

“GOD’S WORD TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN” (Ephesians 6:1-4)

We’re in a section of Ephesians that talks about the family, and so far, we have focused on the role of husbands and wives in cultivating a healthy marriage. It’s only natural that we now talk about the offspring of marriage, and the roles and responsibilities of parents and children.

When I first started out as a youth pastor, I worked with a number of parents who were struggling in the parenting department. I tried to find some seasoned parents who had raised kids to teach a class, but I no one seemed confident to do it, so as a single youth pastor I dove right in and taught the class myself. It actually didn’t go all that badly – it was a good forum for parents to share their struggles and look at the biblical principles of parenting, but I look back now and laugh. I knew a lot about the theory and philosophy behind parenting, but you really don’t know truly entails until you actually become a parent.

It's like the young pastor just out of seminary who decided that he would do an annual sermon on parenting. The first year he gave a sermon on ten definitive ways to raise children, and preached for an hour. A year later, after he and his wife had their first child, he once again preached on parenting and gave a 30-minute sermon on seven ways to raise a child. The next year they had their second child and he preached for 20 minutes on four or five things that may or may not work on raising children. The next year after having his third child he gave a short sermonette entitled “How Can You Raise Obedient Children? Please tell me!” After another year he had another child and the time came for the annual sermon on parenting. He stood up and he said, “God bless you – do the best you can.”

The difficult thing about being a parent is that it begins very suddenly and they don’t send you home from the hospital with a training manual. You learn on the job. Even if you’ve observed how other people have raised their children, nothing can adequately prepare you for the lifetime challenge of parenting. Yet just as God has an order and design for the marriage relationship, so too does He have one for the parent-child relationship.

Our text this morning in Ephesians 6:1-4 where the Apostle Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise – “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

In these verses a simple command is given to children and a simple command is given to parents. Paul begins with children, and children are given two primary responsibilities The first is to obey, and the second is to honor. The reason they are to obey and honor their parents is because it’s the right thing to do, and the positive result of obeying and honoring your parents is that is life will go well for you and you will enjoy a long life.

Let’s start with the first command for children to **obey your parents**. The Greek word for “obey” comes from the verb “to hear.” Obedience means you listen to what your parents say, and then you do what they say. When that happens, things generally work smoothly in the home, and when obedience doesn’t happen there is conflict and tension.

As we’ve seen the last couple of weeks, submission is a key element to every relationship, and God’s will is that all believers have an attitude of submission to those God has placed in authority over us. For children who are still at home, that authority is your parents.

How many of you, when you were growing up, thought your parents didn't know anything? All that changes when you get out on your own and start having kids yourself, you discover that your parents knew more than you thought. That's because they have a 20 or 30 or 40 head start on you, they love you, and they want to help you avoid the traps and pitfalls you cannot see. That's why you should listen to them and obey what they tell you.

The second responsibility of children is to **honor your parents**. The word "honor" comes from a Hebrew verb that means "to be heavy or weighty." It means you are to give great weight or importance to your parents by respecting them, it means you are to hold them in high regard, that you acknowledge their wisdom, and that you guard their reputations.

Honoring parents was so important that the Old Testament law stipulated that rebellious, disobedient sons were to be stoned to death. Thankfully, we are no longer under such laws today, but it demonstrates the seriousness God attaches to the honor and respect of your parents.

But why? Why is obeying and honoring your parents so important? First of all, Paul says, **it is the right thing to do**. Since your parents gave you life, it is only right that you respect and honor them. It's also right because the obedience of children is a necessary ingredient for a stable society. Twice in the New Testament disobedience to parents is listed as a mark of a decadent society that headed towards destruction. An orderly structure requires parents to raise children who know the difference between right and wrong and respect other people, and for children to obey and honor their parents. While obedience to parents ends one you are off on your own and start your own family, honoring and respecting your parents continues throughout life.

The second reason obedience and honoring your parents is so important is because this commandment is the only one of the Ten Commandments that **promises a reward to those who keep it**. That reward is "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." In other words, both the longevity and quality of your life will dramatically increase as you obey and honor your parents. The general rule of life is that disobedient children will tend to have shorter lives because their rebellion often leads them to reckless behavior that leads to an early death. Rebellion also diminishes the quality of life, leading to a number of psychological problems and troubled relationships.

On the other hand, respectful children will, in general, live longer, healthier lives. That is why Proverbs 4:10-13 says, "Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life." If you want a long life then live wisely – don't drive fast, eat low-fat foods, and honor your parents.

The third reason it is wise to obey and honor your parents is because **it prepares you for the real world**. One of the main roles your parents play in your lives is to successfully launch you out in to the world. Your launching may take place when you head off to college, or get your first full-time job, or you get married. Your parents will invest a lot of time and money in launching you. Experts say it in a middle-class family, parents will spend an average of \$235K on raising you to age 18. With inflation, that may be even higher!

They not only spend a lot of money on you, but more importantly they want to prepare you for life after home. That's why they make you do chores, because you'll be doing chores and lots of them the rest of your life. That's why they teach you money management, because they know that you will be spending \$235K on your own kid someday.

That's why they keep nudging you to be responsible, use your time wisely, work hard in school, and get a job – because all of these things matter in the real world – and since they have a few years head start on you, they know what the real world is like. Your parents don't have all the answers and they will make mistakes – but obeying and honoring them is the right thing to, it increases the quality and longevity of your life, and prepares you to live on your own.

In verse 4 Paul addresses parents, and gives both a positive and negative command... “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Paul addresses fathers because they have the primary responsibility of training and instructing their children, but these commands apply to both parents. Let's start with the positive command... bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. “Bring them up” speaks of the responsibility of parents to teach, guide, model, and discipline children during their formative years.

Luke 2:52 speaks of Jesus' formative years and says, “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” As a human, Jesus didn't come to earth as a fully-formed adult man, He grew just like any other child – He grew mentally in wisdom, physically in stature, spiritually in His relationship with God, and socially in His relationship with others. The role of parents is to help their child grow in all four of these areas so that they become fully-functioning adults.

As parents, you are to raise your children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Another word for **training** is “discipline.” Every parent who loves their child will discipline their child. Even God – our heavenly parent – disciplines us. When we get out of line and disobey Him, Hebrews 12 says, “He chastens those he loves.” As a loving parent who wants our best, God allows us to suffer consequences when we do not obey.

In the same way, God has given parents the authority and responsibility of disciplining their children so that they will experience the negative consequences of disobedience. Proverbs 29:15 says every child needs discipline for one simple reason... “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” Every child is born foolish and will do what they are allowed to do. If they are allowed to eat a bowl full of candy, they will eat it all. If they are allowed on their electronic devices without any restrictions, they will be on them all day. A parent's job is to drive foolishness from their heart so that when they become adults, they will not still be foolish.

If children are allowed to grow up thinking they can always get their own way, they'll end up ruining their own lives and making other peoples' lives miserable. That's why parents are so important. God made parents to shape the moral will of their children by setting God's standards of what is right from wrong, and then consistently enforcing those standards until their children learn how to rule themselves with appropriate behavior, until they come to personally understand and embrace the reasons why certain behaviors are best.

Along with training and discipline, there is **instruction**. Proverbs 1:8 says, “Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.” Instruction means to “place before the mind.” As parents we have the responsibility to teach our children the ways of the Lord – to teach them right from wrong – to teach them what God's design for life is and impress upon them the wisdom of living in harmony with His plan. Children do not just come out of the womb knowing God's commands – they need to be taught and instructed. Deuteronomy 6 says the best way to do that is through everyday example and modeling – looking for teachable moments in the everyday flow of life.

Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” This verse does not guarantee that your children will live according to your values. God gives every person, including children, the ability to make their own choices. It does mean that they will never be able to get away from what you have impressed upon them. Even if they depart from God’s ways when they are older, they will never be able to escape your life and testimony. I heard someone say that godly parents can tip the scales in the right direction. I like that. We cannot guarantee what our children will do but we can provide an atmosphere of commitment that makes it easier to choose Christ than to choose the way of the world.

Along with the positive command to bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord, there is also a negative command. Paul says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children.” Colossians 3:21 says, “Do not embitter your children.” This command was especially pertinent in first century culture where fathers held absolute power and control over their children, and there were no consequences for abusing their power. It’s important as parents that you be careful not to raise your kids in a way that makes them angry and bitter, and since every child is different it’s important to know your child well and bring them up according to the way they are uniquely wired. Most of the mistakes parents make fall into one of two categories: over-parenting or under-parenting. Let me give you a few examples of each – some of which might pertain to you and some not, but try to zero in on a few that you most need to work on.

Examples of over-parenting would be:

OVER-PROTECTING: When your child is young it’s natural and important to protect your child from things that could hurt them, but as kids get older, they need the freedom to figure some things out for themselves. One book refers to overprotective parents as “helicopter parents” who are always hovering over their children, ready to come to the rescue at the first sign of difficulty or disappointment. Most helicopter parents have good intentions, but if you do everything for them and never let them make decisions for their own, they won’t be prepared for the real world – they won’t know how to solve problems on their own and have confidence in their own abilities. It’s good for them to learn how to do things on their own and experience a failure or two, because it is much better for them to fail at home and learn from their mistake, than to fail once they move out of the home.

OVER-EXPECTING: As good parents we want our kids to excel – excel in school, in sports, in relationships, and in serving the Lord. The tricky thing is that we can unknowingly place our expectations on them instead of working with who they are. I have a good friend whose passion in life was basketball. He played basketball in high school and college, and looked forward to the day when his son would follow in his footsteps. My friend poured a large basketball court on his property and put up glass backboards and the works. But when his son got old enough to shoot baskets with him, he discovered his son didn’t even like basketball. He liked art. My friend was wise enough to see this and instead of pushing him into something that he was not cut out for, he supported what he was good at. This is wise parenting. Every child is unique and it’s up to parents to encourage them to do what God wants them to be, not what we want them to be.

OVER-CRITICAL: One Christian author said that kids are like wet cement – whatever falls on them makes an impression. When a parent implies that their kid is stupid or tells them they won’t ever amount to anything or compares them to another kid, those kinds of statements stay lodged in a child’s heart long into adulthood. They grow up feeling insecure and lacking confidence.

The truth is that kids need far more praise from parents than criticism. Studies have shown it takes eight compliments to make up for one statement of criticism. Make sure you look for the positive and not just the negative. As someone said, “You’ll get better results from using sugar than vinegar with your kids.”

OVER-STRICTNESS: Sometimes as parents we can be too strict and too harsh in our discipline. Larry Crabb called this law without grace. A kid who grows up in an overly strict and rigid home can develop bitter feelings. I’ve seen many kids like this who outwardly obey their parents and seem to be model kids, but once they move away from home, they suddenly indulge in everything they weren’t allowed to do at home. Discipline and structure are essential for the home, but being overly strict can lead to rebellion.

OVER-DISCIPLINE: Every parenting expert I have ever read says the same thing: don’t discipline your children in anger. How many of you parents have failed in that department? The problem is that we’re often mad when we are faced with a discipline situation. When I was a kid, maybe 9 or 10 years old, I did something to my sister. I think I kicked her or called her a name or something. My dad grabbed me with fire in his eyes and proceeded to take me to the back bedroom, took his belt off, and applied it to my backside. I deserved to be punished, but I was the kind of kid who only needed a stern look from my dad and I was good. His anger made me lose heart. He later apologized, and it’s a good reminder to keep your emotions under check when you discipline and not do it out of anger.

Just as parents can over-do things and cause their kids to become angry or bitter, they can also under-parent as well. For example:

UNDER-INVOLVEMENT: While some parents are helicopter parents, others are uninvolved, absentee-type parents. They set very few boundaries for their kids and know little of what is going on in their lives. This can be worse than helicoptering because the child grows up with very little guidance and gets the message that their parents don’t care. While we may think that kids don’t like boundaries and discipline, deep down they do – they’d never admit it, but having boundaries and discipline communicates that the parent cares. I heard one parent say, “I care enough about you to do something you may not like. If I didn’t love you and care about you, I wouldn’t spend the energy it requires.” So parents, stay at it, because your child needs your love, care, and involvement in their lives.

UNDER-CONSISTENT: No parent is 100% consistent when it comes to discipline, but the goal – and the best thing for your child – is to strive for consistency. That means when you set a boundary, make sure you enforce that boundary. It’s like James Dobson said, “If you draw a line in the sand and your kid crosses the line, they are looking for a fight. Make sure you give them one!” Consistency means that rules and expectations are the same from one time to another. Consistency makes the child’s world predictable and less confusing. It frees their minds of worry about what might happen and teaches them accountability for their actions.

UNDER-ATTENTION: Your kids can pick up on how important they are to you by how much time and attention you give them. Your kids need to know that you are mentally and emotionally there for them. We hear a lot about “quality time.” But nothing can replace “quantity time.” There will always be something else to do. Make family a priority. No one ever said at the end of his life, “I wish I had spent more time at work or making more money.” Universally they say, “I wish I had been there more for my family. I wish I had played more with my kids and spent more time with my family.”

UNDER-UNDERSTANDING: One of our favorite pastimes as parents is to tell our kids how much tougher we had it as kids – we had to walk to school, four miles each way, barefoot, in the driving snow, and it was uphill both ways. The world that kids grow up in today may be different, but no less challenging – I’d prefer to walk four miles to school than to face the pressures and temptations our kids face today. One of the main skills of a parent is to listen – to enter into their world and understand what they’re facing. Kids become exasperated when they feel like their parents don’t try to understand them and listen to them without judgment.

UNDER-MODELING: While we may think your words are the most important element in parenting, your kids are going to learn a lot more from you by what they SEE you do than by what you ever SAY. Or, as someone else put it, “more is caught than taught.” And they are watching you – even when you don’t think they’re watching. One teen wrote these words: “When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you hang up my first painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint another one. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you feed a stray cat, and I thought it was good to be kind to animals. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you make my favorite cake for me, and I knew that little things are special things. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I felt you kiss me goodnight, and I felt loved. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I heard you say a prayer, and I believed there is a God I could always talk to. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I LOOKED and wanted to say thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

As the family goes, so goes the nation, and our culture desperately needs to return to God’s order and design for the family, and it needs to begin in the church. If you are a child or a teen, God’s will is that you obey and honor your parents – it’s the right thing to do, it will increase your chances of a long and meaningful life, and it will prepare you to be a full-functioning adult in the real world.

If you are a parent, God’s will is that you bring up your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord, and to not exasperate you’re them in the way you bring them up. There are no perfect parents here this morning and there are no perfect kids. Mistakes have been made and will be made, but Jesus came to earth to redeem what has been lost, and He wants to redeem your family.

- Some of you grew up in a home where you didn’t have the best parents, but God wants to redeem your situation. He wants you to know that as your Heavenly Father, He has a perfect love for you – and your life doesn’t have to be defined by how good or bad your parents were.
- Some of you feel guilt that you haven’t been a very good parent, and God wants to redeem that. You can’t do anything about yesterday, but you can begin today and ask God to redeem the time that has been lost.
- Some of you feel like you’ve been a good parent but are living with the pain and sorrow of a rebellious child. God understands – He was the perfect parent to Israel, and yet rebelled against Him. He knows your heart and grieves with you and wants you to keep praying for your child.

Whatever your circumstance is this morning, let’s come before the Lord and ask His protection and blessing over our families...