

Christian Parenting, p.2

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We come to this practical part of the book of Ephesians, not that the other is impractical but here's the direct exhortations of how you're to live. Now, folks, look, we just ended eight messages, some of them more than one part, on the glories of salvation through sovereign grace and, by the way, all of those glories are taught in the first couple of chapters of Ephesians, so unless what I've been preaching to you, unless that has grabbed you and apprehended you and brought you to new wonder and awe and thanksgiving and gratitude and humility, then these practical exhortations are worthless. Look, I'm not about, Christianity is not about behavior modification, Christianity is about you becoming a new creature through the power of sovereign grace and then you have the capacity to begin to embrace God's wisdom and live out God's wisdom in all these practical areas of life. So don't miss the foundation.

We're talking about Christian parenting and we're looking at Ephesians 6:4 where Paul says,

4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Now in this whole section he's talking about social relationships, husbands and wives, children honoring their parents, now parents raising their children properly, then he'll go into slaves and masters which parallels our employee/employer relationship, but remember, he's building all this upon Ephesians 5:18, "do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." That's a foundation stone. Walking in the Spirit is a foundation stone which gives you a Gospel humility – now listen – and a supernatural capacity to identify and embrace the wisdom of God over the wisdom of this world, I should say over the so-called wisdom of this world. Is it not a bizarre perverse world we live in? Everything is just being warped. It's not even turned upside down anymore, it's turned upside down and inside out. All this gender nonsense and redefining the roles of men and women and just this...the dominoes start falling and Satan knows this. Satan knows if he can unhinge and separate the fabric and the structures God's ordained for a functional and a sane society, he can ruin us, and what's most troubling to me is the church just seems to open its arms and begin to embrace this things to "keep people happy," to keep the numbers up, to try to be relevant. Look folks, I don't care if I'm relevant, I want to be true, and by the way, the truth is relevant always.

So Paul dives in. Here's what I want you to understand, Paul's exhortation to this Ephesian church of 2,000 years ago about how a wife should function, how a husband should function, how children should honor their parents, how parents should train their children, how employees and employers should relate to one another, it was just as revolutionary in this day or more so than the message would be to our present culture. This was just way out there, but here's what Paul's saying you've experienced the truth of Ephesians 1 and 2, you've experienced the power of regeneration, you've experienced the new birth, now you can begin, notice the phrase, you're not there yet, none of us arrive, amen? But now you can begin to apprehend and conceive and respect and embrace God's wisdom about the way he has developed or set up the family, the culture, etc. to function. So we as the church folks are not to be like the world, we're not to be trending with the world, we're not to be changing with the world, we're to be a bright light of hope to the world and our light is going to contradict the darkness that they're embracing and that's difficult at times. We are headed in a different direction than this culture.

Do you remember the name Billy Sunday? Billy Sunday was a professional baseball player, became an evangelist and he was really a wild kind of guy. Somebody criticized Billy Sunday and said, "Billy, you stroke the fur on the cat the wrong way." He said, "The old cat's headed toward hell. If it would turn around, I'll be stroking it the right way."

Well folks, look, we as the church of Jesus Christ are not succumbing to and submitting to the false dictates of this man-centered, God-dishonoring culture. We're not always against the culture, we're just for the truth. If that puts us against the culture, then so be it. Are you with me? We don't react against the culture, we just act on truth. If that puts us against the culture, then that's what it is.

So he comes to this part now of parenting and he gives this revolutionary new perspective on parenting. Listen, to this day this was radical thinking. To be honest, you have to be kind of careful in the public square today even in Alabama stating some of the things we stand on and believe as Christians, the way you'll get berated and treated and classified by the God-haters and truth-rejectors of our day. So we talked about here the things that fathers are responsible, rather the fact that fathers are responsible for their children. That's review, that was I., and notice as Paul writes here, he says, "Fathers." You notice he doesn't even mention mothers. Does mom have no role? Of course she does. As a matter of fact, she's usually far more hands-on in the discipline and instructing of the children in the things of the Lord because she's usually there, but the point is the fathers bear the responsibility. Dads, you listen to your pastor this morning: you will give an account before God for your home, not your wife. You're to take the lead. You're to lead in how the discipline is to be carried out, what the standards and the convictions of the home are. Always a husband should listen to his wife, should gain wisdom from her, but he bears the responsibility for the home before the Lord. It's fathers must see to these things.

Now we come to new material. II. The things fathers must not do. The first thing out of the gate in verse 4 is, "Fathers, do not." There is something you must not do. Why do you

think Paul to this Roman/Greek culture he's writing to, these are believers who came out of a Roman/Greek culture of the day 2,000 years ago, the first thing he says is don't do something. The reason why he says this is because this was very prominent in the households of ancient Rome and Greece, fathers provoking their children to anger. So to hear that, to these fathers, would have been strange indeed.

When he says do not provoke your children, he's saying do not push them to anger. There are things you can do, fathers, and as an extension of the fathers, mothers, of course, there are things you can do, parents, that provoke your children to anger. It also has the idea of exasperating them, to drive them to extremes. Parents are the factor in preventing rebellion and juvenile delinquency but they also can be the main agent in promoting and encouraging a child to rebellion. Parents have such authority and control in their hands.

Charles Hodge, the Presbyterian theologian said this word means do not excite the bad passions of your children. Your children come forth from the womb with a fallen, rebellious, sin nature. Your children naturally want to rebel against authority. That's what father Satan has put in all of us by us being born a sinner and in his dominion. Children come into this world with a bent toward loving self, not considering others, and we must not, as parents, do the things that exasperate that or throw fuel on that rebellious fire that Satan has kindled in every child's heart. Make sure our conduct as parents does not nurture the evil that is inherent in the heart of every child. That's what he's saying here. Now again, a revolutionary concept to these ancient Romans and that's whom, of course, this was originally written to.

Let me give you some background on what both secular and church historians have written about the average home in ancient Rome when this was written almost 2,000 years ago. First of all, the families had fallen into such wickedness primarily sexual immorality, as a matter of fact, in the Greek and Roman cultures, sexual perversion, sexual experimentation had become so rampant they had to invent whole catalogs of terms to express the deviant things they did in their sexual behavior. Does that sound anything like America today? Is it not a weird and warped and corrupt age when people are defined by their sex drive? "I'm gay. I'm lesbian. I'm straight. I'm queer. I'm whatever." Now they're coming up with letters just to try to recognize and express that, "I'm all over the charts. I never know what I'm going to be the next morning when I wake up." What a warped, ungodly and perverse mentality that is.

Well, that's the way ancient Rome was, so the families were falling apart. Families were in shambles and the idea of a father loving his children was almost unheard of. As a matter of fact, a father could sell his child as a slave or he could have his child killed if they inconvenienced him, a little bit like abortion today. Just go ahead and kill the child. Why, it might cramp your lifestyle. It might hinder your advancement. Folks, there's nothing new under the sun. The old selfish wickedness of the flesh, they come out with new terms and new phrases and new labels but the same old wickedness just recycled generation after generation.

John MacArthur has in his commentary a letter written by a man in 1 BC in this culture and he's writing to his wife and he says this to her, "Heartiest greetings. Note that we are still even now in Alexandria. Do not worry if when all others return, I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech you to take care of the little child and as soon as we receive wages, I will send them to you. If, good luck to you, you should have another child, if it's a boy, let it live. If it's a girl, expose it."

Seneca, a renowned statesman in Rome at the time Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, said this, "We slaughter a fierce ox, we strangle a mad dog, we plunge a knife into a sick cow, and children born weak or deformed, we drown." That was common in this ancient culture.

The custom of the day was that when a wife had a child in a Roman family of this day, the child was laid at the father's feet. If he picked it up, it remained in the household. If he did not pick the child up, it was to be discarded. It was taken to a town forum where it could be picked up and made a slave or put into a life of prostitution. Just children were unloved. They were just in the way unless the parents chose you to be a child that would be loved.

So in this context of such blatant neglect and wickedness on the parts of parents, one would be prone to think what needs to happen, the state needs to step in and just remove from parents the right to raise their own children, they're failing so miserably, but that would be wrong also because to take children out from under loving and good parental authority is child abuse in itself. A child without proper parenting is a child that is not only undisciplined, they're usually disrespectful in their behavior, they're warped in their relations to other people, they're delinquents, many of them turn out to be criminals. So we know that we can't go to that extreme either, so what does the word of God say? The word of God beautifully brings things back to a solid balance, keeping the God-ordained position of parental authority over children but admonishing parents, "Now that you're changed, now that you're born again, now that you're striving to walk in the Spirit, you have the capacity to have the kind of home the world does not know about. So live this way: parents, raise your children, not provoking them, not exasperating them but raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Now I don't know where I compiled this from, but through the years I've put together a little list of ways you can most certainly exasperate your children or provoke them to anger and ultimately rebellion. Let me just list them quickly.

First of all, over-protection. The helicopter mom comes to mind here. I've got a new one I came up with: the heat-seeking missile mom. I mean, buddy, anything just slightly happens, hurts their little darling, might be being treated unfairly, whoom, she comes in like a heat-seeking missile. Look, mom and dad, sometimes your child needs to be treated unfairly so they can learn the biblical way to respond to difficult and unfair circumstances. Now certainly we don't let just terrible things happen to our children but if you over-protect them, they'll never experience anything. You can smother them. They feel like they can never be trusted with anything. You are always over-ruling their

judgments. They need to begin to learn to make some judgments. I know there's balance here, where's that balance? I'm not sure but a true pattern of over-protection is exasperating to a child.

Favoritism, choosing one child over another. This leads to discouragement. It leads to resentment. It leads to withdrawal and bitterness. Jacob, Esau and Rebekah, well, the whole Arab/Israeli conflict came from the favoritism of one parent to Jacob and one parent to Esau. I mean, it built a bitterness that we see the repercussions of even to this day. Favoritism, easy way to provoke your child to rebellion.

Pushing achievement beyond bounds. This is when nothing the child does is sufficient. There's always a correction. There's always an add-on. No sooner does he or she accomplish a goal than another goal is splashed out before them. "Keep going. Keep achieving." There's a balance here, there's a good part to that, of course, but you've got to be careful. The Bible talks about raising up a child according to his bent, kind of discerning what's this child into? What are his gifts compared to her gifts? And I've got to challenge them and encourage them according to the way God's bent them, their temperaments, their propensities, their natural abilities and talents. Sometimes parents fantasize their own achievements through the lives of their children and when you do that, you prostitute your responsibility as a parent.

Discouraging words and actions. Just an unrelenting harping on what is wrong or what they do wrong and never a compliment. Oh my goodness, a child could be so exasperated and just lose hope in such an environment. I've learned through the years, and by the way, I'm preaching to Brother Jeff this morning because when I get through with this message, every parent in here is going to say, "I'm a failure." Well, in that case, I am too, but do you know what you can be? You can be humble and be a repentor and say, "Lord, help me do better in these areas." And we're going to try to balance all that out as we go through here.

One of the things I was going to say about discouraging words and actions, I found that for every one lick on the seat of the pants, and that's needed, by the way, from time to time, there needs to be 100 pats on the back for good behavior. A balance in these things.

5. Failure to sacrifice for our children and making them sometimes to feel unwanted. Communicating to them perhaps not purposefully but it does communicate, that they are unwanted. They are something of an intrusion. They're always interfering. You know, when I was a younger pastor, I could easily get out of balance and I was very passionate and very committed, spent very very long hours in ministry work and God's had to grow me some in that, but I had a rule in my house because my study was at home, I tried having a study at the work but it was absolute death to me. If you've got a study at church, there's always interruptions, some secretary, some staff member saying, "Well, we can interrupt him just for this," and it just goes on and on and you never get back to what God's really called you to do. Anyway, having my study at home meant my family was there and my children were there but I had a rule that whenever they came in, at least for a moment I would put my books down, I would embrace them and let them know,

"You're welcome in here. You're not an intrusion." And maybe we all need to look for ways in our lives that we communicate to our children, "You're not an intrusion. We want to make sacrifices because we love you."

Using love as a tool of reward or punishment is another way to exasperate your children. Now those whom the Lord loves, he disciplines, the Bible says, but you love, period. You love all the time. You don't just say, "If you do this, if you perform this way." No, as a matter of fact, sometimes a child needs to get precious abundant love when they haven't behaved well because that's the way our Father loves us. Now there's a balance here. You've got to be careful. I'm not talking about rewarding bad behavior but be careful if you use love as a tool of reward or in punishment.

Another way is withholding appropriate discipline. I've used the illustration so many times but I'll just throw it out there again, a child who doesn't have a mom and dad who says no and has firm rules, is a child that feels insecure and a child that ultimately feels unloved. Like I said, it's like having a bridge with no guardrails. It's like going over the new bridge, over the river, and what would it feel like if you were driving and there were no guardrails there? It would be very insecure and children need those rules. I told you about the time I had corrected one of my daughters and said, "No, you can't do that," and when her best friend said to her, "My dad never tells me no about anything." She was discouraged about that. It's just built in the heart of a child to hear mom and dad say, "No, you can't do this," at times. There's a reason for things and I can't explain it all the time but withholding appropriate discipline is a way to exasperate your child.

The last one I'll mention is rank hypocrisy. Rank means that's just who you are. It's your rank. It's your position in life. Now look, mom and dad, as a matter of fact, there was a campaign about smoking marijuana that was encouraging parents to go ahead and be a hypocrite. What they're saying is, "Yes, you did it as a young person, but you've got to love your kids enough to tell them, 'You can't do it, though.'" And I agree with that, by the way. As a pastor, if I only preached the truth to you I'm 100% at, I'd have to quit today. You understand that. If you quit training your children on everything that you couldn't do perfectly, well, there'd be nothing else to train them in. So I'm not talking about failing, I'm talking about rank hypocrisy. I'm talking about, mom, when you consistently as a pattern in your life dishonor your husband's authority and yet you tell your children to honor your authority. Your children are not dumb. They see the rank hypocrisy. Dad, when you tell your sons and daughters the way they ought to be kind and treat people but you run roughshod over your wife and don't treat her like a weaker vessel that needs special nourishment and protection, they can see through that. And on and on we can go, go with other behaviors and other habits. Rank hypocrisy. You can't expect your children to honor the Lord when they see you consistently as a pattern not honoring the Lord.

Now look, we all have struggles and we all have weaknesses but do you know what we can be? We can be humble about it. We can be repenters and we can tell our children when we've blown it and when we've not been what we ought to be, and I have found that

covers a multitude of weakness in parenting, is just being real and being humble when we need to do better in some areas.

Well, those are some things a father must not do, alright? Now let's get on to the next point. If I can find it in my notes, we'll get on to the next point. Obviously, things the father must do. He kicks off things by saying, "Fathers, do not do these things, but here are some things you must do." Now the next thing he says is nurture them in love. That's the idea of bringing them up in the discipline and instruction, the bringing of them up has the amplified understanding of nurturing them along. You nourish them and you nurture them. You don't coercively with a heavy hand browbeat them into submission. They must have our love, our children must have our sympathy, they must have our compassion, they must have our time, and they must have our interest. I just do not subscribe to this idea of quality time. I guarantee you, you can poll 100,000 children and say, "Is it okay with you if mom's gone a lot but she gives you some quality time or would you just rather have mom here all the time?" You know what that child is going to say. That quality time thing may work for you, I'm telling you it's not working for Johnny and Susie. They need our time. They need our sympathy. That's the way we nurture them. A child comes to us, into life, and they're helpless and they are immature and that child is yours to mold like clay. That child is yours to engrave upon like a silver plate.

So we go into parenting with this balancing act of compassion and sympathy and care but control and discipline and we strive to maintain those. So nurturing them in love. Secondly, things a father must do, now remember, I'm seeing mom the way the Bible sees mom as an extension of the father in this whole parenting balance here, B. is correction and discipline, correcting wrong behaviors and attitudes as we see them. So he says raise your children, bring them up in the discipline of the Lord. The word "discipline" has the idea of chastising here. It has the idea of correction for bad behavior or bad attitudes. Hebrews 12:7 reminds us, "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" But note we're to discipline not according to Dr. Spock, we're to discipline not according to Hillary Clinton who wrote the book, "It Takes a Village," because it really doesn't take a village, it takes church, it takes families in a church to raise a child. Your village may be going to hell but if you've got your family a church family with you on this thing, you can make it in raising children for the glory of God.

You're to raise them in the Lord he says here in Ephesians 6:4. In the Lord means we recognize and we embrace the superior wisdom of God revealed in the word of God. I remember a parent that was mocking the authority of school leadership because they had a certain dress code or whatever. Parents, be careful about doing that stuff. Be careful about going to bat for your kids and teaching them to dishonor authority, no matter whose authority it is. Remember what God said to Eli in 1 Samuel 3:13, he told them, "You did not discipline your sons and so punishment is coming upon you." There's a curse, a generational curse, I believe, that comes upon us if we do not call our children into discipline and correction.

Now, thirdly, we're to instruct them with words. That's what we must do. Bring them up, he says, "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." That means we use verbiage, we're speaking God's truth and God's wisdom to them. Now, parents, we are not the source and the possessors of authority to determine the truth that we're to teach our child, we're to do this in the Lord, under his authority, according to his superior wisdom. I believe we have just a terrible precedent in our country right now of everything has to flow through emotion, "It's how I feel and how I think about something, how something looks to me." Then you have these emotions and they say, "Well, what about this?" And they feel emotional about that. "And what about that?" And these dominoes start falling and we're just all over the place and oftentimes in contradiction because we're not following biblical principles that do not change but fickle emotions that always change. You're not to train your children according to your fleeting and fickle emotions. Maybe that's why fathers are held ultimately responsible because women, thank God, are more emotional than men. Why? Because they're the more direct caregivers. They're the grace-givers. They're the chief instrument of nurturing. But they need the guidance of a godly compassionate father who gives the principles you're going to live by in your home. Emotions are not your lord, Jesus is your Lord. "Well, I just don't feel..." I don't care what you feel. I don't care what I feel. I care what the word of God says.

Where would we be, church, if we followed our feelings as Baptists three decades ago? "Well, we just feel this is... Well, we just feel that is best." Who cares? What does the word of God say? This is the sound rock on which we can build our churches, and in this case, build our homes, and particularly build the raising of our children. We're to discipline them and instruct them in the Lord. We make Christ the teacher and ruler under whose authority everything is to be believed and in obedience to whom we obey everything and everything is to be done. It's all about Christ. It's very important to communicate to our children that we are under God, that we're not coming up with these things ourselves; that we tell our children, "Do you understand mom and dad is under authority? You're under our authority and you're under our authority because God put you under our authority, and we're under his authority. I can't parent you the way I just want to. I'm to do these things in the Lord, in his wisdom, under his authority." It's the greatest folly to assume that we are wiser than God or to attempt to accomplish an end by means other than those which he has appointed.

Now some conclusionary thoughts. Moms and dads, let's remind ourselves, children are not looking for perfect parents but they are looking for honest parents, and if might add to that, humble parents. An honest parent is that parent that rules with authority, instructs and disciplines, but also has moments of humbling. I had to do that with my children and I know I probably failed them and didn't do it often enough, but I've had those moments when I had to go back and say, "Sweetheart, will you forgive daddy? I was wrong when I said that that way, because do you know what? Daddy needs a Savior too." We're all under him and under his authority.

Children are not looking for perfect parents but they are looking for honest parents. Remind ourselves this morning that sometimes the best parents can have a bad child. God had Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel. Sometimes, and here's the thing,

if I might just say this and, Lord knows, I've had to grow through some of this so I'm lumping you in with me kind of this morning, but we come into this Christianity thing and we think, man, we're going to find out all the mechanisms, the structures and the ways to get this thing right and we dot all the i's and we cross all the t's and we become little idolaters, we become idolaters of our system. "If I'll just homeschool, they'll all love Jesus. If I just follow So-and-so's book on raising children and how to raise babies, then they'll all just love Jesus." No, your children will love Jesus if the Gospel transforms their hearts. Now I've been watching this for four decades now in one place and that teaches you something. Now listen to what I'm about to tell you: I've seen more children go into rebellion from strict homes than I have homes that were better balanced. So be careful. It's not your rules, it's not your adherence to a system, it's your humility, your realness, your love for Christ, your dedication to honor God and to yield yourself humble before him that communicates so deeply to the hearts of your children and causes them to want to.... By the way, what have we gained if our children grow up intelligent, well-educated, moral and respectable if they don't love God? I don't want a child like that, I want them to be well-educated and respectable and good citizens and love God deeply and that be the real motivation for their behavior, because we're not about behavior modification, at least not primarily.

Let's remind ourselves that God's normal pattern is the communication of the faith from one generation to the other. This generation must reach the next generation and that's to be done by the Christian home and the local church. So many things a sound local church does to affirm and complement and reinforce everything a sound Christian home is teaching and that's what we've worked really really hard now over the generations to establish at Grace Life Church, and that's why I'll often say this is a great place to raise children because we are what we have been and we are what we're going to be. We don't chase fads and gimmicks here. Watching some of the large churches in our area just for the last three to four decades, you see children from the time they're born until they graduate from high school, their church has gone through three or four different major shifts of what they're about as a church. What does that teach a child? That God changes, I guess, instead of saying, "No, some things stay the same." God is eternal and God is holy and God is unchanging and his church shouldn't be changing, at least not in substantial ways. My goodness, when electricity was invented, churches got lights. I'm not talking about things like that. I'm thinking about how their modus operandi, of how they approach reaching people, and what they're calling the Gospel, and what they're calling true church growth etc. etc.

All these gimmicks and fads, can I just exhort you on this, parents? Please don't raise your children in a faddish, gimmicky church. You're teaching your children that God's stuff is just frivolous and ever-changing, and without eternal and abiding unchanging substance. You need a local church that teaches parental authority. You need a local church with God-centered curriculum. We many years ago radically revolutionized all of our children's literature so that our children would learn who God is and would learn the truths from the stories, not just learn Bible stories. Spiritual accountability and spiritual fellowship. A place where being a committed Christian parent is complemented and welcomed.

Let's remind ourselves that it's hard for children to obey their parents. You realize Satan works feverishly to keep children from obeying their parents. It's hard and it's hard for parents to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. It's hard and if you don't feel like you've failed, you're a liar. We all fail and struggle but we can all be real and we all can be repenters and we all can do better as we go forward because just because it's difficult doesn't mean it is impossible. The world, the flesh and the devil are indeed against us but God is for us. The world, the flesh and the devil hate God and they hate God's ordained authority and they hate God's wisdom on the home. The world is against us, the world sends out the banner of autonomy, "We're our own self. I'm to be dictated to by me, myself and I. I'm my own boss, captain of my own ship, master of my own destiny. What I am is good and right." No, it's not. Everything about you is bad. The only one who is good and right is God and we yield to his authority.

We can live as our Lord says we should live. We can honor the Lord, we can follow these precepts, we can repent when we fail, and can I just say this again, I ended the last session this way and that is some of you moms and dads are too hard on yourselves. You don't offer yourself the same grace God offers you. Okay, you blew it some, okay, you messed up some, humble yourself, make it right and go on. We're all in this together, amen? We all need each other and by the way, a lot of you parents that would beat yourselves up, I want to tell you this as your pastor, I've watched you for a long time, you've done a lot of things right and you've done a lot of things good. One of the momentous changes in my life as becoming a Christian is looking at my mom and dad and realizing they did a lot of things good, they did a lot of things right and I'm thankful for that. You young people sitting here, it's quite easy to pick out the ways mom and dad blow it and I know they blow it some, but I challenge you, you think about the things mom and dad did right. First of all, you're sitting in a pew where you're hearing the unadulterated preaching of the word of God and that's rare. That's good and that's right. And they did a lot of other things good and right.

So don't get on this, "Well, I just blow it and that's just the way it is." No, it's not. You can't teach an old dog new tricks but you're not an old dog. You can grow. You can keep maturing. You can keep doing better just like your pastor is striving to do. We can live as God says we should live. We can honor the Lord in our parenting and God can – listen – and God will bless our families. Christian Parenting 101. Well, I'm still learning and I hope you are too.