

What's a Parent to Do? • Ephesians 6:4

Out of the many opportunities and responsibilities of life, there is a calling which uniquely mixes the loftiest of privileges and the grandest of responsibilities. It is parenthood.

Without a doubt, parenthood is one of the highest and the holiest callings of life.

Into a parent's hands, God entrusts a life he dearly loves and for which Jesus died. God calls upon parents to be his agents in providing all that is necessary to prepare a newborn infant for adulthood and for eternity. In the intimate relationship of parent and child is the ultimate opportunity for fellowship, evangelism and discipleship.

As parents we have entrusted to us a life, and what we do with that life is far more important than the money we earn, the degrees we have after our names, the success that is attributed to us or the status that we seek. Our children are the greatest expression of the kind of people that we are, the kind of lives that we live and the relationship we have to God.

The biblical qualifications for church leadership do not include tithing, do not mention public speaking ability and are not concerned with a person's ability to memorize Bible verses. But, the Bible is crystal clear that to be a leader in the church a person must have demonstrated that he is effective and capable in functioning as a parent. He must manage his household well.

Billy Graham was once asked to name the key leaders of our country. He answered, "The mothers and fathers of America."

It is nearly impossible to over-emphasize the importance of the roll of parents. What you and I do as parents influences our children 10,000 times more than school, friends, church, television, music and books combined.

So it is no wonder that we ask, "What's a parent to do?"

And it is no wonder that the same God who

gives us such an exciting opportunity and such a heavy responsibility clearly answers our question when he tells us in Ephesians 6:4, "do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

This distinctively Christian approach has two sides. First a negative side, and then a positive. The negative side tells us, "do not exasperate your children." And the reason that God starts off on this negative note is that parents are naturally prone to do just what is forbidden here. Some parents are too concerned about their children and some parents are not concerned enough. Other parents simply don't know how to parent and out of their frustration they mishandle their children. Every parent is here being addressed by God because every parent, at one time or another, has a tendency to push his children too far.

But what does that mean? Simply stated, parents are forbidden to push their children to the breaking point. Parents are forbidden to break the spirit of their child.

The same author, Paul, says it this way in a parallel verse in Colossians 3:21: "do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

Maybe it's helpful to hear what some other translations of Ephesians 6:4 say. The Living Bible says, "Don't keep on scolding and nag-

ging your children making them angry and resentful."

Phillips says, "Don't overcor-

rect your children or make it difficult for them to obey the commandment." This specifically refers to the commandment to obey parents and to honor them. And the Jerusalem Bible does a good job in translating it, "Never drive your children to resentment."

How do parents do that? Well, there are lots of ways. One is by being overly strict. Parents

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who are overly strict often fail to trust their children and many times raise children with a very poor self-image. They break the commandment of Ephesians 5:21 to “submit to one another” because they never submit to their children – they never admit to being wrong. Eventually these children may rebel in anger. There are parents who say that you can’t be too strict, but God says that you can be too strict, and God forbids that.

My mother had an approach in raising my three brothers and me that I think was good. I try to apply it with our children. My mother would say, “If ever asked, I will try always to say yes and only say no when I have to.”

Many times, as parents, we’re predisposed to say no. As parents, we ought to be predisposed by God’s grace to say yes whenever we possibly can.

Some parents always want perfection from their children. They have unreasonable expectations. When less than perfection and less than best is given, approval and affection and love are withheld. That is provoking your children to exasperation. Let your child be a child.

Some parents tell their children to do what they, as parents, are unwilling to do. “Save money”, but there is no indication that the parents save money. “Go to church”, but the parents stay at home. “Don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t drive the car so fast” – but then the parents do what they tell their children they shouldn’t do.

There are parents who provoke anger in one child by treating a brother or sister with favoritism. There are other parents who fluctuate greatly in their treatment of a child so that how a child is disciplined has nothing to do with what the child does but depends rather upon the mood of the parent and on what happened that day. Some parents are unfair and severe in their punishment of children, frequently punishing but seldom rewarding. And some parent force their children to compete for their attention - - - compete against the company, the church or the parent’s hobby.

Martin Luther had an overly strict and severe father. Maybe that explains why, when commenting on Ephesians 6:4, Martin Luther wrote, “Spare the rod and spoil the child, that is true. But beside the rod keep an apple to give him when he has done well.”

Parents, “do not exasperate your children.”

How do you know if you are doing that? Ask yourself, “Is my child filled with anger that bubbles to the surface?” If the answer is yes, then that is a key sign that you have not heeded the word of God to not exasperate your child.

Ask your son or daughter. There is no one who can grade you better as a parent than your own child. God calls upon us in these relationships of Ephesians 5 and 6 to submit to one another out of reverence for Jesus Christ. There is beauty in a parent going to a child and saying, “Help me to be a better mother; enable me to be a better dad.”

That’s the negative side. There is a positive side as well, and it has two parts: training and instruction. Christian parents are responsible to train their children in the practical routines of Christian living. Parents are to train their children much like a coach or a trainer of an athletic team trains the players on that team. Show your children what to do. Explain how to do it, and supervise, correct, punish and reward until what you are seeking to train your child to do becomes a habit. Then move on to some other area of training.

As parents bringing up our children in the discipline of the Lord, it is necessary to understand some important principles.

Discipline or lack of discipline makes or breaks your child in life! By discipline I’m not talking about punishment – that’s a misunderstood concept of discipline. Discipline is enabling someone to have an ordered and structured and controlled life. Without discipline your child will not be able to work and think and pray and read and give and change and improve and grow as he should. Without discipline he is handicapped for all of life.

On the other hand, if you give your child a

disciplined way of life, you have given him one of the most valuable tools that he can have for any experience he will ever encounter. With discipline he will be able to control his temper, complete his job, raise his family, walk with God, control his weight, refrain from gossip and abstain from immorality. He'll be ready for life. Give your child discipline and you have given him a precious gift.

Discipline is a way of life that takes years to learn. It is unfair to expect your child to learn discipline in a few weeks or months. Like most great accomplishments, it takes a long time to build. You work on it with diligence and determination day after day and year after year. It may not be easy, but it will be worth it.

Discipline is more taught by example than by word. Show your children how to work hard and how to save money. Show them how to sit still in church, how to study the Bible, how to pray and how to witness. Model for them how to dress properly and how to behave with the opposite sex. Be an example for them in the way you face crises, how you handle discouragement and how to walk with God. Admit your own weaknesses, your own failures. Tell them about your commitment to God.

Teach your child, by example, how to live life and how to walk with God.

While it's true that the discipline of the Lord generally includes all of the good of life, most specifically it includes the relationship to God through holiness and the relationship to our fellowman through righteousness. We are to teach our children about sin and about confession of sin, about prayer, about daily devotions and about loving God with all their heart and soul and mind. And we are to teach our children to tell the truth, to be honest, to never degrade other people and to always walk in integrity and morality.

It is far more important to discipline our children to become men and women of God than

that we prepare them to follow in our profession or succeed by the world's standards. What greater honor could God ever give us than to bring up our children in the discipline of the Lord?

In addition to the training of discipline, we are to give the truth of instruction. The responsibility for the knowledge of God's Word belongs to parents and not to the church or school! It is the parents' responsibility to be sure that their children know and understand the content and the truth of the Bible.

Parents, teach your children the truths of God! Memorize Bible verses with them. When you watch television with your children, interpret what is good and what is bad in light of what the Bible teaches. (In order to do this you must know what the Bible teaches!) Continually interpret all of life's situations in terms of the Bible: death, sins, victories, defeats, money, friendships. Everything!

Place the highest priority on knowing God's truth. It is more important that your children know and understand what God has to say than that they know history, math, chemistry, language or any other area of human knowledge.

And again, we must model. Are your children as likely to see you reading the Bible as the sports page or the Wall Street Journal? Are your children as likely to hear you quote the Bible as they are to hear you quote the latest stock market reports or the gossip in the neighborhood or the standings of sports teams?

We must creatively seek ways to instruct our children in the ways of the Lord! In doing this there will, obviously, be changes that take place in our own lives in the areas of discipline and knowledge. And that is the real key to effective parenting.

God's word to parents is so straightforward, so concise and clear cut when it says, "do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up

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in the training and instruction of the Lord.” May we realize what a high honor it is to be a Christian parent. May we see the difference between the negative and the positive approach to parenting. And may we realize the difference we can make by encouraging our children through discipline and the instruction of the Lord. What an opportunity we have!

Benjamin West tells how he became a painter. He was just a little boy when one day he was left in charge of his baby sister, Sally, while his mother ran an errand. In his mother’s absence he discovered some bottles of colored ink and began to paint Sally’s portrait. In doing so he made a considerable mess.

His mother came back. She saw the mess, but said nothing. She picked up the piece of paper and saw the drawing. “Why,” she said, “it’s Sally!” And she stooped and kissed him.

Ever after, Benjamin West used to say, “My mother’s kiss made me a painter.”

Parents, your kiss, your touch, your example, your godliness, your discipline, your instruction will make your children men and women of God. What a high and holy calling – so, “do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Father, you are the best model of fatherhood and parenthood that there is. Oh, that we could

be to our children what you are to us, for without exception you treat us with love. Without exception you bless us with your grace. Without exception you are fair, no matter what.

So we look to you to learn what it means to be the kind of parents you want us to be. May we not exasperate our children, but may we, as your agents, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

This we pray for the sakes of our children, in the name of your Son. Amen.

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