

Fathering by Faith

Men's Meeting – March 6, 2021

Introduction

My journey as a dad. I grew up in a family with both parents and two boys. My brother was a year younger. In other words, babies weren't a thing.

When I became a Christian at 18, babies, families, and fatherhood became real. I saw around me what it looked like for a godly man to lead a family.

Anne and I got married when I was at 24, and when I was 27 Caroline was born. We had four more children within 7 years. 5 kids in 7 years.

When Caroline was born I had a business called Triangle Vinyl. Fixed car interiors and windshield chips for about 50 car lots throughout the Triangle. By the time Will was born in summer 2000, I was working for Cornerstone. I've been doing that ever since.

A few data points so you know who you're dealing with:

- Van ride from the beach
- Did I forget to...? No way.
- *Seeking Him Daily* on the New River

A basic idea to grasp: *You are the dad your child needs. You need to be the dad your child needs.*

- God has set YOU apart from all other men and women to be your child's parent—and he's set these particular children aside for you to parent. It's no accident!
- But, God is calling YOU to a task that requires your effort, your growth, and your perseverance. Part of the vocation to parent children is to be committed to GROW as a parent. That's what this teaching is for. Prayer

I. TO THOSE NOT YET MARRIED...

Your Obligations

Your parents are being called to parent well, but God calls you to honor and obey them—**even when they don't!**

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Exod 20:12)

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” (Eph 6:1–3)

What You Can Do Now to Help Yourself as a Parent

Four key decisions to help yourself down the road as a parent. Each of these has an enormous impact on how fruitful you'll be as a parent:

- Choose Christ (i.e., believe in him)—Without a growing relationship with Christ, you'll not have access to the grace you need as a dad. Of course, we only choose him if he's first chosen us (Eph 1:3–5; Rom 8:29–30).
- Choose your church well—A lifelong asset that will benefit your family enormously
- Choose your spouse well—a huge asset when you do, a massive liability when you don't.
- Choose your career well—See down the road for a possible career path. Don't minimize the impact this will have on your ability to father well.

II. FATHERING BY FAITH

Biblical Faith Includes Active Dependence and Hard Work

We parent our children by faith and not by works. But faith acknowledges that we have to work hard, but that God must show up with all of his grace and power. Faith knows that God must do it, but I must also be obedient.

J. C. Ryle captures this well in *The Duties of Parents*

Beware of that miserable delusion into which some have fallen, — that parents can do nothing for their children, that you must leave them alone, wait for grace, and sit still. These persons have wishes for their children in Balaam's fashion, — they would like them to die the death of the righteous man, but they do nothing to make them live his life. They desire much, and have nothing. And the devil rejoices to see such reasoning, just as he always does over anything which seems to excuse indolence, or to encourage neglect of means.

I know that you cannot convert your child. I know well that they who are born again are born, not of the will of man, but of God. But I know also that God says expressly, "Train up a child in the way he should go," and that He never laid a command on man which He would not give man grace to perform. And I know, too, that our duty is not to stand still and dispute, but to go forward and obey. It is just in the going forward that God will meet us. The path of obedience is the way in which He gives the blessing. We have only to do as the servants were commanded at the marriage feast in Cana, to fill the water-pots with water, and we may safely leave it to the Lord to turn that water into wine.

J. C. Ryle, *The Duties of Parents*

In other words, you can't do God's work (heart change), and he's not going to do yours (faithful parenting).

III. PARENTING IS A RESPONSIBILITY, NOT A PERSONALITY TYPE OR SPIRITUAL GIFTING

Passages like Deut 6:4 and Eph 6:4 make that clear:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 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. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9)

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:4)

The responsibility is to “bring them up...in the instruction of the Lord.” There’s no qualification here like, “If you had good parents as models.” Or, “If you’re good with young children.” Or, “If you handle chaos well.”

Your gifting and personality will impact HOW you go about accomplishing this, but God’s Word makes it clear you MUST do this.

Just as your children are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14) and knitted together in their mother’s womb (v. 13), so are you. You will be a unique mom and a unique dad to your children. There are no clones.

The job is so enormous and so complex, aspects of it will be harder or easier for us. We’ll find ourselves more or less gifted for specific parts of it.

Early in my parenting I had a set of influences from our family of churches at the time. Lots of the things these dads did were helpful and inspiring. But these dads were so different from me in personality and gifting, I found over the years I had to really adjust what I did to suit me and my wife and my children.

It’s good to keep going back to the Bible and remind ourselves what God says my responsibility is.

IV. THE BASIC RESPONSIBILITY

Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21

I’m helped if I can simplify what I’m trying to do. Two passages that help us do that with fathering are Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21:

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:4)

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. (Col 3:21)

A New Vision of Fatherhood by Paul

“Fathers” (*pateres*) – Can be “parents” but more likely “fathers.”

- Context in which Paul’s writing saw fathers as having almost unlimited power. Paul radically redefined fatherhood.
- Fathers in the ancient world were powerful figures. The Romans held to the *patria potestas* (“the power of the father”). This is vividly displayed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus:

The law-giver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains, and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death; and this even though the son were already engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, and though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth (cited Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC, 398-399).

- Greeks and 1st century Jews held something similar but more tempered.
- Paul spoke into a culture like this and offered a very different vision of fatherhood, not someone operating with unchecked “full power,” but a father is a man under the authority of Christ trying to raise a disciple of Christ.

Don’t Provoke Your Children, Bring Them Up

Both passages say not to “provoke” our children.

- “Provoke to anger” (*parorgizete*) is a present active imperative.
- “Do not continually provoke your children to anger!”
- Has to do with sinfully stirring up someone emotionally.

We are to “bring them up/nourish” (*ektrephete*) also a present active imperative.

“Continually bring them up/nourish them!”

- Speaks to a process, not something you do once. Not something you do in a “moment.”

Discipline and Instruction

Then we get the basic vision: “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”:

- The two nouns closely related and meant to be practiced together.
- “Discipline” (paideia): BDAG: “Formational instruction attained by discipline, correction.” This Training and discipline as a parent is meant to help the child conform to a standard. It’s “discipline and instruction of the Lord,” so it’s God who in his Word lays out for us what that standard is.

”Instruction” (*vouthesia*):

The second word (*nouthesia*), whether translated ‘instruction’ or ‘warning’, seems to refer primarily to verbal education, while the first word (*paideia*) means training by discipline, even by punishment (John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 248).

Remember, “instruction” is not just for fathers. It’s also a mother’s responsibility:

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, 9 for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. (Prov 1:8–9)

Once again it’s “of the Lord,” so the instruction is defined by God and not ourselves. It’s God Word that will be a central part of what we work to teach our children.

Don’t Discourage Them

Colossians 3:21 adds that we’re to father our children in such a way that they not become “discouraged.” “Discouraged” (*athumōsin*) used only here in the NT. BDAG, “to become disheartened to the extent of losing motivation, be discouraged, lose heart, become dispirited.”

Douglas Moo on this:

Paul does not want to see the children of Christian families disciplined to such an extent that they ‘lose heart’ (NASB; NJB; NRSV) and simply give up trying to please their parents” (*Colossians*, PNTC, 307).

God has hard-wired children to be profoundly affected by their parents. A parent has a unique ability to discourage a child. Just as they have a unique ability to influence them for good, so a parent can discourage a child as powerfully.

V. INSTRUCTION

Instruction has to do with the *teaching* we do as parents, getting God's Word into the minds—and Lord willing, the hearts—of our children.

First, Read the Bible

Read the Bible to your children—the best way is the way you'll actually do it.

Have your children read the Bible. Start them with the habit even before they can read. A Bible picture book for 15 minutes with an audio Bible, that kind of thing.

Be sure to give them Bibles and Bible assignments that match their development.

- I know, you LOVE the book of Hebrews. It's awesome!!!
- Don't assign this to your 6-year old.
- If they are 6 and can read well, have them read the book of Mark. Or Jonah. Or Ruth.
- I know, you LOVE your ESV. It's awesome!!! Stick with children's Bibles for a good while till they're really solid with reading.
- Hold off on having them read the whole Bible until it really makes sense. They're better off reading repeatedly what they do understand than the hundreds of chapters in the Bible they won't.
- Basically: *Our hearts aren't affected by what our minds don't understand.* That's not an absolute law but a good guide for how to think of assigning reading to your children (and yourself!). Life is long. They don't have to read ALL the Christian classics before they graduate from high school.

Second, Be Faithful to the Church

Be faithful with church attendance. One of the enormous benefits of church attendance is being confronted by God's Word. It's read, taught, prayed, sung, and modelled in a hundred ways every Sunday. This is nothing more than "instruction of the Lord" as Eph 6:4 demands.

Church is also a powerful way to reinforce what you teach. When they hear the same things from other respectable, kind people, it validates and empowers your teaching.

Third, Teach Like Proverbs

Don't just teach the Proverbs (which is excellent!), but teach LIKE the Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs is a fascinating study in HOW to talk to our children:

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. (Prov 6:6)

For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice,
7 and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a
young man lacking sense, (Prov 7:6–7)

Life is filled with teaching opportunities, teachable moments:

- The choices people make and their consequences
- A great disappointment in our child's life
- A major challenge coming up
- Sports
- Music
- Church
- Friendships
- How other families live when it's different from ours
- A person leaves our church. Why did they do that?
- Family hardships—death of a grandparent, a divorce, serious illness
- Major historical events—elections, impeachments, pandemic, 9/11.
- Major church events—name change, leaving denomination

Talking about these things and how to think about these things is one key way you will pass along WISDOM to your child.

- Wisdom is different than facts or knowledge. Wisdom is learning how to process and think, not just what the answer is.

Fourth, Preach the Gospel Throughout their Entire Childhood.

Don't think of the gospel as something you teach them when they're young "to get them saved."

The gospel is the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ for sinners who deserve God's judgment.

That's good news we need hear throughout our Christian lives, not just at the front end.

- When they're young during times of spanking, have a gospel formula you use and adapt as needed. "Jesus, please forgive me for my selfishness. Help me to love others."
- When they're young, memorize gospel verses like John 3:16 (they'll be able to memorize things they can't read).
- When they're of an age where understanding is more clear, consider working with them to get baptized—*Believe and Be Baptized*.
 - I don't subscribe to the view that says you need to wait till they ASK before you baptize them, though I do understand the motivation for it. My take is if a child is a believer, they should be baptized, even if you motivate them to do it.
- Books like Greg Gilbert's *What is the Gospel* or Jerry Bridges *Discipline of Grace* make good family read-alouds.
- Read and re-read and re-read the four gospels.
- Read the Christmas passages in the Bible at Christmas, the Easter passages at Easter.
- Connect stories you read elsewhere in the Bible to gospel truths—what happens to sinners who reject God (Saul), to men and women of faith who are faithful (Ruth), to the faithful when they sin and then repent (David), etc.
- When you hear a Christian conversion story at church, talk about it.
- When someone gets baptized at church, talk about it.
- When we take the Lord's Supper at church, talk about it.

Fifth, Instruction Includes their Conversion, A Delicate Matter that Demands Great Wisdom

The challenge is to communicate the gospel accurately, which is the promise of eternal life we receive by a personal and true faith.

Where it gets hard is when we take this relatively simple truth and add to it. E.g., we might want to see "evidence" of this personal and true faith before we give our children positive encouragement they're Christians. This isn't a bad desire. But if we do this poorly we can quickly and easily communicate that faith isn't enough. You actually have to be good enough to be saved. Doing that, we've preached a false gospel.

In handling our child's conversion there's risk of false conversions (baptizing someone who isn't a Christian) and also of preaching a false gospel (wanting to "make sure" they're Christians we end up preaching you have to be good enough to be saved.

The challenge is that a Christian child is still a child. A 9-yr old boy who's a Christian is still a 9-yr old boy. He's still going to break windows and make heroic messes. The mess is because he's 9, not because he's unsaved.

A 12-yr old girl who gets saved is still 12. She's going to talk back to her mom and have a bad attitude about chores sometimes. She grumbles about chores because she's 12, not because she's unsaved.

Sixth, Don't Forget About Being Filled with the Spirit

Instruction is like the kindling, bull, and water that Elijah assembled on Mt. Moriah. It was the fire from above that turned this into a radical divine event.

Your child being filled with the Holy Spirit could be one of the catalysts that radically changes their spiritual trajectory.

No, you can't make it happen. But you can pray for it—and talk about it as it comes up in church life.

VI. FRUITFUL PARENTING REQUIRES RELATIONSHIP

An Affectionate Relationship is the Context for Our Discipline and Instruction

From birth till they leave the house, you'll need an affectionate relationship with your child to bear real fruit as a parent.

There's no simple or easy way to do this. Like all relationships, this will require your:

- TIME—It's not quite as simple as "time=relationship," but it's not totally off.
- INTENTIONALITY (I.E, think of "The Incredibles": "Engage, Bob!")—planning activities and being **present** when you're with them.
- AFFECTION—seeing the good in them, appreciating who they are and how God made them, having an eye for how God is at work in their lives, loving them—truly loving them.
- REALISM—not every planned activity or conversation or vacation is going to be a good one. You'll have many duds. Just be faithful.

Rick Phillips talks about building that relationship through four things:

- Read (God's Word)
- Pray
- Work
- Play

In Building Relationships with Your Children, BE WHO YOU ARE.

Don't be someone you're not when it comes to relationship. If you hate camping, go to a basketball game. If you hate sports, teach them how to play chess.

Kid's activities and breakfasts are two big ones for me.

Our Model for this Affection is God Himself

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. (Ps 103:13)

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1 John 3:1)

VII. PARENTING IS A MARATHON

Once you have a child, you're a parent and never cease to be one. Even a marriage might end, but the parent-child relationship never does. It can be bad or good, but the relationship itself remains throughout our entire lives.

But there's a special phase of parenting you want to grab hold of: *The clock starts when you have your first child, and it stops when your last child becomes an adult. Absolute minimum, that's somewhere around 18 years. For some us, it's much longer.*

The challenge for us is this, not to lose focus throughout all these decades of the responsibility. This is hard, because in these same decades you'll develop your career and likely advance to some challenging seasons in it. But despite the demands of your job, your responsibility as a dad is unwavering.

Every phase of a child's life demands focus to see it bear good fruit.

VIII. A FEW THOUGHTS ON DIFFERENT AGES

They're All Good

Each phase of a child's life has joys and challenges. Avoid thinking of any phase as "that dreaded phase," whether it's the baby years or "Terrible 2s" or "the teen years," etc.

Birth to School Age/0–6 yrs

- Be faithful with spanking. It's not the only tool in your toolbox, but it's an important one.
- Teach the basics of the gospel, have them do Bible time (even if it's just looking at Bible picture books and listening to Bible stories).
- We were helped with our newborns by the "parent-directed" approach to scheduling, feeding, etc.
- Have them do "Bible time" before they can read (see above).

Elementary School/6-12 yrs

- "The Hallelujah Phase"—No diapers and not yet the emotional complexity of older years! *Only kidding. They're all good.*

- Temptation is to shift into cruise-control in the 9–12 years (no diapers, no teenagers!).
- An ideal time for baptism. Old enough to articulate a true faith, not into all the teenage fear-of-man issues that can make a public baptism tricky.
- Kid's activities are great tools for discipleship:
 - Sports
 - Music
 - Dance
 - Etc.
- Sometimes the way to evaluate a kid's activity is not what it means for them today but what it will mean when the child is a teenager.
 - E.g., we eventually felt like competitive sports were important for our boys. Not just rec, but something more competitive. But to set them up for that required getting on it earlier than 14 (when we really wanted it to be there).
- This is the time to think about post-high school life. Setting them up for post-high school means setting them up for high school, which means setting them up for middle school, etc.

Middle and High School/13-18 yrs

- These years will require a lot of you in terms of wisdom—thinking through the individual needs of the child and what the right path forward will be. Everything will be more complicated.
- Discipline is one of the areas where much wisdom is required. You aren't spanking anymore. Much of the time it'll be a verbal rebuke. But sometimes it's a practical consequence, everything from push-ups to no cell phone to paying some amount of cash.
- You can still make radical changes and bring significant pressure in these years. It's harder, but it's still possible.
- Expect your teenager (boy) to do something heroically disastrous at some point(s). When it does happen, don't lose it. Talk to them, figure out what happened and why, use it as a teaching moment. Respond appropriately to what he/she did—not too easy, not too harsh.
- More and more you'll be talking to your girls as women, your boys as men. They aren't the same. They're headed for different life situations. They preparation for that.
- GIRLS—Post-highschool for girls mean doing things that are interesting, require hard work, and are worthwhile. For us that's been college for them, at least, so far.

- We expect our girls to be married and their discipleship is always tied to that.
- But we're eager and for them to be involved with interesting and challenging things until they are—whether that's two years or ten years after high school.
- Not everyone gets married or gets married with the timetable he/she wants. So we feel it's helpful to position them well so that if their singlehood is ten years or so they've got something worthwhile to do.
- For us, some debt seems acceptable since the reward is significant. But not any amount of debt. Too much can strain a woman or young family and limit some opportunities.
- The point is, anything you plan on for post-high school needs to impact how you plan in their middle and high school years.
- **BOYS**
 - Post-highschool for boys. The million-dollar question is a four-year college degree. If you go the college route, you'll need to think through how to get there. What is he doing in his high school years to have a resume sufficient to get into a good school?
 - If you don't go this route, you'll need to really think through how to set your son up to provide for a family. I.e., What's the plan for him to make \$50-75k per year by the time he's in his 30s? (These are obviously ballpark estimates, but you get the idea).

Young Adulthood/18+ yrs

- *In some ways, this is THE phase for parenting, since this is really the GOAL. We want our children to become adults who will flourish in Christ.*
- A lot of decision-making you'll do throughout their childhoods has to do with seeing this endpoint and then working backwards based on who they are and how God's made them.

CONCLUSION: PICK 2, "GRACE BE WITH YOU"

Pick 1-2 Things to Work On as a Parent, Not 10

- If you find yourself thinking you need to change everything and you're completely discouraged...it's likely wounded pride more than the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

And to Say it Again, Love Your Children, Really Love Them!

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. (Ps 103:13)

Sometimes you need to step back and remind yourself you really love them.s

Paul's Consistent Closing Message: "Grace Be With You."

Why? Because that's what we need!

Resources

For you to read:

Between Us Guys: Life-Changing Conversations for Dads and Sons, Joel Fitzpatrick

Between Us Girls: Walks and Talks for Moms and Daughters, Trish Donahue

The Manhood Journey, Kent Evans

Shepherding a Child's Heart, Paul Tripp

Age of Opportunity, Paul Tripp

The Masculine Mandate, Rick Phillips

Equipping for Life: A Guide for New, Aspiring & Struggling Parents, Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger

Parenting Essentials: Equipping Your Children for Life, Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger

The Trinity Hymnal (classic hymns, creeds, confessions)

For your child to read (or you to read to them)—several of these you'll need to adapt as needed. E.g., the Presbyterian resources teach a different view of baptism than we have. You can easily use the bulk of them, however, and leave out those portions.

The Children's Catechism (<https://reformed.org/historic-confessions/the-childrens-catechism/>)

Topic Memory System by Navigators (good life verses to memorize)

Big Truths for Little Kids: Teaching Your Children to Live for God, Susan and Richie Hunt

Disciplines of a Godly Young Man, Kent Hughes & Cary Hughes

Biographies: The Hiding Place (Corrie ten Boom), *A Chance to Die* (Amy Carmichael), *For the Glory* (Eric Liddell)

The Fruitful Life (Fruit of the Spirit), Jerry Bridges (Bridges in general an excellent author for teens)

Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, R.C. Sproul

Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know, Wayne Grudem (see also his *Bible Doctrine* and longer *Systematic Theology*)

Systematic Theology, Louis Berkhof (free version available online)

The Lord of the Rings (Tolkien)

The Chronicles of Narnia (CS Lewis)

Morning and Evening, Charles Spurgeon

Growing in Godliness: A Teen Girl's Guide to Maturing in Christ, Lindsey Carlson

Discipline of Grace, Jerry Bridges

Desiring God, John Piper