

## Ephesians 6:4

### Introduction

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians that one of the signs we're filled in the Holy Spirit is that we subject ourselves to the God-ordained authorities in our lives.

- Ephesians 5:18b–21 — Be filled in the Spirit... being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Subjection to the God-ordained authorities in our lives is an expression of our being subject to Christ. It's a sign that we're new creations in Christ, filled in the Spirit. Paul goes on, then, to exhort specific people to be subject to specific authorities. First, he spoke to the Christian wives and called them to be subject to their husbands. Then he turned to all the Christian children, and called them to obey and honor their parents. And then he addressed the Christian slaves, calling them to obey their masters. But always, when he's finished exhorting those who are called to submit, Paul exhorts those to whom God has entrusted positions of authority. If Christian wives are to subject themselves to their husbands, then Christian husbands are to use their headship as the context for loving their wives in the same manner as Christ loved the church (5:22-33). It's the husband's headship that *enables* him to love his wife in this specific and unique way. If Christian slaves are to be obedient to those who are their masters, then Christian masters must remember that both their Master and their slave's is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him (6:5-9). Standing before his master, the slave and his master are *not* equals (in terms of position and role). But standing before God, the master and his slave *are* equals (both are slaves of God). So if Christian children are to obey and honor their parents, then what about Christian parents? After speaking to the children directly in verses 1-3, Paul begins in verse 4 of chapter 6:

### I. Ephesians 6:4a — And fathers...

Why does Paul only say: "And *fathers*"? Why not "parents"? (cf. "Children, obey your parents..."; v. 1.) Why not "fathers *and mothers*"? (cf. "Honor your father and mother..."; v. 2.) Everything Paul is about to say in this verse will *apply* to mothers. Paul says in another place:

- 1 Timothy 5:14 (cf. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15) — Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, rule/direct/manage the household [*oikadespoteo*], and give the enemy no opportunity for reviling...

Paul's words here in Ephesians will apply to the mothers, 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 and finally accountable for the health and well-being of their household, and specifically here for the Christian training of their children. Because authority is from God (cf. Rom. 13:1), the greater the authority that is given, the greater the weight of responsibility and accountability. Fathers, the authority that we've been given in the home is directly proportional to the weight of responsibility and accountability that we bear. Have we ever felt overwhelmed by this? We must, apart from God's grace. Wives and children, how might this encourage and enable you to be in subjection? Young men, how are you being equipped to bear this weight of responsibility and

accountability as the head of a future household? Since the authority of the husband/father in the home is the highest authority in the home, the responsibility and accountability that he bears is also the highest. This is why, after telling the children to obey their *parents* and to honor their father *and mother*, Paul now turns specifically to you and to me: “And *fathers*.”

One of the most important ways that a father sees to the upbringing of his children is by loving his wife – by using his headship and authority in the marriage relationship as a means of empowering and enabling his wife to be a faithful mother—to be managing and directing the household well (cf. Eph. 5:22-33). But, of course, that’s not all. Paul writes: “And fathers...”

## **II. Ephesians 6:4b — ...do not provoke your children to anger...**

Why does Paul say this? It’s not because he knows one or two Christian fathers who’ve been guilty of this; it’s because this is exactly what all fathers (and also all mothers) are prone to do. The danger of provoking our children to anger is directly proportional to the position of authority that we’ve been given in the home.

We might ask: Isn’t it just as easy for a child to provoke his father to anger? In fact, isn’t that what happens more often? And the answer is “no.” In a relationship of authority and submission, it’s only the one in authority who can ever be held accountable for “provoking to anger.” When my children sin, they’ll be held accountable by God for their sin, but they won’t be held accountable for my anger. God doesn’t tell my children, “do not provoke your father to anger”. What He does tell them to do is to obey and honor their father. But I—because of my position of authority—may be held accountable by God for their sinful anger. Likewise, my wife will never be held accountable for my anger (though, of course, she’s held accountable for her own sin). But I—because of my position of headship and authority—may be held accountable for hers.

The key, here, is to recognize that authority isn’t just something we have in reserve to bring out and exercise on different occasions. As fathers (and also as mothers), every single interaction that we ever have with our children takes place within the context of a relationship of authority and subjection. This isn’t to say that commands are always being issued or that direction and instruction is always being given. Neither is this to say that as our sons and daughters grow older, there’s not an increasing level of camaraderie and even friendship. But as long as there’s any authority at all, then the relationship itself is experienced and lived always in this context. Authority isn’t just something we *have*, it’s a position that defines the *relationship*. To the extent that this isn’t recognized and embraced by both parents and sons and daughters, then the relationship between parents and sons and daughters must be fundamentally, biblically dysfunctional. On the other hand, it’s this reality of the inherent nature of the relationship as one of authority and submission which makes us capable of a sin which our children cannot commit—or which gives to the sin which we have in common with our children a uniquely destructive character. When a husband or a father is sarcastic, or harsh, or simply inconsiderate and insensitive, or subtly self-righteous then the wife or the son or daughter is still called by God to be in subjection in the fear of Christ. If they’re not, and if they give way in their hearts to anger, then they’ll be held accountable for this sinful anger — and so will we (cf. Ezek. 3:18, 20). Authority brings with it not only *greater* accountability, but even a *double* accountability, and therefore a stricter judgment (cf. James 3:1). In chapter four of Ephesians, Paul wrote:

- 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 sons and daughters to anger is to provoke them to sin; it's to provoke them to give place to the devil himself. To provoke our sons and daughters to anger is to jeopardize their spiritual well-being. The principle of Jesus' words in Matthew 18 should be a sobering thought to us as fathers (and to mothers as well).

- Matthew 18:6 — Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, 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.

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” The point isn't that we walk around on eggshells or that we practice child-centered parenting. The point is that we *do* walk in *love* – not just the parental, filial love that's instinctive to us all, but the true, biblical, Christian love that's only enabled by the Holy Spirit. This is a love that means we'll always be working to be in our sons' and daughters' “shoes” – to understand as best we can their feelings and where they're coming from as those who are called all the while to obey and honor their parents. The point is not that we're ruled by the feelings and sensibilities of our children, but rather that these things will be 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 sons and daughters to anger is to go back to last week's message and meditate on that holy calling of our sons and daughters to obey their parents “in the Lord” and be subject to their parents “in the fear of Christ.” Our children are created in the image of God, with personal accountability for their response to God's law and His provision of a Savior – an accountability that carries eternal consequences. How can this not impact our own attitudes, words, and actions, and even our tone of voice and facial expressions, in the exercise of our authority (the living out of our position of authority)?

Our parental authority isn't about us, but about God's glory in our sons and daughters. It's not about our “right” to be obeyed and honored. We have no such right *in* and *of* ourselves. It's about *God's* holy law. We don't require obedience because of who we are, but because of God's law – the same law to which *we* also are subject. And so we're responsible to exercise our authority only as the expression of biblical, Christian, Holy Spirit empowered love. And when we fail (as we will), 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 spiritual well-being of your children.

### **III. Ephesians 6:4c** — ...but bring them up in the training [*paideia*]... of the Lord.

While authority does bring greater responsibility and accountability, it's also given to us as that which enables us to fulfill our calling as parents. Our authority is the necessary context for bringing up our sons and daughters in the training of the Lord. Once again, our authority isn't about our “right” to be obeyed and honored. It's about God's holy law. And so 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.” In other words, one of the best ways for us to

avoid “child-centered” parenting is simply to go back to last week’s message and meditate on the holy calling of our sons and daughters to obey their parents “in the Lord” and to be subject to their parents “in the fear of Christ.”

The Greek word for “training” that Paul uses here includes both the idea of discipline and the idea of instruction.

- Hebrews 12:5–6 — My son, do not regard lightly the *discipline* [*paideia*] 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 up his children in the (painful) “discipline” of the Lord. Generally, this aspect of parenting will be especially important at the younger ages. The temper-tantrums, the grabbing, the unwillingness to share, and the stubbornness are all fruits of the sin nature. These are all violations not of our law, but of God’s own holy law. When a ten-month old looks at his parent after being told “no,” and then goes to grab the plug in the outlet anyway, the problem is not just the danger of an electrical shock, the problem is the violation of God’s law—the law of obedience to parents. When we fail to discipline this disobedience, we’re failing to uphold God’s law. Sometimes we avoid setting boundaries in order to avoid the need for discipline. But what we really end up doing is cultivating the self-centeredness that’s inherent in the sin natures of our children. Sometimes we avoid “requiring” something of our children so we can minimize the possibility of disobedience and conflict. With the younger ages, we reason, we sweet talk, we suggest, and we say “please.” And so we teach our children that God is a God who reasons, sweet talks, suggests, and says “please.” With the older ages we “pick our battles.” Certainly, as our children grow older we give them freedom to choose in areas where we would not have given that freedom before – even when they choose in ways that we might wish they didn’t. This is a part of parenting wisely. But this isn’t the same thing as not requiring something simply because of our fear of our children’s failure to honor us and be in subjection to us in the fear of Christ. In the end, we *must* set boundaries and we *must* require obedience (because we ourselves are subject to God’s law), and when these boundaries are rejected (when *God’s* law of obedience is broken), why do we discipline our sons and daughters? The Bible answers: So that we might save them from death.

- 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.

Discipline teaches our sons and daughters the reality of God’s justice and righteousness and is a picture of the discipline of our heavenly Father—a discipline in which we all partake as His children (cf. Heb. 12:4-8). The author of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 12:9–10 (cf. 1 Cor. 11:32; Rev. 3:19) — We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them. Shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our benefit, so that we may share His holiness.

Discipline is not for the sake of getting a behavior we want. Especially at the younger ages, discipline is for the sake of helping our children grasp the more ultimate realities of God's Law and their need for the Gospel. This is the ultimate reason that God has given us our authority. True gospel and grace-centered parenting is parenting that faithfully and consistently portrays to our children the realities of God's law—the law of obedience to parents being one of those laws. May our *discipline* of our children always be motivated by love for our children and a desire 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's faithful to discipline in the light of God's holy law.

But discipline isn't enough. Especially as our children grow older, discipline should be giving way mainly to "instruction" (cf. Acts 7:22; 22:3; Proverbs 1:2; 4:1). "Fathers, bring up your children in the training [the discipline and the instruction] of the Lord." Fathers, we bear the ultimate responsibility for the instruction of our children in the ways of God and the truths of His Word. We don't have to be seminary trained theologians here—though we should always be growing and learning ourselves. There's a sense in which these ways and truths can all be summed up in two categories – Law and Gospel, command and promise. Law, by itself, kills (legalism will lead our sons and daughters either to pride and self-righteousness or to hopelessness and despair or to anger and rebellion, or to all three at the same time). Gospel, *by itself*, is not the true Gospel, and so it also kills ("Gospel" without law [cheap grace] will lead our sons and daughters to empty professions and false assurance). Prior to and apart from the Gospel, the Law brings guilt and condemnation and so it point us and our sons and daughters to our need for the Gospel. After the Gospel, the Law comes to be the expression of our love to God and a means of our assurance. So in all our parenting, may we hold these three things together: law and then gospel and then gospel law (cf. Jm. 1:25; 2:12). And we'll be enabled to do this as we're being constantly reminded of these same things with respect to our own walk with God. Moses said to all the fathers (and mothers) in Israel:

- 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 also the purposeful overflow of our own hearts. The more *we* are growing in knowledge and in faith, the more equipped we'll be to bring up our sons and daughters in the instruction of the Lord. (Family worship; Scripture reading/singing/prayer.) At the end of the day, however, we know that we cannot discipline or instruct our children into the kingdom of God. We can't force them through discipline. We can't convince them through instruction. Paul says: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger..."

**IV. Ephesians 6:4d** — ...but bring them up in the training *and admonition* of the Lord."

It's this admonishment that should permeate and accompany all of our discipline and instruction. To admonish is to urge, to warn, and to 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). To admonish is to recognize that we don’t control the hearts of our children. We are responsible to enforce outward conformity to God’s law and to discipline faithfully when that law is broken (particularly the law of obedience to parents). But may our sons and daughters never think, on the one hand, that we’re only—or even primarily—concerned with outward conformity, and may they never think, on the other hand, that we would ever try to “control” or manipulate their hearts. Sometimes we “lecture” in an attempt to somehow coerce guilt and/or remorse in our children. But we cannot be the Holy Spirit for our children, and when we try this, there’s no surer way in all the world of provoking to anger. We cannot require from our children a changed heart. And yet— a changed heart, and an always changing heart, is the goal of all our parenting; it’s the ultimate reason for the authority that we’ve been given. So in humility and with fear and trembling, we discipline our sons and daughters according to God’s holiness and justice, we instruct them in the Law and in the Gospel and in Gospel law, and we urge and admonish them always to fear the Lord and to walk in His ways by faith.

May God give us grace to be obedient stewards of the authority that He has given us as fathers (and also as mothers). And may God graciously grant to all of our children—as He has granted to us—repentance and faith and eternal life in Him (cf. Acts 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25).