

Don't Exasperate Your Children

I. THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

A. The Warning

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger (NIV – exasperate; NEB – goad to resentment), but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not provoke (NASB – exasperate; NIV – embitter) your children, lest they become discouraged (NASB – loose heart).

To exasperate means “to make very angry or irritated.” To embitter means “to arouse bitter feelings in.” In Colossians the verb translated “exasperate” or “embitter” means “to stir up.”

JOHN MACARTHUR JR. (*Successful Christian Parenting*, 131) – “The children’s duty in the home is to obey. The flipside is the parent’s duty: to teach them that obedience in an environment of godly nurturing, without exasperating them in the process. It’s a tall order. This doesn’t come naturally for parents, any more than obedience comes naturally to kids.”

We must bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord with a pure heart and not a self-serving motivation (to impress others, to avoid embarrassment, because we are irritated, because they make life hard). Our children must know they are dearly loved and enjoyed - they are not projects suited for our benefit.

F.F. BRUCE (Colossians, 398) - “Fathers (or parents) are urged not to assert their authority over children in a manner more calculated to provoke resentment than ready obedience.”

CURTIS VAUGHAN (EBC Colossians, 219) - “Fathers are not to ‘embitter’ their children. The sense is that they are not to challenge the resistance of their children by their unreasonable exercise of authority. Firm discipline may be necessary, but it must be administered in the right spirit.”

B. The Reason

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not provoke (NASB – exasperate; NIV – embitter) your children, lest they become discouraged (NASB – loose heart).

WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN (Colossians, 172) - “When fathers are unjust or overly severe, a spirit of sullen resignation is created in the hearts of their offspring. The children “lose heart,” thinking, “No matter what I do, it’s always wrong.”

FRANCIS FOULKES (Ephesians, 165) - "It is right for parents to demand obedience, but there must not be 'capricious exercise of authority'. Discipline is essential in the home; but not unnecessary rules and regulations and endless petty correction by which children are discouraged."

II. THINGS TO DO

Ephesians 4:1-2 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

J.C. RYLE (*The Duties of Parents*, 4) - "Now children's minds are cast in much the same mold as our own. Sternness and severity of manner chill them and throw them back. It shuts up their hearts, and you will weary yourself to find the door. But let them only see that you have an affectionate feeling towards them, that you are really desirous to make them happy, and do them good, that if you punish them it is intended for their profit...let them see this, I say, and they will soon be all your own. But they must be wooed with kindness, if their attention is ever to be won."

We want to make obedience easy and attractive. The home isn't the army or a prison. A child's obedience can be made easy (or at least easier) by his parent's gracious leadership.

A. Love

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

Love both expressed and demonstrated is crucial to the parent/child relationship.

J. C. RYLE (*The Duties of Parents*, 4) – "Love should be the silver thread that runs through all your conduct. Kindness, gentleness, long-suffering forbearance, patience, sympathy, a willingness to enter into childish troubles, a readiness to take part in childish joys, - these are the cords by which a child may be led most easily, - these are the clues you must follow if you would find the way to his heart...Nothing will compensate for the absence of this tenderness and love...Just so you must, set before your children their duty, - command, threaten, punish, reason, - but if affection be wanting in your treatment, your labor will be all in vain."

KEN WILSON (*The Obedient Child*, 33) - "The affection we show our children...is their first taste of the grace of God."

B. Compassion

Hebrews 5:2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

Compassion is a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. Our children live in the same fallen world with the same sin nature as we have. The more we are aware of our own need for grace, the easier it will be to be aware of the same need in them and to extend the grace and understanding that we ourselves need.

The more you remember you need for God's grace, patience and forgiveness the more you will be aware of that same need in your children and the easier it will be to be compassionate.

C. Gentleness

1 Thessalonians 2:7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children

Gentleness means to be kind or amiable, free from harshness, sternness, or violence, mild, docile, soft or moderate. Gentleness is not weakness but strength under control. Even though we have authority in our children's lives we are to exercise that authority kindly and softly.

D. Patience

2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Proverbs 14:29 Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

Patience means manifesting forbearance (to hold oneself back from, to control oneself when provoked) under provocation or strain. Our children's sins can try our patience but we must forebear. This does not mean that we overlook their sins or fail to confront or correct but that we aren't unreasonably demanding of maturity or change beyond the work of the Holy Spirit.

Patience must be accompanied by faith that our children can change. God's children are never beyond the reach of His grace. Be aware of His grace. Be patient because of His grace.

E. Encouragement and Praise

Proverbs 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

Hebrews 3:13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

To encourage means to give courage or confidence; to raise the hopes of; to help on by sympathetic advice and interest, to strengthen. Growing up can be hard and our children need us beside them cheering them on and pointing them to the grace of God and the gospel to give them hope.

One of the best ways to encourage is through praise. Make sure your children are praised when they do well and that you are recognizing evidences of grace in their life, especially in areas where you have been urging them to grow or where you have had to discipline frequently. Make sure you are more aware of where they have come from than where they need to go, more aware of progress than difficulties, growth than need for growth. Try to catch them doing well!

One caution – praise what they do, not who they are. They may do good by common grace and that is to be celebrated. But they are not a "good boy" or a "good girl". Even when they are saved, your praise should always include commendation of God's grace and the Holy Spirit's working which enabled them to obey ("way to go man!" "It obvious that God is really working in you and that you are learning to walk in His grace.")

F. Time

Psalms 39:4 "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!

There is simply no substitute for time spent with our children. Time spent talking and listening (vs. talking at), playing, building memories, serving together, etc., build a relationship in which all our instruction and discipline can flourish.

PATRICK MORLEY (*The Man In The Mirror*) - "If we end up with regrets over the time we didn't spend with our children, it's a pain that never goes away."

Nothing makes your children happier than you. All the things in the world can't replace you. They need your time and attention. God calls us His friends; we ought to be our children's best friends. I fear that too many dads lose their children's affection through lack of time.

WILLIAM HENDRICKSON - "Fathers should create an atmosphere which will make obedience an easy and natural matter, namely, the atmosphere of love and confidence...When fathers are unjust or overly severe, a spirit of sullen resignation is created in the hearts of their offspring...A good father spends time with his children, teaches, entertains, and encourages them, and by his example as well as by outright, verbal instruction, points them to Christ."

Proverbs 20:5 The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.

TED TRIPP - "The finest art of communication is not learning how to express your thoughts. It is learning how to draw out the thoughts of another. Your objective in communication must be to understand your child, not simply to have your child understand you. Many parents never learn these skills. They never discover how to help their children articulate their thoughts and feelings."

III. THINGS TO AVOID

A. Overindulgence and Inconsistency

Our children need and desire boundaries. Lack of clear, Biblical standards and/or weak, inconsistent enforcement of standards will eventually exasperate children (although there are times to make exceptions). So will spoiling them by giving them all that they want or not setting high (reasonable) standards or goals.

B. Favoritism

To be unjust or to favor one child over another will incite anger, especially if some of your children are easier to discipline, more compliant or of sweeter temperament than others.

Beware of comparison – "Why can't you be more like your sister?!" Be aware that your compliant children are just a different kind of sinners.

C. Unrealistic Expectations

We must beware of setting standards so high our children can never live up to them. This can often be accompanied by parents being harsh, impatient, and critical thereby communicating to children that nothing they do is ever good enough.

Also be aware that your expectations can be too low.

The most important consideration is what is God trying to get at today, in this season of life?

D. Hypocrisy

To demand of our children what we ourselves are not modeling will surely exasperate them. So will our failure to live with them as a fellow sinner who confesses sin and asks forgiveness when needed.

E. Lack of Relationship

The old saying “rules without relationship equals rebellion” is true. If we are more general and judge than loving parent and friend to our children, they will become exasperated. This will also occur if we become too busy to spend quantities of quality time with our children.

We must recognize the importance of communicating with our children, sincerely listening, valuing their opinions and desires, etc. We must sow into our relationship with them.

My personal and pastoral experience has been that a good relationship with your children won't guarantee that they don't have struggles but it does guarantee that when they do have struggles you will be able to work through them more easily.

A good relationship with parents – founded in trust in God, humility, and genuine affection – is a tremendous means of grace in a child's life.