

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Biblical Fathers: "Fathers, do not provoke..."

We conclude our series on 'Biblical Fathers' with a practical talk based on the exhortations of Ephesians 6:4, "*Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord*" (New King James Version). Just in case you're inclined to switch off the radio at this point because you're not a father, let me say that there are lessons for all ages and both genders in what I have to say this morning. First of all, our text occurs in a large practical section of this letter beginning at Ephesians 4:17, "*This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind.*" Paul is urging Christians to be different in lifestyle from the rest of society. In today's world, this very much applies to family life, especially here in post-Christian Britain, with all of its secular ideas, norms and practices. Christian families have a unique opportunity to demonstrate that Christianity works! Also, not to do so is inconsistent with our profession of Christ as Saviour and Lord. "*I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called*" (Ephesians 4:1). Throughout Ephesians 4:1-6:24, Paul explains how to live up to our heavenly calling in all spheres of life: in the world of mankind, in church, in our families and in the workplace. In other words, belief governs behaviour.

The immediate context of Ephesians 6:4 is relationships within families. It starts with husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33. It concludes with children and parents in Ephesians 6:1-4. "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honour your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'* And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." Even though he quotes from the Old Testament law, Paul's emphasis is on what is freely offered to others, not on what is demanded, from each family member. In passing, it's worth mentioning that some modern translations give 'parents' instead of 'fathers' in Ephesians 6:4. The exhortation equally applies to mothers! Also, unless children can see a proper husband and wife relationship displayed in their parents, they're unlikely to see that there's any good reason why they should obey them. Specifically for me as a father, if my children do not see that I love my wife, then can I truly expect them to reverence me? Likewise, if they don't see my wife submitting to me as is fitting in the Lord, there's a likelihood that they won't either.

In Genesis 1:26, God decided to make man in His image and after His likeness. Genesis 1:27 records that He did so, then adds "*male and female He created them.*" A man is joined to his wife by marriage to become one flesh. They complement each other in order to reflect God's image and likeness - both are required to do this. With Adam and Eve, God went on to establish the family unit. He commanded them to be fruitful and multiply (see Genesis 1:28). He also made these family relationships for our mutual benefit: husband and wife; parents and children; father and children; mother and children. However, soon after creation, Adam and Eve sinned. Sadly, the entrance of sin into the world also marred family relationships. A friend of mine was rudely reminded of this fact once, when he was showing-off his firstborn child to a couple of spinsters from his church. One of them abruptly prophesied that the principle of sin would soon manifest itself in his baby! Yes, it has been well said that, because of sin within us, each of us now has that tendency to move away from God's ideals for family life. That's why Paul makes these exhortations in Ephesians 5:22-6:4 (and again in Colossians 3:18-21). A man can neglect to love his wife. A wife may think that she doesn't need to submit to her husband. A father can so easily provoke his children by lording his authority over them. And children, we know, don't always obey their parents!

Now, on the positive side, believers possess a new nature which wants to obey God - and Paul urges us to "*put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind*" (Ephesians 4:22-23). We've been made new in the attitude of our minds to act, not only to put off the old self, but to put on the new self. We've learned of Christ's sinless life and we've been taught by Him. This is practical godliness, called here, "*the truth as it is in Jesus*" (see Ephesians 4:20-21).

What is the God-given role of father in family relationships?

Through Jesus Christ, God's Son, the true or essential nature of God has been revealed. "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8). Love permeates the family life of God from eternity. And the Son came from heaven to make the Father's name and love known to believers. The Lord Jesus said to His Father, "*I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. ... and they have kept Your word. ... I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.*" (John 17:6, 26). The name 'Father'

introduces us to the Person in the Godhead who originates everything. *"There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist"* (1 Corinthians 8:6, English Standard Version). Ephesians 3:15 states that the real meaning of fatherhood, and therefore of family life, is derived from God the Father *"of whom every family in the heavens and on earth is named"* (JN Darby Translation). When (in Malachi 2:10) Malachi challenged his people with the question, *"Have we not all one Father?"* he was stating that fathers and families reflect God's image and likeness because he adds, *"Has not one God created [everyone of] us?"* Yes, God is the father of every person in the world, whether they are believers or agnostics or atheists, in the sense that He created each. *"We are God's offspring"* (Acts 17:29, New International Version). Family life is the basic social structure in the world wherein love is manifested and experienced.

The Amplified Bible expands Ephesians 3:15: *"That Father from Whom all fatherhood takes its title and derives its name."* That is, fatherhood and family have no meaning to mankind other than that bestowed by the Creator upon them. In other words, a father is the progenitor of his family and his children are his offspring. A family takes its character from its father and he's its figurehead. Father sets the standards by which he wants his family to live and he controls how family life operates. Without a father in a family, or the active involvement of a father in a family, family life inevitably suffers. It doesn't function in the way God intended. (Sadly, there are many situations nowadays where fathers are either unknown and/or absent themselves from participation in family life. There's also sometimes the view that father is unnecessary and that mum can manage the family okay without him. These situations result in dysfunctional families.)

All Christian fathers should be like God the Father. They should manifest His nature and His character. They should love as He loves, forgive as He forgives, be pitiful as He is pitiful, be compassionate as He is compassionate, care for their children as He cares for His children and be merciful as He is merciful. But they should also abhor sin as He abhors sin, in whatever shape or size it manifests itself in their children. They should give wise guidance, and should do good, to their children in the same way that God does with His children (see Ephesians 5:1).

We can now consider our text for today's talk. *"Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."* Ephesians 6:4 requires a father to be diligent in all his responsibilities as head of his family. Again, the expanded meaning of the verse given in the Amplified Bible is helpful. *"Fathers, do not irritate and provoke your children to anger [do not exasperate them to resentment], but rear them [tenderly] in the training and discipline and the counsel and admonition of the Lord."* A parallel passage on family life issues in Colossians 3:18-21 ends similarly, *"Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged"* (Colossians 3:21). The reason why provocation of children by fathers is out of place in Christian families is to prevent them becoming discouraged, or turned-off from the Christian-way-of-life. If a father copies his heavenly Father in all of his dealings with his children, they'll be encouraged for they'll experience a Father's love in all its reality.

Let's now split the text into two parts. First, the negative - what fathers shouldn't do. Second, the positives - what fathers should do.

The negative - what fathers shouldn't do

The negative is that fathers should not provoke their children to anger. To provoke is to antagonise. It's to deliberately set out to arouse anger or to cause unnecessary distress. If the provocation becomes habitual, either of these may lead eventually to embitterment and resentment. Rather, fathers should want the best for their children and temper their interactions with their children accordingly. Therefore, fathers should be neither commanding their children, as a bullying sergeant major would, nor over-demanding of them so as to discourage them. Above all, fathers need to ensure that their behaviour towards their children is not hypocritical. Children readily perceive father's inconsistencies between pious professions in public and/or church life and very different attitudes at home with his family! This is most likely if father doesn't play an active role in family life. Fathers should also avoid a legalistic approach to the practice of Christian family life, where lifestyle issues become *"we don't do this or that because we believe in Jesus"*. Children will most likely be turned off from the Faith (and even begin to resent the Lord) where restrictive legalism dominates family life. Such legalistic attitudes invariably back-fire upon parents. As children grow up, they generally find themselves unable to keep up these kinds of restrictive lifestyles.

The positives - what fathers should do

The positives are that fathers should bring their children up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). Paul is not implying that discipline is unnecessary. The final part of the verse makes clear how necessary discipline is in family life. All of us were children once. We all know that childhood, with its inherent immaturity and youthfulness, with its zeal to throw off restraint; both require parental, especially fatherly, restraint and constraint. Children are full of natural life. Their Adamic nature is ready to mischievously assert itself, as the Christian spinster has reminded us. Youths have many ill-conceived ideas, which subsequently lead to wrong actions and can eventually lead to ungodly lifestyles. Discipline is a constituent part of fatherhood to counteract all of these kinds of things. The text talks about

nurture, or training, which is positive instruction in correct ways of living. Positive, because there's great potential with children, "*Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it*" (Proverbs 22:6, New King James Version). Training means to show what is right by practical demonstration. Sometimes a father achieves this by things which are absent from his life, when he's compared with men of the world. It's usually what he doesn't do or say and where he doesn't go. For example, children will readily notice that father doesn't swear, etc.

But the Ephesians 6:4 includes admonition - reproving where there's any wrong, even chastening, where that's required (and warning of the consequences of such action) - then urging his children along right paths in life (see Hebrews 12:5-11). The final phrase of Ephesians 6:4, "*of the Lord*", is all-important. Everything a father does should reflect the fact that he himself, as a disciple, is trained by the Lord. What he requires his children to do, he must always do himself. He must practise what he preaches. Any discipline or admonition of his children should be in accordance with the godly principle, "*whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality*" (Colossians 3:23-25). By following this principle, fathers will exercise discipline that's both measured and appropriate for their children.

The loving Father of Luke 15:11-32

Most Bibles present this part of the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32) under the heading 'The prodigal son'. But it's also about 'The loving Father'. In the previous two parts of this parable, Jesus asked His hearers, "*What man of you?*" and "*What woman?*" (Luke 15:4, 8) because their reactions to losing a sheep and/or a valuable coin would be the same as the shepherd and the woman in the parable. But in Luke 15:11 He continued, "*A certain man had two sons...*", showing that He had a definite Person, the one and only true Father, in mind. By means of this parable the Lord reveals the true nature and character of His own Father. God the Father is forgiving and merciful, full of tender compassion to everyone who repents of their sins, which, according to Luke 15:7, 9, is the main lesson of the parable. It presents Him as the loving Father, who yearns to bless His children, who has provided the best position (of sonship) in His home, and the best out of His treasury store, for them. But He's also the patient Father, who is "*slow to anger and longsuffering, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (see 2 Peter 3:9). We learn this from His attitude towards the elder son in Luke 15:25-32. However, the elder son never realised or appreciated the true character of his father. In fact, he well describes self-righteous people, whether they be theist, agnostic or atheist, who reckon they don't need to repent of their sins. I must also stress that the parable teaches that the younger son left home of his own volition and shows how saddened the father was at this decision. People like to blame God for all the evils in the world and all of the problems they encounter in life. The Lord made it clear from this parable that the fault is theirs. Everyone has turned away from God and made a mess of their lives, just like the younger son. But, during the Gospel age, God never gives up on anyone and is always on the lookout for the repentant sinner.

Spiritual fathers

Although I've spoken about family relationships, there's also a sense in which Ephesians 6:4 applies to spiritual fathers; that is, to older, mature believers who have a fatherly care for Christians who are young in the faith. Their job is to promote spiritual interest and growth and give wisdom and guidance to younger believers. Therefore, these exhortations apply to such fathers, but in a spiritual way. And the need for spiritual fathers is as great, if not greater, in the twenty-first century as it was in the first century AD.

The Apostle Paul is a good example of a spiritual father. He regarded his converts as his spiritual children and was always concerned for their spiritual well-being. In 1 Corinthians 4:15, he laments that others do not exhibit the same fatherly attitude for them. "*For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.*" Paul also had some special spiritual sons, for example Onesimus and Timothy. His letter to Philemon and his two letters to Timothy give a good idea of his fatherly care and concern for these two believers. Of Timothy, he wrote, "*But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.*" (Philippians 2:22). Then in his letters to Timothy, he provides detailed instructions of how he was to take Paul's place; first in Ephesus and then as the one to whom he passed on the baton of the Truth as he himself neared death.

The Apostle John is another spiritual father. In his epistles, he regards believers as children in the family of God (for example, 1 John 2:1). His overall admonition is that they would continue to be active participants in God's family life, that is, have fellowship with God the Father and His Son (1 John 1:3). But in 1 John 2:13-17, he grades them according to their maturity within the family of God: fathers, young men and babes. He exhorts each group in distinct ways, tailoring what he says to their particular needs.

What about us today?

All of us will have had real-life family experiences in which fathers have indeed provoked their children to wrath. Unfortunately now, even as a relatively young OAP and grandfather, my memory isn't good enough to remember whether or not I actually did so with my own children. However, I'm sure any one of the four of them could readily remind me of those occasions! Recently, I learned that my eldest granddaughter got angry with her father. When I enquired, I found that she had misunderstood his instruction over a certain matter. So yes, it still happens and fathers must seek grace from God to ensure that it's not an on-going feature of family life. Then if slip ups do occur, there'll be no permanent damage to these precious relationships.

Overall, the message of today's talk is that Christian fathers should model themselves on God the Father and demonstrate His kind of love in their behaviour towards their children.

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