

Note: Some of the material in this message was taken from class notes obtained from Clearcreek Chapel's Counseling Training program.

A couple of weeks ago, I heard the humorous story about a man who was walking through the mall with his wife. After passing a pet store, they heard a gruff voice behind them say, "Hey buddy, you're a weakling and your wife is ugly." The guy swirled around to see who made the slanderous remark. There was no one there but a parrot in a cage. Furious, the man went to the owner of the store and told him what his talking parrot had said. The owner was embarrassed, apologized, and went directly for his bird. He pulled the creature out of its cage, by the neck, beat it on the head, stomped on it with his feet, and yelled, "I'd better never hear you say those words to anyone again!" The shopper felt a little bad that he had gotten the bird into so much trouble. After he and his wife left the store, they passed the bird cage, went 5 steps, and heard a gruff voice say, "Hey buddy!" He stopped, swirled around eyeball to eyeball with the parrot, and said, "What?!" To which the bird replied, "You know what!"

In a sense, that's how I feel as I prepare to preach this message. Our topic is parenting, and with such a topic, I'm inclined to think, "Oh, parenting, you know what!" For most of us who are parents, all somebody has to say is, "You call yourself a parent!", and we melt, for we know we need to improve. My aim, however, is not condemnation, but instruction--practical, biblical instruction.

We are spending two weeks seeking to discover what the Bible has to say about parenting. Ephesians 6:4 is a watershed text which pulls together the essential issues. Last week, we learned that parenting that pleases God starts with having the right goal. If we are to please God as parents, we must have three areas in order--Parenting involves having proper attitudes, the proper aim, and proper actions.

The goal is key. We suggested the following goal as a working model: "My goal as a parent is to raise an independent disciple of Christ who will live life for God, making decisions based on God's Word."

But how do we achieve this goal? That's a vital question, a question which God addresses for us in practical terms in Ephesians 6:4. We'll seek to answer that question this morning.

Proposition: According to Ephesians 6:4, God has given parents two guidelines to follow as we seek to raise children in a way that will please Him.

I. Guideline #1: We must not exasperate our children.

A. One extreme is underdiscipline.

1. The child's head is in the clouds.
2. The child's heart is full of anger.

B. Another extreme is overdiscipline.

1. The child's eyes are on the floor.
2. The child's heart is full of anger.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

II. Guideline #2: We must equip our children.

A. Parents must use training.

1. The use of discipline is good.
2. The purpose of discipline is godliness.

B. Parents must use teaching.

1. A parent is a counselor.
2. A parent is a catalyst.

The Implications...

1. God's standard for parents is high.
2. God's provision for parents is Christ.

Background: Ephesians 6:4 reads, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." As mentioned last week, parents are given two guidelines, one negative and one positive. In addition, allow me to point out three key observations about this verse.

First, it's an imperative. God is not giving parents an option or a choice, but a command. You may be thinking, "But I have a career to pursue." A successful career doesn't excuse parental negligence. How many men do you know who have given up a promising career for the sake of their children? I don't know very many.

Second, it's in the present tense. That means this isn't a one time shot. It happens over the long haul.

Third, it's addressed to "fathers." Notice, Paul refers to "parents" in vv 1-3, but "fathers" in v 4. Why is v 4 addressed to dads? It's not because moms are not to be involved. One possible reason is because dads are so prone to ignore the children. We think if we bring home the bacon we have earned the right to be lazy--wrong! Another reason is that this fits the biblical teaching concerning headship. God ultimately holds the husband/father responsible for what happens in the home (see 1 Cor 11; in 1 Tim 3:12 this instruction is given to deacons, "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well").

Ok, so what is it that God expects of parents? Here's the first guideline.

I. Guideline #1: We must not exasperate our children.

Here's what we are NOT to do--"Provoke not your children to wrath." The word "provoke" is used only twice in the New Testament. In Eph 4:26, the noun form is appears, translated "wrath." The term describes what God said the Israelites did to Him, in Deut 32:21, "They have moved me to jealousy...they have provoked me to anger with their vanities."

As parents, we are not to provoke our children. We're not to exasperate them. What does that mean? It doesn't mean we never oppose our children, that we never deny their wishes. No, it means we are not to provoke our children TO WRATH. We are not to bring up a child that has an angry spirit, in simple terms, an exasperated child.

Have you noticed that we are living in a world full of exasperated people? Why is there so much anger in our culture? To a great degree, the fault lies in the family. We have seen a generation of exasperated kids grow up and move into society.

How does a parent produce an exasperated child? By one of two extremes.

A. One extreme is underdiscipline.

I agree with a statement by Jay Adams that underdiscipline exasperates children more than anything else. One form of underdiscipline is changing rules. For instance (Christian Living, Adams 107), one day your 6 year old daughter comes into the kitchen with a beam on her face and a flower in her hand. She's picked it just for you, Mom, while playing in the field. You don't see the smile on her face, however. All you see are the tracks on the kitchen floor caused by her muddy feet. And you tear her apart verbally, limb from limb (you just finished mopping the floor), and send her to her room until supper.

How will your daughter react? "I tried to be nice to mommy, and look what I got!" Then you as the mother start feeling guilty for your reaction. You have two options. One, you could go ask your daughter for forgiveness. Or you could choose the second--you compensate--which you do. The next day when your daughter does something really bad--she lies to you and talks back to you when confronted. But since you feel bad for overpunishing your child the previous day, you let her get away with it today.

Jay Adams makes this assessment (108), "It is precisely that sort of inconsistent discipline with which our children are being raised and about which they begin to think, 'What's the use?' They begin to put two and two together and find they make ten. They think: 'Today you get murdered for doing nothing, but tomorrow you get away with murder. You never know what you're going to get; you never know what the limits are...What's the use? You might as well do what you want to do anyway.'"

That's an exasperated child. How can you detect a child that has been exasperated by underdiscipline? Look for two marks.

1. The child's head is in the clouds.

An underdisciplined child thinks the world revolves around him. He is oblivious to reality. Since his parents are permissive, he becomes self-centered. This is a generalization, but quite often it's the case. What's the result of underdiscipline?

2. The child's heart is full of anger.

Boundaries are not bad. Boundaries give security. When the boundaries are not there, a child becomes insecure, and anger begins to fester--exasperation.

B. Another extreme is overdiscipline.

Here's how the LB paraphrases v 4, "And now a word to you parents. Don't keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord himself approves, suggestions and godly advice." And the Phillips Modern English reads, "Fathers, don't over-correct your children or make it difficult for them to obey the commandment. Bring them up with Christian teaching in Christian discipline."

How do you detect overdiscipline? Look for two marks.

1. The child's eyes are on the floor.

The underdisciplined child's head tends to be in the clouds. The overdisciplined child's head hangs down, his eyes fixed on the floor. The worst case scenario, obviously, is child abuse. You've seen such children--they're fearful, insecure, they struggle to make eye contact with adults. Overdiscipline provokes children to wrath.

One thing that strikes me about v 4 is that the verb is a present tense prohibition. The idea is, "Stop doing this," which implies something. There's a tendency for Christian parents to be overly strict and over-protective. So Paul warns, "Don't do that."

Rules are needed, but petty rules will exasperate a child. In the parallel text of Col 3:21, parents are admonished, "Do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged." Overdiscipline discourages a child.

One of the great leaders of our century was Winston Churchill. His father was Lord Randolph Churchill. I read this week (Disciplines of a Godly Man, 50) that the great leader's father was very critical of his son. Kent Hughes offers this observation about Lord Randolph Churchill. "He did not like the looks of Winston, he did not like his voice, he did not like to be in the same room with his son. He never complimented him--only criticized him. His biographers excerpt young Winston's letters begging both parents for his father's attention: 'I would rather have been apprenticed as a bricklayer's mate...it would have been natural...and I should have got to know my father.'"

There are not a few children growing up today who could say the same. They don't know the man who gave them life. Oh, they may live under the same roof, but they don't know their father.

Parents, do you ever praise your children? Listen. A child who never hears praise loses hope. Mark Twain said (in Disciplines, 67), "I can live for two months on a compliment." What's the second mark of an overdisciplined child?

2. The child's heart is full of anger.

I had a friend growing up who lived in a straight-jacket. Not literally, but his list of do's and don'ts was so long he couldn't breathe. His parents meant well, and they loved the Lord, but their son resented the overdiscipline. When he became a teenager, I used to watch what he'd do behind his parents' backs.

Please realize something. If my parenting is marked by petty rules and unreasonable demands, I'm in trouble. I'm liable to exasperate one of the greatest treasures in my life. There's the first guideline. We must not exasperate our children. So what should we do?

II. Guideline #2: We must equip our children.

How do we do that? I love the practicality of Eph 6:4. The verb "bring them up" means to "bring to maturity." The same Greek word in Eph 5:29 is translated "nourish." Parenting is like preparing a meal--a proper, balanced diet. There are two ingredients in the healthy diet of effective parenting. Do you see them? Bring them up in the "nurture" and "admonition" of the Lord. If we as parents are to nourish our kids so they grow to spiritual maturity, we must use two ingredients.

A. Parents must use training.

The word "nurture" (paidea) includes both directing and correcting. In its most basic understanding, nurture is "discipline." It's the word used in Heb 12, there referring not only to fatherly discipline but also to God's discipline. Listen carefully to Heb 12:5-6 (in the NIV), "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and punishes everyone he accepts as a son." God disciplines. That means discipline isn't bad.

Now listen to the critical assumption given in vv 10-11, "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Those who have been what? TRAINED by discipline. From this, we learn two important truths about training.

1. The use of discipline is good.

Some parents fear discipline, in part because of the abuse they've seen. Martin Lloyd-Jones is right, "The opposite of wrong discipline is not the absence of discipline, but right discipline, true discipline."

Did you ever notice how much Proverbs has much to say about the "rod"? For instance, Prov 13:24, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." A parent who doesn't use a "rod" hates his child.

What is a rod? I used to picture an iron rod, so I did a little word study this week. There are several "rods" mentioned in the Bible. This "rod" in Proverbs refers to a stick or green branch (i.e. "switch"!). The rod is not an instrument of abuse, but of punishment and correction.

But aren't there psychologists that say that spanking will warp a child's personality? Yes, but what's the assumption behind this statement? It assumes a child has a "good" personality. Is that true?

Not according to the Bible. We are depraved from birth. Prov 22:15 "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." A child by nature has a foolish heart. Left to himself, he'll destroy himself and others.

The issue isn't his personality. It's his eternity--Prov 23:13-14 "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." Those are serious words. So are these--Prov 29:15 "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."

Why do we discipline our children? Someone may say, "I can't discipline my child. It doesn't work. My child has a strong will." Think about something. Did God say, "Discipline if it works?" No. The reason we discipline our children is NOT to make them obey. We discipline because we want to obey and please God.

2. The purpose of discipline is godliness.

That's the second critical truth about training. Some parents stop using the rod (i.e. spanking) because they say it doesn't work. By that, they mean spanking doesn't help the child obey. But that's not goal of discipline. Frankly, spanking always "works"--not that the child always responds--but it teaches a child that sin always has consequences.

The purpose of discipline is godliness. My aim in disciplining isn't the here-and-now alone. It's so that when my child leaves the nest, she knows a fundamental fact about godliness. That is--sin has consequences. When a 5-year old talks back to Mom, there are consequences. When a 16-year old lies about where he was Saturday night, there are consequences. Why is a parent so concerned to teach that sin has consequences? Because when a 25-year old doesn't show up for work, there are consequences. When a 40-year old writes bad checks, there are consequences. When a 75-year old dies without trusting Christ, there are eternal consequences. The purpose of discipline is godliness.

There's a second ingredient in the diet of parenting, besides training (nurture).

B. Parents must use teaching.

When it comes to teaching, a parent must wear two hats.

1. A parent is a counselor.

In fact, the parent is the child's primary counselor. The word "admonition" is the Greek word "noutheteo" (used in the term Nouthetic counseling). As a verb, it means to admonish, warn, even counsel.

Popular teaching today says, "There's a seed of goodness in every child. A good parent lets the child find her own way." Not so says the Bible. A child needs admonition: verbal education, instruction, even warning. The bottom line is this. A child needs to be taught--about God's requirements, about God's provision in Christ, about life.

Parents, do you have a conscious plan to teach your children?

2. A parent is a catalyst.

A catalyst is something that affects something else. God expects parents to be the #1 spiritual catalyst in the life of a child. Which raises a question. What about Prov 22:6? "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Many take this as a promise--that if I give my child the right input, my child will grow up to be godly. Is that true? Certainly we are responsible to be godly parents--that's what this message has been about. But I want to suggest that Prov 22:6 is not an airtight promise. Quite possibly, it's a warning (see Adams).

Train up a child in the way he should go (lit. Heb--"train him in his OWN way"). What is a child's own way? It's foolish (Prov 22:15). The verse says, "If you train up a child and let him go his own, foolish way," guess what will happen to him when he's old? When he's old, he won't stop walking in this foolish way. Prov 29:15 says a child left to himself will disgrace his parents.

I'm not dogmatic, but I think it's worthy of consideration--Prov 22:6 is not so much a promise as it is a warning that says this, "Dads and moms, if you let your child go his own way now, that's exactly what he'll do later.

Can you think of a classic case-study in the Bible? Though he was a godly, great man in many areas, David struggled as a father. There was the problem with Adonijah in 1 Kings 1 (1:6 says tragically, "His father had never interfered with him by asking, 'Why do you behave as you do?'"). David didn't confront sin in his son Adonijah's life. You know what happened to Absalom and Solomon. All three sons grew up to be angry men. Why? In part, because they had a passive dad.

The Implications... I want to leave you with two implications to consider.

1. God's standard for parents is high.

2. God's provision for parents is Christ.

How have you been doing as a parent? We can never achieve this standard on our own strength. We need the grace of God. That grace is available only through a personal, growing relationship with Christ.

Homework: (taken from H. Hendricks, "Heaven Help the Home" 138-9)