

An Exhortation to Children and Fathers: Ephesians 6:1-4
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On this Father's Day I want us to study a passage that speaks to fathers. In Ephesians 6:1-4 we find an exhortation to children and fathers. I don't plan on preaching a father's day message every year, or a mother's day message every year. Last year I did preach a mother's day message from Proverbs 31. And just last week I decided that we would break from our 1 Timothy study in order to look at this passage in Ephesians 6 this morning so that we can consider the role of fathers. Next Sunday Ed Ridge, who is a missionary in Brazil, is going to be preaching. Then we'll continue in 1 Timothy the following week.

First, we'll look at the exhortation to children in verses 1-3, then the exhortation to fathers in verse 4. Then I'll close with an exhortation to all of us to hope in God our Father.

An Exhortation to Children (verses 1-3)

This section of Ephesians is known as the household code, beginning in 5:22 with the relationship of the wife and husband, then in 6:1-4 dealing with the relationship of children and parents, and then 6:5-9 addresses slaves and masters. There are instructions here for some of the most fundamental relationships in life. What is marriage all about? What does it mean to be a husband? What does it mean to be a wife? How are parents and children to relate to each other? What should relationships look like in the workplace? These are very relevant questions, and they are questions that the Bible speaks to very clearly. Don't think that the Bible is just an old dusty book that has nothing important to say to 21st century America. The truth is there is nothing more relevant than this. There is no other book that can change your life the way this book can. There is no celebrity or talk-show host or psychologist who can speak to your situation the way the Bible can. It is relevant, because it addresses the most fundamental truths and realities of life. And it is authoritative for our lives, because it is far more than a man or woman spouting off whatever clever-sounding ideas come to mind. What we have in the pages of the Bible is the God of the universe communicating His character and His gracious plan of salvation and His instructions for how we ought to live.

So children, you need to listen up, because these verses are written directly to you. You may think that obeying your parents is no more than an annoying expectation in your home. But as we come to these words of Scripture this morning, we find that God Almighty commands children to obey their parents. Look at it

with me, in verse 1 of Ephesians 6, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Do you know what this means? It means that when you disobey your parents, you are not only disobeying dad or mom. You are also disobeying the sovereign, all-powerful God of the universe. Think about that the next time you’re tempted to disobey.

If we were sitting around talking about this, you might say to me, But you don’t understand, I have lousy parents. How can I be expected to obey my dad or mom when their lives are a mess? They aren’t setting a good example for me. They aren’t leading our family in godly ways. Their expectations are too high. They might not even be believers. How can I be expected to obey and honor someone I don’t even respect?

I should first say that if your parents are telling you to sin in some way, or if they are abusing you in some way, you should ask for help. Talk to your Sunday School teacher, or one of the elders, so that we can help in that situation.

But aside from that, you are expected to obey your parents, even though your parents have many faults and shortcomings. Notice that the verse doesn’t say, Obey your parents when they are perfectly righteous. Obey your parents when they deserve to be obeyed. Obey your parents when you think that what they are asking you to do seems reasonable. That’s not what the verse says. It says, Children, obey your parents in the Lord. You see, the command here is not so much about the parents. It’s not dependent on how well they are doing as parents. You are to obey them, not because they themselves deserve your obedience, but because the Lord deserves your obedience and demands your obedience. You must obey your parents in the Lord, meaning you obey them as you obey the Lord. A very significant way that you must honor and obey the Lord is by submitting to the authority of your parents by honoring and obeying them.

I hope that every child here will do some soul-searching right now and consider what a serious thing it is to obey your parents. Don’t think of it as a frustrating limitation on your freedom. Don’t become bitter or angry because it seems like your parents are always telling you what to do. That’s the way God designed it! You need someone to tell you what to do at this point in your life. You need your parents to help you and instruct you and discipline you so that one day you’ll be mature enough to make it on your own.

In what ways have you been disobedient to your parents? How have you been disobeying the Lord by disobeying your parents? What a wonderful Father’s Day present it would be for you to first of all confess those sins to the Lord and then to go to your parents and ask for their forgiveness. The other thing I would

encourage you to do on this Father's Day, and every day, is think about ways that you can encourage your dad and compliment him on the things he is doing well. He's not a perfect man, and he certainly has his faults. And it would be very easy to dwell on those faults and become angry and bitter. But instead, try to focus on the things that you are thankful for, the things that you appreciate about your dad. And tell him those things! And don't just do that today. Make an effort to encourage him and compliment him and show your appreciation for him every day. Tell him you're thankful that he provides a place for you to live and clothes for you to wear and food for you to eat. Tell him you enjoy spending time with him. Tell him that you're glad he wants to bring you up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Thank him for teaching you about the Bible. Tell him you love him.

All of these things have the potential to impact your dad's life in huge ways. You may think that your dad seems angry most of the time. What if you were more cooperative and obedient and encouraging? Maybe God would use that to make your dad kinder and more loving. You may think that your dad is disconnected from the rest of the family. What if you expressed your love for him more openly and told him how much you like being with him? Maybe God would work through that to show your dad that family is more important than his job or his hobbies.

Rather than dwelling on your dad's weaknesses, look for ways to compliment his strengths. And pray that God will work in your dad's heart to make him a better father, a more loving father, a more committed father, a more involved father.

Whatever God chooses to do or not do in your father's life, or your mother's life, the exhortation of these verses remains. You are expected to obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. That's verse 1. Verses 2-3, then, give a quotation from the 10 commandments. This is the 5th commandment. "Honor your father and mother." Then Paul inserts this comment and points out that this is the first commandment with a promise. And then he quotes the rest of the commandment, which is the promise, "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." In Exodus 20, this was referring to the Promised Land that God was giving to the Israelites. But Paul changes it a little to make it a more general statement. He says if you obey and honor your parents, your life will go well and you will live long. This is a general principle, and there are certainly exceptions, but the point is that your life will go better for you when you obey your parents. You may not believe that right now. You may think that your life would be better if you could just have your own way all the time. But that's nothing other than selfish foolish pride. And the sooner

you understand that, the better your life will be, and the happier your life will be. Heed God's Word. Listen to what God says. He is far wiser than you are, and it is by His design that you are under the care and authority of your parents right now. Obey them. Honor them. And enjoy the blessings that God will bring into your life as you do that.

An Exhortation to Fathers (verse 4)

Now let's turn to verse 4 and consider this exhortation to fathers. "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." The first question we have to ask is why the verse specifically addresses fathers. It's an interesting, and maybe surprising development in the flow of the passage. Verse 1 speaks of parents, and then verse 2 mentions both father and mother. But now verse 4 addresses only fathers. It doesn't say, Mothers. Nor does it say, Parents. It says, Fathers.

To understand why this is, we need to go back for a moment to chapter 5. In chapter 5:22-33, which is the first part of this household code, we find some very clear and very profound teaching on the relationship between a husband and wife. Wives are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to sacrificially love their wives. And the purpose and design behind these differing roles is that marriage is to be a living parable of Christ's relationship to the church. Look at 5:22-24, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." So the wife's role in the marriage is analogous to the church's role in relation to Christ.

Then verse 25 introduces a longer section exhorting husbands concerning their role in the marriage. It says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Just as the wife's role is analogous to the church, the husband's role is analogous to how Christ sacrificially loves His bride, the church. This is the beauty and mystery of marriage. Husbands and wives are equally made in the image of God, equal in worth and dignity. And at the same time we are created in wonderfully different ways, designed for different roles in the home and in the church. So we see here the principle of male headship, which is not just a chauvinistic prejudice that we have inherited from antiquity. It is part of God's intention for us. He created us male and female, and He did so for our good and for His glory. There is such joy and harmony to be found in living out this biblical vision for manhood and womanhood, and it is also

such a beautiful and tangible display of the Gospel to see wives who respect and honor and submit to their husbands just as the church is to relate to Christ, and to see husbands who humbly lead their families and sacrificially love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

This principle of male headship is seen throughout the passage on wives and husbands, and it shows up again here in the address to fathers. This does not mean that mothers have no obligation to bring up the children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We know that mothers have a tremendous influence on their children, and can teach them and guide them in so many important ways, and in many ways that fathers are unable to. But the point here is that fathers have the primary responsibility of leadership in the home, and that includes the area of disciplining and instructing the children. The mother is obviously very involved in this process, but the father is the leader and the one who is primarily responsible.

Do you hear that dads? Maybe you feel like your responsibility is to bring home a paycheck, and it's your wife who has to bring up the kids. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible addresses us as fathers and tells us how we ought to shepherd our children. Our wives may be the ones who are with the kids during the day and doing a lot of the discipline and instruction. But as fathers we are responsible to direct and lead the family. Even though my wife spends more time with our kids than I do, and therefore she is more involved on a day-to-day basis with disciplining and instructing them, I am still the one who is responsible for how our children are raised. Just like God came looking for Adam in the garden, if there's an issue in our home, God will be calling my name. He will hold me accountable. This is why verse 4 is addressed to fathers.

The remainder of verse 4 breaks down into two parts. There is a negative command and a positive command. The negative command is, "do not provoke your children to anger." And the positive command is, "but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." I want us to think about these two commands as they relate to two characteristics of biblical manhood, biblical fatherhood. Biblical, Christ-like manhood, as we have seen from Ephesians 5, involves humble, servant leadership. On the one hand, it involves humility and sacrifice and gentleness and love. And on the other hand, it also involves bold and courageous leadership. It involves taking the initiative. It involves providing for and protecting your wife and children. It involves being the spiritual leader in your home. So here's the balance: humble, servant leadership.

Here are the two ways we fall short of this. When we fail to be humble and sacrificial and gentle and loving, then our leadership role takes on a sense of tyranny and dictatorship. The extreme form of this involves physical and verbal abuse, but this attitude is also present when we are insensitive toward our wives or children or when we become angry because things aren't going the way we planned. Leadership is not about assuring that I get what I want, it's about honoring God and loving my family. As Stuart Scott writes, we should not "love to rule, but rule to love" (*The Exemplary Husband*, 121).

The opposite tendency is to neglect the leadership role we've been given and to become passive or apathetic. This is certainly the case for marriages in which we would say the wife "wears the pants" in the relationship. The husband has given up his leadership role, and the wife has assumed that role. It also happens in many subtle ways as well, when a husband fails to provide spiritual leadership for his family or fails to discipline his children as he ought.

This verse in Ephesians 6:4 speaks against both sinful tendencies. First, do not provoke your children to anger. This is an all-too-common emotion that rises up in our sinful hearts when we don't get our way. When my children are not acting the way I want them to act, when their behavior is conflicting with my plans or my schedule, then I am so susceptible to the sin of anger. And when I'm angry, or when I discipline in anger, I will provoke my children to anger. My anger will be felt and caught by my children. When this is happening, it means that the humility and gentleness and patience and love and servant mindset have fallen out of the equation. Things have become too much about me and my wants and my plans and my schedule and my perceived "right" to be obeyed. That's not servant leadership. That's selfish leadership.

What we should remember as we correct and discipline our kids is the fact that my position of authority over my kids is not about me. It's about God. Therefore the main issue when they have disobeyed me is not the inconvenience it causes me or the embarrassment it causes me or the annoyance it is to me. The main issue is that they have sinned against God, and it is my responsibility to correct them. Keeping this perspective will help us get our own anger out of the way. Tedd Tripp, in his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, says, "If you correct and discipline your children because God mandates it, then you need not clutter up the task with your anger. Correction is not your showing anger for their offenses; it is rather reminding them that their sinful behavior offends God. It is bringing His censure of sin to these subjects of His realm. He is the King. They must obey."

If I think of my children's disobedience primarily as an offense against me, then I'll be more prone to get angry and then provoke my children to anger. If it's all about me, then I'll be likely to manipulate and humiliate and be insensitive and unfair. But if I recognize that God has put me in the position of authority, and He has commanded my children to obey me and my wife, then I can deal with disobedience by pointing out the sinful attitude or action that has been done against God, and reminding my child that I'm under God's authority, too, and it's my responsibility to discipline them.

This brings us to the second exhortation here, that we must bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We must not be angry or provoke them to anger, which will mean that we must fight against the tendency to be selfish and domineering and the temptation to abuse our leadership role. But we must also make sure that we *are* leading. This is the other way in which we so often fall short of biblical manhood. We must not become passive or apathetic. It is our responsibility to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Let me comment on "discipline of the Lord," and then "instruction of the Lord." These two terms, discipline and instruction, are almost synonyms, and they summarize how we must shepherd and lead our children. There will be a correcting component and a teaching component, and these two must overlap significantly. As we correct wrong behavior, we are teaching. And as we teach, we are warning against wrong behavior and presenting a vision for godliness.

First of all, then, we are responsible to discipline our children. We must correct their disobedient and sinful behavior. There need to be consequences for disobedience. For younger children this will involve spanking. I know that's controversial. But it's not my idea. It's a biblical idea. Proverbs 13:24 says, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." There needs to be that clear consequence for children, exercised in a controlled and loving way by the parents. The children must know that they are under your authority. They must know that you are in charge, and that God designed it that way.

As the children grow there can be more probing conversations that address the heart and appeal to the child's conscience. On all of these matters I would strongly recommend the book by Tedd Tripp, which I just quoted from, entitled *Shepherding a Child's Heart*.

The point I want to make is that fathers need to be the leaders and initiators in the area of discipline. You need to be the one who is setting the standard of what is acceptable behavior and

what is not. And your children need to know that you are going to enforce those biblical expectations. Men, this is an area where we can be so prone to passivity, and therefore we need to be very intentional about leading our families in this way. It is so easy for us to think, My wife is with the kids more than I am, she is better at knowing how to deal with them, I'll let her handle the behavior issues. I'll let her take care of the whole discipline thing. I'll bring home the paycheck. That is an irresponsible and cowardly attitude. Dads, don't sit around passively while your wife disciplines the kids. When you're home, you need to be the one disciplining the kids. And there will be times when that begins the moment you walk in the door. A child has been disrespecting mom all day long, and dad needs to step in with his masculine authority and communicate very clearly that that is not acceptable in this home. Let's not be passive, dads. Let's lead in this area. It's not a mistake in God's Word that Ephesians 6:4 is addressed to us.

And as I mentioned earlier concerning anger, disciplining our kids is not about us, but about God. We are to bring them up in the discipline of the Lord. It's about Him. It's about pointing our kids to Him. And it's so important to remember that as we correct and discipline. Every discipline situation is an opportunity to preach the Gospel to our children. It's an opportunity to shepherd them by helping them see the sin in their own heart, and their need for a Savior. It's also an opportunity to be vulnerable with our kids and admit that we are sinners, too. We need a Savior, too, and we need to be disciplined by the Lord just as our children need to be disciplined by us. Use those situations as teachable moments. Use correction as a means of teaching.

This leads us to the second broad focus here, which is the instruction of the Lord. As fathers, we must also take the lead in planning how we will instruct our children in the ways of the Lord. There will be conversations at the dinner table, conversations about Sunday School and the worship service, conversations about school, conversations about endless topics and questions that will come up that can (and must) be connected back to the biblical worldview. And then there must also be intentional times of family worship—reading the Bible with our kids, praying with them, asking them questions to see what they're comprehending and to make sure they are growing in their knowledge and understanding of spiritual things. I encourage you, men, as I encourage myself, to be more intentional about these things. Make a plan for how you are going to be the leader in instructing your children in the ways of the Lord.

We must be reminded at this point that all of our efforts in discipline and instruction are unable to bring our children into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This is not something we

have control over. There's not a 10-step plan that assures our kids will become Christians. This is why we must also pray for our children. Only God can change their hearts, and our hope is that He will use our Christ-centered discipline and instruction as a means of doing that, but only He is able to save. We have to trust Him to do that work and ask Him to do it. So as we seek to obey this verse, let us also be on our knees before the Lord pleading with Him to do a work in our kids' lives. Let us pray fervently that He will regenerate them, that they will come to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sin, that they will be sanctified and used in mighty ways for the glory of God and the spread of the Gospel.

An Exhortation to All of Us to Hope in God our Father

Finally, I want to close with an exhortation to all of us to hope in God our Father. Maybe you're hearing this message and grieving over the fact that you don't have an earthly father. Or maybe your earthly father has been a negative example—the polar opposite of what is described here. You may also be hearing this as a single mother and wondering how your children are going to manage without an earthly father. Even for those who grew up with Christian fathers, they're still sinners with evident weaknesses and flaws. So for everyone here, it is necessary for us to look beyond the fathers here on earth and put our hope in our heavenly Father, the only Father who will never let us down, who will always keep His promises, who will forgive our sins, who will not provoke us to anger but will bring us up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. I hope we all sense our need for a heavenly Father. I hope we see the severe inadequacies of even the best of earthly fathers. We need to have God as our Father, watching over us and protecting us and working all things together for our good. I hope you also realize that not everyone has God as their Father. Not everyone is a child of God. The only way to have God as your Father is through His Son Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The only way to become a child of God is through Jesus Christ. One must repent of sin and trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ, who died our death, paid our penalty, was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5). That is our only hope, and I beg this morning to embrace this Savior and enter into the wonderful reality of having God as your heavenly Father.

This does not mean that life becomes easy and comfortable, though, because God the Father is the perfect model of what earthly fathers are exhorted to do in Ephesians 6:4, which means he will discipline us and instruct us. That's what a good father

does, and God is the perfect Father. Hebrews 12 speaks of the fact that God disciplines His sons, and it says in verse 10 that “he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.” If you have God as your Father, life will not always be easy or comfortable, but it will be infinitely and eternally satisfying because God’s discipline will chip away at all the false hopes we cling to in our sinful hearts and will cause us to increasingly find our joy in Him. So on this Father’s Day let us hope in God our heavenly Father, and may we be thankful to Him even for the discipline that He uses to sanctify us and bring us into a closer relationship with Him. He is the perfect Father, and He will be a Father to all who receive His Son.