

Faithfulness is Not Provoking Your Children to Wrath

Galatians 5.22; Ephesians 6.4

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A great enemy of the fruit of faithfulness within the home is the absence, neglect, and refusal of fathers to love, lead, and train their children within the Christian family. Christian fathers who will love and lead their children in truth and by example are sadly so often AWOL (absent without official leave) or MIA (missing in action).

Dear men, if you are not training your children by Scripture, by love, by prayer, and by your example of faithfulness to Christ, you are training them not to love Scripture, not to trust and love Christ, not to love prayer, and you are doing so by your own example. Faithfulness to your children is not only working hard to provide food, clothing, and shelter that their bodies might be preserved, but is also working hard to provide the environment, training, and education in which the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ will fill their lives that their souls might be preserved forever. Dear Christian fathers, it is time for us to grab all excuses that proceed from our mouths for why we cannot be/become the faithful fathers God call us to be and to cast those excuses out of our mouths like contaminated food. Making excuses for our failure will only prop up our failures and extenuate our failures rather than moving beyond our failures to become faithful (not perfect, but faithful) fathers who lead our children to Christ by our words and our deeds. Just as we do not allow our children to make excuses as to why they cannot be faithful, obedient children in their respective duties and responsibilities in the home, so we cannot use the same excuses with God, our wives, or our children. God help us, gentlemen, to take our divine calling as fathers to be a calling of faithfulness to the Lord (first and foremost), a calling of faithfulness to our children, a calling of faithfulness to Christ's Church, and a calling of faithfulness to future generations (for what we now do will affect for good or for ill our descendants for generations to come).

This Lord's Day we continue in our study of the fruit of the Spirit considering the fruit of faithfulness and particularly focusing upon faithfulness in respect to the divine calling of fatherhood. From our text this Lord's Day, we shall focus our attention upon the following two commands: (1) A Negative Command: "Provoke not your children to wrath"; (2) A Positive Command: "Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord".

I. A Negative Command: "Provoke not your children to wrath" (Ephesians 6:4).

A. As the Apostle Paul began in the previous chapter (Ephesians 5) to present to Christian families the duties of faithfulness (wives to husbands, and husbands to wives), so he continues in Ephesians 6 to summarize the duties of faithfulness on the part of children to parents (in Ephesians 6:1-3, which we will consider in a sermon to come), and the duties of faithfulness on the part of fathers in particular (but parents in general) to their children (Ephesians 6:4).

B. The Holy Spirit directs this command specifically to "fathers" (though no doubt the duties of faithfulness Paul mentions here also apply to mothers as well). Fathers are particularly addressed here because it is the husband and father that God has appointed to be the head of his household of faith (Galatians 6:10, which includes his wife and his children). As Joshua declared over his household of faith, so Christian husbands and fathers must likewise declare today, "As for me and my house (household), we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

C. Let us now look closely at the negative command God gives to us as fathers: “Provoke not your children to wrath” (Ephesians 6:4). This command is in the present tense, indicating that this is a duty of faithfulness that is to characterize Christian fathers. Essentially the same command is found in Colossians 3:21. Let us first consider what this command DOES NOT mean and then consider what it DOES mean.

1. What this command DOES NOT mean.

a. It **DOES NOT** mean that we should do whatever pleases our children and whatever complies with their wishes so that they do not become angry with us. This would completely contradict many other places in Scripture which command us to discipline, chasten, and reprove our children (which children certainly do not like, Proverbs 19:18; Proverbs 22:15; Hebrews 12:11). There are also places in Scripture which command us to teach and to train our children (which so often goes contrary to our children’s own natural inclination and sinful desires, Proverbs 22:6). This erroneous interpretation of what it means to provoke not your children to wrath is opposed to what Paul commands immediately following in the same verse: “But bring them up (or train them) in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). The child’s wishes and inclinations are not to overrule the command of the Lord or the duty of faithfulness given by God to fathers.

b. This command (“Provoke not your children to wrath”) also **DOES NOT** necessarily mean that if our children become angry with us about being disciplined, reprovved, corrected, or being trained and taught the right ways of the Lord out of love for them that we have erred and need to rethink what we are doing. Thoughtful reflection and discussion with our wives, men, is a good sounding board to get the feedback that we may need in improving and growing in the way we can be most effective in training our children and avoid unnecessarily provoking them to anger.

2. What this command (“Provoke not your children to wrath”) DOES mean.

a. It means that as fathers (and as mothers) we should not provoke, tempt, or lead our children to become angry with us because of our sinful treatment of them. Each of us (whether child or adult) is always responsible for our sinful and angry response to being treated in a harsh, angry, disrespectful, scornful, humiliating manner (Matthew 5:43-45). We cannot blame our sinful response on the person who provoked us with his/her ungodly behavior. But at the same time, when we by our sinful words or deeds provoke or tempt our children, our parents, our wife, our husband, or anyone else to sin, we have become an accomplice and aid to Satan who is called “the tempter” (in Matthew 4:3). That child (or anyone else) may be responsible for his/her sinful outburst of anger, but I (as a father) am even more responsible for provoking that child to wrath—this is to set a stumbling block before a child, which Jesus declares to be most serious (Luke 17:2).

b. This command (“Provoke not your children to wrath”) means that we as fathers (and as mothers as well) will seek by God’s grace and with God’s help to avoid the following words and deeds because they tend to provoke and tempt our children to become angry with us.

(1) **Unreasonable, unrealistic, or unclear commands or expectations** will provoke them to anger. Children should be given chores, responsibilities, and duties appropriate to their age. However, our expectations should not be perfection, but rather a wholehearted effort and a reasonable degree of completing the task. This can only be accomplished when our children understand clearly what we are asking them to do (explain it to them, show them what you are asking them to do, and give them a reasonable amount of time to do it). So much frustration and anger comes at times from a child who does not understand what he/she is to do. Fathers (and mothers) should ask the child, “Do you understand? Is it clear what you are to do? What did I tell you to do?” Don’t yell from one end of the house to the other, have the child come and look you in the eye, if you want to effectively communicate to the child what you would have him/her to do.

(2) **Speaking to our covenant children in an angry outburst, calling them foul names, humiliating them in front of their friends, or speaking to them in general with a harsh, loud**

voice, we will provoke them to anger. Now there is a time to be firm and to raise the volume, especially when there is obstinacy, but not in a fit of rage, but under control to show that this is serious business.

(3) **When we “punish” our children rather than “disciplining” our children**, we will provoke them to anger. Punishment is getting even with our children; it is retributive justice. Discipline is training and teaching our children to love truth and righteousness and to hate error and wickedness.

(4) **When our children do not know that we love them when we discipline them**, we will provoke them to anger. They will see discipline only in a negative light, whereas the Lord tells us that His discipline is a token of His great love for us (Hebrews 12:5-6). We must seek by love to win the hearts of our children and to lead them to obey us, rather than simply standing on a soap box and authoritatively demanding they obey us.

(5) **When we as fathers do not set an example of faithfulness to Christ in submitting to His commands**, we will provoke our children to anger. How can we (without contradiction and hypocrisy) call our children to submit to our commands, when they see we do not submit to the commands of the Lord? This is a recipe for the growth (whether inward or outward) of anger in our children.

(6) **When we do not pray with our children, confess our own faults and sins to our children, walk them through the gospel each time discipline is necessary**, we provoke them to frustration and anger by teaching them that they are only acceptable before God (and us as fathers) if they meet certain expectations and standards, rather than that they can only be acceptable before God because of Christ’s righteousness. Once we pray with them and they seek God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of others who were offended, we can tell them that the matter is behind us (“Let’s move on rather than dwelling on that any longer”). Our children must know that God removes their sins as far as the east is from the west, and remembers them against us no more, as they trust Christ alone for their forgiveness. Dear fathers, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that leads our children away from wrath and bitterness and rather leads our children to willingly submit their hearts in love to the Lord and to us a fathers (and mothers). To simply demand the obedience of our children is as if we were instituting a covenant of works in our family (where acceptance is based upon their perfect obedience) rather than a covenant of grace (where acceptance is based upon Christ’s perfect obedience). This will only lead to frustration, anger, and bitterness.

II. A Positive Command: “Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

A. Here the Holy Spirit commands us (as fathers) not only to abstain from doing that which is sinful (namely, “provoke not your children to wrath”), but He also commands us (as fathers) to replace that which is sinful on our parts with that which pleases Him (namely “but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”).

B. Quite literally, this portion of the verse reads: “But nurture them in the training and admonition of the Lord.” Here once again the main verb of this second part of the verse (“nurture”) is a command in the present tense, emphasizing that this nurturing our children is to characterize the way we treat them as fathers—we are not to starve our children physically or spiritually, but to nourish them that they might grow in both respects. Dear fathers, we can either stunt the growth of our children (physically or spiritually) by the way we treat them, or we can nourish their growth. Our children are like plants, which if they are given the nurture and nourishment needed, they will by God’s grace grow, but if we do nurture them and protect them from worldly enemies that would attack them, it will be like allowing weeds to take over your garden and choking out the life of your plants. Doing nothing to nourish your children in the Lord is doing something to destroy your children in the Lord. There is no neutrality.

C. As fathers, we are commanded to nurture our children in the following two ways (which are not

entirely distinct but are complementary one to the other).

1. **First, we are commanded to nurture our children in training them.** The word used here for training or discipline is derived from the word for a child (in other words, child training).

a. Fathers, we are to nurture our children by training them. Not allowing the world to train them, not allowing television, computer, music, or friends to train them, but rather it is our duty of faithfulness before God to train them (together with mothers) in our own households of faith. Yes, children may be trained outside the home, but not outside the ultimate oversight of fathers and mothers.

b. The idea of training that is conveyed in the Greek word used here involves hard work, planning, praying, thinking, reading Scripture, and always dependent upon the grace of God to make that training effectual in the lives of our children. Those fathers who are not nurturing their children by training them to walk in the paths of righteousness and truth are indeed teaching them that their dreams, their thoughts, and their ways are more important than God's ways. Our children will be taught and instructed, the only question is by whom and in whose ways.

c. If we profess to be Christian fathers, we cannot take a back seat to our children's training. That is to provoke God to wrath, for the children of Christian parents are "holy" (1 Corinthians 7:14), which does not necessarily mean that they are inwardly holy, but rather that our children separated from the world are members of the Visible Church. We, therefore, provoke God who has extended His promises to them (according to Acts 2:39), if we do not water those promises by training them in the gospel, in prayer, in the sacraments, in nurturing and disciplining them in love.

d. Let us train our children according to some of the following stepping stones (rather than putting stumbling blocks before them).

(1) **Train your children with much love and affection.** They must know you love them by your words and deeds.

(2) **Train your children knowing their natural bent toward evil** (Proverbs 22:15), and therefore the need for the grace of God (for both you and your children). Don't be surprised when your children sin. Their sin should not amaze us, but the mercy of God should in forgiving sin should always amaze us.

(3) **Train them in the atmosphere of the gospel,** even when issuing commands and discipline. True obedience begins with a changed heart through the power of the Spirit of God and the gospel.

(4) **Train them to submit to those who have lawful authority over them.** They will not learn to submit with joy to you if they do not learn to submit with joy to Christ. Submission is the way of life; rebellion is the way of death. Submission teaches our children that the world does not revolve around them. They do not exist to be served, but to serve the Lord and others.

(5) **Train them to love the truth and righteousness of Christ.** Never respond to serious questions put to you by your children by saying, "I don't know, but we've always done it that way." If you can't provide a biblical answer to a child's question, simply tell him that he has asked a very good question, and that you will give them an answer after you have thought more about it. Always seek to use the Scripture and the Confession of Faith when answering your children's questions, so that they learn that God's Word is relevant to all areas of life and is also what we (as a church) profess in our Confession of Faith.

(6) **Train your children to work hard.** Don't let them spend their whole day in playing and recreation. Recreation is important to break up the day, but recreation is not to consume the day. Plan your children's day with chores, with schoolwork, with works of mercy to others in the church, in writing letters to pen pals, in reading good literature as well as with time to run and play. Much idleness and pleasure-seeking will only breed discontentment and discouragement when God brings afflictions and trials into their lives.

(7) **Train your children by your own example.** Your children (especially while

they are young) are more prone to learn by what they see than by what they hear. Don't just tell your children to walk the narrow path, show them how to walk it and invite them to follow you.

(8) **Train your children by giving them a Christian education** (school, secret worship, family worship, corporate worship). Let them live in the school of Christ wherever you may be with your children.

(9) **Train your children that this life is passing away, and that they must prepare themselves to meet their God** (Ecclesiastes 12:1). They cannot put their hopes in this life, or in people, or in circumstances, for this world is fading away as is our very life. Our children must have a more firm foundation than what is perishing. They must have a hope in the God who created them and in the eternal glories that will never perish or fade away.

2. Second, we are not only to nurture our children by training them, but also by admonishing them ("in the nurture and **admonition of the Lord**"). This admonition of the Lord means literally "to put them in mind" of the Lord in all that they do. We admonish our children by teaching them what their baptism means (their need of Christ due to their sin, and the promises God has made to them in the gospel and in their baptism). To admonish our children is to warn them where rebellion will lead, and to encourage them where loving obedience will lead. To admonish our children is to comfort them when they fall with the comfort of God's promises, those same promises of the gospel that likewise comfort us when we fall.

If we take these matters seriously as Christian fathers (and mothers), we will no doubt feel the heavy burden of our duty to be faithful. But if we are not careful we will be overwhelmed and crushed beneath this burden if we carry this around as a covenant of works. There will only be joy in endeavoring faithfulness to Christ, faithfulness to our children, faithfulness to our family, faithfulness to our church, and faithfulness to succeeding generations, if we live and breathe and consciously live under the covenant of grace, where Christ has already fulfilled all obedience for us and supplies all grace and fruit we need to be faithful to Him. A verse like this (as with all of the duties of faithfulness that belong to Christ and to others) is intended to drive us outside ourselves in utter humiliation so that we cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." There is no hope for any of us as fathers apart from the mercy and promise of Christ. Without Christ we can do nothing, but we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Praise be to His glorious name.

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