

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

In 1884, German socialist Friedrich Engels (1820–1895)—who partnered with Karl Marx to develop the philosophical system known as *Marxism*—published *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Operating from a radical atheistic and evolutionary standpoint, Engels sought to bring revolution to society’s understanding of the family.

Engels advocated “free love” between men and women, believing such open relationships reflected the utopia of equality which socialism promoted. Conversely, the concept of marriage was loathsome to him because it was exclusive, constraining, and hierarchical. Engels believed marriage in general—and monogamous marriage in particular—was a toxic by-product of evolution, a social evil created by capitalistic men as a means to protect and pass on wealth to their progeny. Engels likened the husband in a monogamous marriage to an exploiting capitalist, and the wife to an exploited worker (a child-bearer). He viewed monogamy as society’s open and unrestrained form of slavery. It prevented women from experiencing true freedom and equality, from making a valuable contribution to society.

Consequently, the family unit needed to be “abolished.” Women needed to be liberated from the expectation to raise children. The human race could be populated sufficiently through open and obligation-less relations between men and women. In turn, child-rearing—the socialization and education of children—was solely the duty of society. In fact, the whole concept of “legitimate children” (children born to married parents) needed to be abandoned once-and-for-all.

The ideas of Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, and other socialist revolutionaries did not remain limited to the pages of their books. The Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 was an attempt to introduce these ideas in real life. As the Bolsheviks took control of Russia and sought to implement their socialist utopia, they began to apply Engels’s ideas to the concept of families, child-rearing, and education. One of the more radical attempts to deconstruct the family and re-imagine child-rearing is reflected in the speech of one early Soviet socialist educator, Zlata Ionovna Lilina. At an education conference in 1918 in the city of Petrograd (St. Petersburg), she stated,

We must exempt children from the pernicious influence of the family. We have to take account of every child; we candidly say we must nationalize them. From the first days of their lives they will be under the beneficial influence of communistic kindergartens and schools. Here they shall assume the ABCs of Communism. Here they will grow as real communists. Our practical problem is to compel mothers to hand over their children to the Soviet government.

Although the Soviet regime never was able to implement Engels’s ideas to the degree called for by Zlata Lilina, the history of Soviet education is the saga of countless attempts to undermine the authority of the family and socialize children in communist ideology from the earliest ages.

But this effort is not a solitary chapter in the history books. Though its inevitable failures were well-observed in the Soviet Union by the end of the 20th century, similar ideas about families and child-rearing are rapidly growing in popularity and practice in the U.S. today. For example, in 2013, political commentator Melissa Harris-Perry stated in an interview,

We have never invested as much in public education as we should have because we have this private notion of children. “Your kid is yours, and totally your responsibility.” We haven’t had a very collective notion of “these are our children.” So, part of it is to break through our kind of private idea that kids belong to their parents, or kids belong to their families, and recognize that kids belong to whole communities.

Fast-forward to 2022, and we see that the influence of such ideas has only strengthened. An editorial piece in the *Washington Post* recently asserted, “Parents claim they have the right to shape their kids’ school curriculum.

They don't" (Oct 21, 2021). And just recently, during an April 27 speech at the 2022 National and State Teachers of the Year event, President Joe Biden stated,

You've heard me say it many times about our children, but it's true. They're all our children. The reason why you are teachers of the year is because you recognize that. They are not somebody else's children. They're like yours when they're in the classroom.

Christian fathers cannot be indifferent about the forces battling for ideological control over their children. A biblical understanding of the world at large, and of the nature of the mind in particular, requires that fathers take responsibility for being the most influential force in the nurturing of their children. This is reflected most pointedly by the Apostle Paul's instruction to the fathers in the church of Ephesus: **"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).**

I. The Target Audience

"Fathers . . ." (6:4a). Paul begins by calling out the ones he wishes to address most directly about the raising of children. He uses the plural term *πατέρες* (*pateres*)—from the noun *πατήρ* (*patēr*)—from which we derive the term *paternal* ("pertaining to the father"). Some commentators have argued that this address should be understood here in Ephesians 6:4 as referring to "parents"—i.e., to *both* father *and* mother. The term certainly has this nuance in Hebrews 11:23 where the writer describes Moses as being "hidden for three months by his parents" (obviously, both father and mother are assumed).

However, context always has the last word in cases where several interpretive options are possible. In the case of Ephesians 6:4, it is crucial to note that Paul just referred to "parents" in the preceding context, but with a different term: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (6:1). In v. 1 Paul uses *γονεῖς* (*goneis*), a term that indisputably refers to both father and mother. But in v. 4 he uses a different term, *πατέρες* (*pateres*), which clearly indicates a transition in his thought to speak to "fathers" in specific and not "parents" in general.

Thus, as Paul transitions in his list of "household instructions" (Eph 5:22–6:9), he directs his focus now to fathers. This is not coincidental. Paul recognizes husbands—and thus fathers—to be the *heads of their families* (cf. 5:24). **As the center of authority in the home, the father has the ultimate responsibility to ensure the proper intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation of the children.** This certainly does not minimize the responsibility of the mother (e.g., Titus 2:3–5), but it does indicate that the father will give the highest account. (For insight into the different functions Paul saw for the mother and the father, see 1 Thess 2:7–12).

Responsibility is a key component of biblical masculinity. The proper exercise of masculinity in the home is never about lording it over or being served, but of taking the greatest responsibility in caring, protecting, and providing for one's wife and children.

II. The Solemn Warning

"Do not provoke your children to anger" (6:4a). Both Jewish and Greco-Roman fathers in the first century AD were known for severity. The law of the land was a law known as *patria potestas* ("the power of the father")—a law that gave fathers absolute rights over their children. This unlimited degree of power coupled with the sinful nature led to many abuses and even the death of children.

However, the Apostle Paul unequivocally prohibits the unbridled use of authority. The action which he forbids is communicated by the verb **"to provoke"** (*παροργίζω*, *parorgizō*). It means **"to make angry, irritate, exasperate."** Certainly, those who respond in sinful anger are always personally responsible for their sin (Eph 4:26, 31). However, Paul recognized that the father's authority could be used to tempt children to become angry in unique and serious ways, and this transgressed the law of God. How could fathers sinfully provoke their children? One commentator explains it well when he writes,

This involves avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness,

unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs and sensibilities. (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 406)

Crucial in the effort to form a child intellectually, morally, and spiritually is the rejection of anything abusive.

III. The Explicit Command

“But bring them up” (6:4b). Using a strong contrasting conjunction (“but”), Paul then describes the proper way to raise children. They must be “brought up.” The verb he uses is **ἐκτρέφω** (*ektrepō*), which literally means “to provide food, nourish.” It is used in this literal sense in Ephesians 5:29 to speak of what a man does for his own body as the regular practice of life: he “*nourishes* and cherishes it.”

Paul uses the same verb—but in a figurative sense—to prescribe the father's responsibility to the child: **he is nourish the child in an intellectual, moral, and spiritual manner.** This is no one-time or occasional activity. It is to take place from the moment of birth until the time when the child reaches adulthood.

This command is crucial for fathers to understand. Often the mothers are considered to be the nurturers. They are looked upon as the providers of the physical and non-physical nourishment that children need. While God has certainly equipped mothers for this in unique and exclusive ways, the problem with many fathers is their underestimation of the importance of their involvement. Christian fathers today—no less than the Christian fathers of the church in Ephesus—are required to be ultimately responsible in the nurturing of their children.

IV. The Necessary Environment

“In the discipline and instruction” (6:4b). Immediately after stating the command, Paul describes the *sphere* or *environment* in which this nourishing is to take place. He does not leave this up to personal preference. Paul spells it out carefully.

The two terms he uses are synonyms, making them difficult to distinguish. This difficulty is reflected in the various English translations that have been produced: “discipline and instruction” (NASB/ESV/LSB); “nurture and admonition” (KJV); “training and admonition” (NKJV); and “training and instruction” (NIV/CSB). All told, the NKJV best reflects Paul's intent: **“training and admonition.”** The first term Paul uses describes *education* or *training* in general. The second term is more specific and relates to *verbal correction*.

- (1) The first term, **παιδεία** (*paideia*), refers to **“the act of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing, training, instruction.”** A helpful parallel is found in the verb form of the word used in Acts 7:22 and 22:3 to refer to the “education” of both Moses and Paul respectively.

Fathers are to nurture their children actively in an environment of *training* and *education*. This is not a responsibility to be left to the mother alone or delegated solely to others like schoolteachers. The father is the one who must impart the fundamental principles of life. He is to have the key role in the overall development of his children's minds.

- (2) The second term, **νουθεσία** (*nouthesia*), is made up of the words νοῦς (*nous*, “mind”) and τίθημι (*tithēmi*, “to place”). Essentially, the term means **“to exert influence on the mind.”** But the way in which the term is used in the New Testament is not simply to refer to intellectual influence. Rather, it is used in contexts where **correction** is in view (e.g., 1 Cor 4:14). One scholar helpfully defined it as “the well-intentioned seriousness with which one would influence the mind and disposition of another by advice, admonition, warning, putting right according to circumstances” (Cremer, *Lexicon*, 442).

This is another indispensable measure which a father will employ as he nurtures his children. He cannot aim to be the child's “best friend” who affirms anything the child thinks. Instead, with exceptional love and

concern for the child, a father will step in to correct, warn, and even discipline when the child's thoughts go astray. He who does not only hates his child (cf. Prov 13:24).

V. The Transcendent Standard

"Of the Lord" (6:4b). The final phrase of the sentence modifies both "discipline" (training) and "instruction" (admonition). By it Paul calls attention to the fact that the environment he has just described is instituted by the Lord Himself. The father, by creating this environment, fulfills his God-ordained role. As Harold Hoehner states, "The training and admonition come from the Lord or are prescribed by the Lord through fathers. The fathers are the Lord's agents and, therefore, raise their children according to his mandates" (Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 799).

Ultimately, the raising of children is to be neither father-centered nor child-centered but *Christ-centered*. It is to be neither "neutral" nor a smorgasbord of perspectives, leaving it to the child to choose his own way. Instead, this nurturing must be "truly Christian, compatible with loyalty to Christ" (Mitton, *Ephesians*, 213).

How must we respond?

1. **Prioritize your children.** Biblical manhood is about *taking responsibility*. Biblical fatherhood is about taking responsibility to "bring them up"—an act that is filled with *affection* and *concern*. Fathers cannot plead ignorance—not with respect to *their own responsibility*, the *needs of the child*, nor the *spirit of the age*. Fatherhood is a responsibility that cannot be delegated, deferred, or diminished.
2. **Preserve your children.** Specifically, preserve them from *temptation*. Fathers can be guilty of one of two devastating errors: ignoring the children or oppressing them. Both extremes "provoke them to anger." Fathers must understand that exposing their children to temptation through graceless and excessive discipline and reviling speech, or disinterest and neglect, is *serious sin* (cf. Matt 18:6).
3. **Protect your children.** A father must *protect* and *shield* his child from harm, or he is no true father. This protection is essential in light of the snares of the devil, the wiles of the world, and the child's own sinful propensity. Inattentive fathers sacrifice their children on the altar of convenience; uninformed ones on the altar of chance. And while over-protection is real and damaging, the failure to protect is far more common.
4. **Prepare your children.** It is the father's responsibility to ensure that his children are trained in the right *mindset* or *worldview*—"in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." This must begin with *example*, an environment in which the child can observe the Christ-centered use of the mind. It necessitates *training*, communicating the fundamental precepts for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual well-being. But it also includes *admonition*, the effort to reveal to your child his sinfulness and need of grace and truth in Christ.
5. **Point your children.** It is a father's greatest privilege and most solemn duty to point his children to the Ultimate Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Every father must make it crystal clear to his children that he himself is not the solution to their soul's greatest need.

For Further Study

1. Memorize Ephesians 6:4.
2. Why is it so easy for fathers to neglect their God-ordained responsibility of ensuring the proper nurturing of their children? What cultural norms perpetuate this abdication of duty?
3. There are obvious, well-attested ways in which fathers can tempt their children to anger. List several more subtle but common ways they can do this.
4. If you are young or future father, how active have you been in seeking counsel from godly, older fathers? What questions should you be asking them in light of Ephesians 6:4?
5. If you are a father of older children, what advice would you give to young or future fathers as you now reflect upon Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6:4 and your own experience of fatherhood?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: May 4, 7pm, "Beware of Philosophy"