

Ephesians 6:4

Introduction

One of the signs that we are filled in the Spirit is that we *submit* to the *authorities* in our lives in the fear of Christ. That's what Paul said in verse 21. And then Paul went on to exhort specific people to submit to specific authorities. First, he spoke to the Christian wives and called them to submit to their husbands. Then he turned to all the Christian children, and called them to obey and honor their parents. Next week, he'll speak to the Christian slaves, calling them to obey their masters.

But always, when he's finished exhorting those who are called to submit, Paul also exhorts those who are in authority. If Christian wives are to submit to their husbands, then Paul calls the Christian husbands to love their wives in the context of their headship. So now if Christian children are to obey their parents, what will Paul have to say to the Christian parents? Paul begins in verse 4:

I. "And fathers"

At first that might surprise us. Why not "fathers *and mothers*"? Why not "*parents*" (cf. vv. 1-2)? Why do you think Paul specifically addresses *fathers*? Everything Paul will say *applies* to mothers (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15), but it's the Christian fathers who carry the ultimate weight of authority in the home. And so it's the Christian fathers who are ultimately *answerable* for the upbringing of their children. It's the Christian fathers who are held to *account* before the mothers. Authority is a weight of responsibility because it brings answerability – it brings accountability. Fathers, we have a responsibility to and for our children that is exceedingly serious. This is why Paul, after telling the children to obey their *parents* and to honor their father *and mother*, now turns specifically to you and to me: "And fathers."

Now one of the most important ways that a father sees to the upbringing of his children is by loving his wife – by *empowering and enabling* her to be a faithful mother. But as we're about to see, that's not all. Paul writes: "And fathers..."

II. "do not provoke your children to anger"

Why does Paul say this? It's because this is exactly what many fathers (and also many mothers) are most prone to do. Fathers (and mothers) we are easily *prone* to provoking our children to anger. So if we didn't already know this about ourselves, then now we do.

We might ask: "Isn't it just as easy for a child to provoke his father to sinful anger? In fact, isn't that what happens far more often? And the answer is "*no*." In a relationship of authority and submission, it is *only* the one in authority that can ever be held accountable for "provoking to sinful anger." My children will never be held accountable for my sinful anger (God didn't tell my children, "do not provoke your father to anger"), but I may be held accountable for their sinful anger. My wife will never be held accountable for my sinful anger, though I may be held accountable for hers. When a husband, or a father, or a master is "unreasonable," then the wife,

or the slave, or the child has no other place to appeal and is still called by God to submit in the fear of Christ. If they don't, they'll be held accountable for their own sin – but so will we – not just for our sin, but also for theirs (Ezek. 3:18, 20). It's double accountability and a stricter judgment (cf. James 3:1) And so the very thought of provoking our children to anger should make us fear and tremble. Paul talked about anger in chapter four.

- ✓ Ephesians 4:26-27 — Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your provocation, nor give place to the devil.

To provoke our children to anger is to provoke them to sin. To provoke our children to anger is to provoke them to give place to the devil himself. What's really driving Paul's concern here is this: to provoke our children to anger is to jeopardize their very souls and their eternal well-being. The *principle* of Jesus' words in Matthew 18 should be a sobering thought to us as fathers (and also to mothers).

- ✓ Matthew 18:6 — Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Because this is so very deadly serious, and **because** this is exactly what all of us are so easily capable of doing, Paul writes: “And fathers, **do not** provoke your children to anger.” And if we're not *daily conscious* of this command (or at least of this general idea and principle), then for many of us the likelihood that we're failing is almost guaranteed.

So what are the ways that we provoke to anger? Lincoln writes: “This involves avoiding **attitudes, words, and actions** which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out... all forms of... insensitivity to a child's needs and sensibilities.” The point isn't that we walk around on eggshells. The point is just that we *do* walk in **love**. And this love will mean a true *sensitivity* to the needs and sensibilities of our children, at whatever age they may be. It will mean working diligently to always be “in their shoes” and to understand and appreciate their feelings and where they're coming from. The point is **not** that we're ruled by the feelings and sensibilities of our children. The point is that these things are always before our minds as we obediently exercise our authority in the home before **God**.

One of the *best* ways for us to avoid provoking our children to anger is to go back to last week's message and think on the high and holy calling of our children to obey and honor their parents. How could we listen to that message and not feel the heavy weight of responsibility that we carry as parents? Our children are created in the image of God, with *personal* accountability for their *own* response to God's law and His provision of a Savior – an accountability that carries eternal consequences. How can this not keep us from all the ways that we might otherwise provoke our children to anger? How can this not impact our attitudes, words, actions, and even our tone of voice and facial expressions, in the exercise of our authority?

Our parental authority isn't about us, but about God's glory in our children. So much of our “provoking to anger” is because we've been “personally offended” by our children's disobedience or disrespect. We try to hide that fact by appealing to righteous anger, but is that

really what it is? Rarely, if ever. When our children disobey, or disrespect us, or even outright rebel against us, we must never take it *personally*, because it's not about us. It's not about our "right" to be obeyed and respected. It's about *God's* holy law, which leads our children either to condemnation and judgment or to a Savior and forgiveness. I think of Cosby's famous saying: "I brought you in this world, and I can take you out," and I don't think it's funny – not even for "pretend." Or what about these words, "Johnny, I am your father/(mother)." Words like these reflect a wrong understanding of the nature of authority and therefore an *attitude* that can easily jeopardize the souls of our children. *We* do not require obedience because of *who we are*, but because of God's law – the same law to which *we* are also subject. So we think of our attitudes, words, actions, tone of voice, and facial expressions, and how they can so easily convey to our children the "subtleties" of sarcasm, of condescension, of intimidation, of guilt. These are the things that provoke to anger. And they're the result of our failure to remember the divine obligation and the high calling that lies upon our children. They're the result of our failure to remember that there is never any authority or worthiness inherent in us. They're ultimately the result of our failure to exercise our *God-given* authority always as the expression of biblical, Christian love. And when we fail, isn't it our obligation to acknowledge our sin not only to God, but also to our children? "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." Fathers, do not jeopardize the souls and eternal well-being of your children.

III. "but bring them up in the training... of the Lord."

As parents (and especially here as fathers), our authority has been given to us as stewards ("bring them up in the training... *of the Lord*"). *Once again*, our authority is about *God's* law, which leads our children either to condemnation and judgment or to a Savior and forgiveness. The *same* principle that warns us against provoking our children to anger also warns us against all forms of parenting that are in any way "*child-centered*." So often as parents, we're either prone to provoking our children to anger, or we're prone to parenting our children in ways that are centered around them (even in very subtle ways). But our calling is to strive after the goal of *God's* glory *in* our children – and so we are to bring them up, Paul says, "in the *training... of the Lord*. Sometimes that word for training just means *discipline* (Luke 23:16, 22).

- ✓ Hebrews 12:5–6 — "My son, do not regard lightly the *discipline* of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord *disciplines* the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives... For the moment all *discipline* seems painful rather than pleasant..."

So a father is to bring his children up in the (painful) "*discipline*" of the Lord. Even from the very earliest age, the screaming, the grabbing, the unwillingness to share, and the stubbornness are all fruits of the *sin* nature. These are all violations not of Daddy's and Mommy's law, and not of any social conventions, but of God's holy *law*. And so it's this sin at the very earliest ages that reveals the *guilt* of our children – a guilt that existed even from the moment they were first conceived with a nature bent to sin. Sometimes we avoid setting boundaries in order to avoid the need for discipline – or in order to give our children the "freedom" to learn and explore. But what we really end up doing is cultivating and enabling the selfishness and self-centeredness and self-entitlement of the sin nature in our children. But this is not love. Boundaries, at all ages, are essential – boundaries that reflect the law of God to live not for the satisfaction and gratification of *self*, but for the glory of *God* and the good of our *neighbor*. How will you show your two-

year-old that the Law of God forbids living for the gratification of self? How will you show your two-year-old that the Law of God requires putting the needs and desires of others ahead of his own. What will this look like in the boundaries you set for your 10-year-old, for your 16-year-old?

Sometimes we avoid “*requiring*” something from our children, so we can minimize the possibility of disobedience. In other words, especially with the younger ages, we reason, we sweet talk, and we suggest. And so we teach our children that God is a God who reasons, sweet talks, and suggests. But this is not love. We must set boundaries, and we must require obedience, and when these boundaries are rejected (when God’s law is broken), why do we discipline our children? The Bible answers very clearly: So that we might *save* them from *death*. Parenting is about life and death – and may we never forget that.

- ✓ Proverbs 22:15 (cf. 19:18) — Folly [sin] is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.
- ✓ Proverbs 23:13–14 (cf. 13:24) — Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.

Painful discipline teaches our children the reality of *God’s* justice, and righteousness, and the coming judgment as nothing else ever will. Failure to discipline, on the other hand, teaches our children that God is *not* holy (no matter what else we may preach with our words). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:32 — But when we are judged by the Lord, we are *disciplined* so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Discipline is not for the sake of getting a behavior that we want. (It’s not about us!) Discipline is for the sake of teaching our children the Law of God, and helping them ultimately to see how very desperately they *need* the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s love. As Jesus says in Revelation:

- ✓ Revelation 3:19 (cf. Heb. 12:9-11) — Those whom I love, I reprove and *discipline*, so be zealous and *repent*.

May our discipline of our children always be motivated by love for our children and a passion for God to be glorified in them through their embrace of the Gospel. May our *love* for our children always be the true, biblical love that is faithful and diligent to discipline in the light of God’s holy law.

But discipline isn’t enough, and so this word for “training” also includes the idea of “*instruction*” (Acts 7:22; 22:3; cf. Proverbs 1:2; 4:1). Fathers especially, we are responsible for the instruction of our children in all the truths of God’s Word. And these truths can all be summed up in two categories – *Law* and *Gospel*, command and promise. We must bring our children to the foot of Mount Sinai (law), and then we must bring our children to the foot of Golgotha (Gospel) – always, all the time, to both. Always, all the time, to both. Law, by itself, *kills* (legalism will lead your children either to pride and self-righteousness or to hopelessness and despair). Gospel, by itself, is not the true Gospel, and so it also *kills* (“Gospel” without law

will lead your children to empty professions, false assurance, and the lie of a “carnal Christian”). Prior to the Gospel, the Law means guilt and condemnation. After the Gospel, the Law comes to mean love of God and assurance of salvation. And so in all of our parenting, we must remember these two things – Law and Gospel. We must bring our children (age-appropriately) to the foot of Mount Sinai (law), and then we must bring our children to the foot of Golgotha (Gospel) – always, all the time, to both. And fathers, you *will* be able to do this as you yourself are being brought to the same place.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 6:6–7 — And these words that I command you today shall be *on your heart*. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

The point here is a lifestyle – the *natural* and *purposeful* overflow of our hearts. Are we doing this? No matter how little or how much knowledge you have as a father, you *can* do this. We must do this. And the more *we* grow in knowledge and in true faith, the more equipped we’ll be to faithfully instruct our children in the law, and then the Gospel, and then Gospel law – in that order, and without ceasing. Fathers, bring up your children in the *training* (the discipline and the instruction) of the Lord. But at the end of the day, we cannot train our children into the kingdom. We can’t force them through discipline. And we can’t convince them through instruction. Paul says: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...”

IV. “but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”

It’s this admonishment that should accompany, and permeate, and surround *all* of our discipline and instruction. To admonish is to urge, to warn, to encourage, and exhort. It’s to “advise or urge someone earnestly” (1 Cor. 4:14; 10:9-11; Col. 1:28). One person says of the Greek word: “Its fundamental idea is the well-intentioned seriousness with which one would influence the mind and disposition of another by advice, admonition, [and] warning.” (Cremer; quoted in Lincoln) Fathers, we cannot force or reason our children into the kingdom. Our holy calling is simply to bring them up from the time they’re a toddler to the time they leave the home in the “admonishment” of the Lord.

To admonish is to recognize that we do not control the *hearts* of our children. ***We must never forget this.*** We *are responsible* to enforce outward conformity to God’s law and to discipline faithfully whenever that law is broken. So to use a very simple, cut and dried example (which very often they’re not especially as children grow older), if one child hits another child, this breaking of God’s law of love *must* be punished. If one child takes from another, then restitution *must* be made. If a child continues to do what we said not to do, there must be discipline. Justice *must* be done. But may our child never think that by the pain of discipline, we’re trying to “force” them to *feel sorry* for what they did, *or* that we’re only trying to get them to behave in a certain way. Forcing them to feel sorry is not in our power, and only trying to get an outward behavior shows no concern for their souls. Sometimes we “lecture” in an attempt to manipulate or somehow force guilt and sorrow in our children. But we cannot be the Holy Spirit for our children. And whenever we try this, it flows not from love, but from self-serving motives. We cannot ***require*** from our children the outward expressions of a changed *heart* – *ever*. And yet... this changed heart is the whole ***hope and goal*** of our parenting. So instead of forcing our

children to apologize or ask forgiveness, we discipline them as a sign of God's justice and earnestly urge them to see their constant need for God's mercy and grace – for a changed heart that *wants* to apologize and *wants* to seek forgiveness – a heart that only God can give.

Fathers (and mothers), at the end of the day God entrusted to us our children so that we might show them *JESUS*. Short of this we dare not stop. Past this, we dare not try to go. So may God give us grace to be faithful stewards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ every day of our parenting. And may God graciously grant to all our children repentance and forgiveness and joy *in Him* (cf. Acts 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25).