was good and fine and true in your character. That little heart of yours is as big as the dawn. I see it in your impulse to rush and kiss me goodnight. Nothing else matters tonight son. I have come to your bedside in the darkness, and I have knelt there, ashamed. Tomorrow I will be a real daddy. I will play with you, I will suffer when you suffer and laugh when you laugh. I will bite my tongue when critical thoughts arise. I will remember your age, and I will speak to you of my delight in what you are becoming."

It is okay to cry. I cry every time I read that because I know my own guilt. God has given us to our children to correct them. We know that. We see how much they need that. But He has also given us to our children to be their cheerleaders, to be their fans. We have to pursue balance in this. For most of us it would be an improvement if we offered one praise for every criticism, but that is not nearly enough. If ten of you left here today and told me my sermon was wonderful, but one person was critical of me for what I taught, guess what I would think about all day? It would probably take 20-1 praise to criticism for me to feel good about my work. For our kids to be challenged by us without being discouraged they need to hear far more praise than blame, far more approval than disapproval. Understand that your child will grow to see himself as he thinks you see him. (R) If you somehow say, "You are a dumb kid" or "You're a failure" you put a weight on him he will carry for life. Why do you think little children want so much for Mom or Dad to "watch me. Watch me, Mommy. Watch me Daddy." Why do they want you to watch? Because they don't know if what they do is good, bad, or funny until you tell them. What are you telling your child about

who he is, who she is? A nuisance? A failure? A special gift from God? I met a lady and her boy once, 22 years ago, her kid was a about six and the mom was goo-gooing over how cute our baby Andrew was and she said in the presence of her son, "*Oh, he's so nice. I just hope he doesn't grow up to be a brat like my kid.*" Parents, your child will see himself as he thinks you see him. Now, you parents can see that as a fearful thing or as an opportunity. You have the opportunity to give your child a healthy view of self and high motivation for the things in life that count. Don't blow it by provoking them to anger.

That is the negative of our text, what is the positive? Don't provoke your children, but bring them up. Bring them up. Raise them. Specifically, we are exhorted to raise them in God's way. But you see that this is active parenting God is talking about. This is parenting with a purpose. So many parents seem relatively passive about their role. They seem to think its their job to keep the kid alive and out of too much trouble, but they don't see themselves as shaping a life. But that is what parents are supposed to do. Psalm 127:**3** *Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward.* But there is something God expects you to do with that gift. **4** *Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth.* Arrows in a warrior's hands. In those days it was the practice of warriors to fashion their own arrows. They had to cut them and sand them and feather them. I understand this is a fine and delicate art. For a warrior, the quality of his arrows could be a life and death issue so they would do it with great care and precision. Parents are to be like that with their children. Like an arrow maker we are to have a vision in our heads of what our kids are to be and then we take steps to shape them so that they will hit the target. Intentional parenting. Shaping our kids toward a goal. And what is the goal? Tony Campolo, who has been a college professor, tells of how his wife learned to deal with the anti-child, anti-mothering mentality of some of the women professors she would encounter. Whenever someone asked what she did, instead of inviting their sneers for being a full-time mom she would say, "*I am socializing two homo-sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the teleologically prescribed utopia inherent in the eschaton.*" In other words, she is training her two kids to make a difference for the kingdom of God. I don't think we could state our goal as parents any better than Paul stated his as a pastor. Colossians 1:**28** *We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. 28c so that we may present every man complete in Christ.* Mom and Dad, that is the goal, transforming those little bags of flesh who have no marketable skills and heads full of mush into mature Christian disciples, ready to fly from

your house, hit the target and make a difference for the kingdom. Maybe nothing you will ever do is greater, more exciting, more important or more challenging than this. What is your plan for parenting? What is your strategy? We will spend the next two weeks looking into what God says we need to do. For today, I close with a story which I got from John Piper about a missionary named John Paton who was born in Scotland and served in New Hebrides. Paton attributed much of his missionary zeal and missionary courage to his father. He spoke of how powerful in his life the prayers of his godly father had been. One scene best captures the depth of love between John and his dad, and the power such a parent can have. The time had come for the young Paton, in his early 20s, to leave home for Glasgow where he would enter divinity school and serve as a city missionary. From his hometown in Torthorwald to the train station was a 40 mile walk. Forty years later, Paton wrote:

My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so we walked together in almost unbroken silence – my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain. We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately said: “God bless you my son! Your father’s God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!”

Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him – gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I rounded the corner and was out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he yet stood where I left him; and just at that moment I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dike and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he gazed eagerly in my direction for a while he got down, set his face toward home, and began his return – his head still uncovered and his heart, I felt sure, still rising in prayers for me. I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a father and mother as He had given me.

The impact of a father or mother’s faith and prayer and love and discipline can be immeasurable. Mom and Dad, join me in that longing. And let’s close in prayer