

A MODEL FOR PARENTING

BY JIM MERSEREAU

Raising children, especially teenagers, is difficult under the best of circumstances. In our society it is doubly hard because there are so many bad influences children are exposed to. But as always, God in His divine wisdom has given us all the instruction we need to raise our children well, right here on the pages of the Bible. The secret to raising our children well is to raise them according to God's standards as described in Scripture. In Ephesians 6:1-4 the Apostle Paul provides some sound Biblical guidance for raising children.

Children submit to and obey your parents

“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.” Ephesians 6:1-3

In verse one Paul instructs children to obey their parents because it is the right thing to do. He is essentially saying to the children, “At this time in your life God has placed you in this family and under the authority of these parents, and so as an act of service and devotion to Jesus, you are to obey the parents He has given you.”

However, let me point out that this command is not absolute. When a parent commands a child to do something unbiblical, unethical, immoral or illegal the child should resist. For instance, a mother has no right to force her daughter into prostitution and so the daughter should resist. A father has no right to sexually abuse his children, and so they too should resist if possible. If a parent is involved in illegal activities, like manufacturing and selling methamphetamine, and that parent tries to get the children to join in that illegal activity, the children should resist and even call the police. So Paul's command for children to obey their parents is not absolute. In cases like this Acts 5:29 applies “We must obey God rather than men.”

But those are extreme examples. Aside from situations like that, which are clearly contrary to the Word of God, children are to simply obey their parents. That is God's desire and there are obvious benefits for both children and parents. For instance, the parent/child relationship is where the child first learns to submit to and respect their elders and others in positions of authority. If children learn to obey their parents they will be much more likely to also obey teachers, coaches, and police officers. But if they routinely get away with disobeying their parents they will be much more likely to challenge other authority figures as well. And, if children are in the habit of obeying their parents they will be much more likely to obey God and His commands too.

There is an important associated point here that, although this text does not specifically address it, I believe it warrants a brief discussion. The Greek word Paul used in this passage for children is “Tekna” and it refers to minor children. There are other Greek words that refer to adult children but in this passage Paul was directing his

instructions to children and teenagers who are still under the legal authority of their parents. Children of that age still need the firm guidance of their parents and therefore according to Paul they are to simply obey. However, when children become older teens and then adults, the relationship with the parent must change. The way the parent interacts with their older children must necessarily be different than when they were minors.

This is an important distinction because it's an area where so many parents create unnecessary problems. As our children grow-up they become wiser and are therefore more capable of making their own decisions. Consequently they become increasingly independent - as they should. As our children begin to make the transition from being dependent children to independent adults, our method of parenting must change accordingly. If we attempt to parent our seventeen year old with the same authority and firm hand we used when he was thirteen, that seventeen year old is going to rebel. Far too many parents fail to make a smooth transition from one parenting model to the next and consequently end up damaging their relationship with the older teen or young adult.

As parents we have to back-off and allow them to be young adults. The relationship we want to have with our children at that point is one of mutual respect. We want those older teens and young adults to begin viewing us less as an authority figure and more as a confidant and counselor. That doesn't mean the seventeen year old won't still need firm guidance and maybe even discipline, they certainly will. But the ideal situation is for them to begin seeing the parent more and more as someone they are comfortable coming to for guidance, knowing they will be respected as a mature and intelligent young adult capable of making their own decisions, but still desiring wise counsel from their parents.

However, if the parent is stuck in the old role of authority figure and disciplinarian, attempting to constantly dictate, insist, threaten and even punish, that young person is likely to hop on the first bus to anywhere just to break free from the heavy-handed control. When that happens, we often see young people make very poor lifestyle choices, such as a young girl taking off with the first guy who offers her a place to live.

So as we look at the family model Paul gives us here in Ephesians, we need to remember that in chapter six he is referring to younger children. Parents should have a very different relationship with their older children. The time to begin making the transition to that new model of parenting is in their last years of High School because if you haven't done so by the time they can go off on their own, if your relationship with them at that time is still heavy-handed and authoritarian, you very possibly may lose them. Do the hard work to make the necessary adjustments in your parenting style so you can maintain your influence with your children as they transition from being dependent children into independent adults.

Now, let's go back to the text. Paul tells children they are to honor and obey their father and mother. They are to *honor* them and they are to *obey* them. Honoring and obeying are different. It is possible to obey without honoring. Even a prisoner of war will obey his captors out of fear of the punishment he will incur if he doesn't, but he certainly has no love or respect for them – he doesn't honor them. Likewise, it is possible for children to obey their parents without honoring them. Children will sometimes obey with

anger, resentment and even disdain. Biblically that's the wrong attitude for them to have (unless of course the parents are treating them like prisoners of war!)

As explained earlier, it is critical for children to learn how to obey and honor, even if they don't agree. One reason is that parents deserve the obedience and respect of their children. But also, there are going to be plenty of times later in life when the children will be required by authority figures to do things they would rather not do. If they haven't learned to obey and respect even when they disagree, if they have developed the habit of reacting with anger, disrespect, hostility or rebellion with their parents, they will also be likely to do so with a boss, coach, police officer, or other authority figure and life is going to be hard for them. Children have to learn to honor and respect those in authority even if they don't like or agree with what they are being required to do. They learn that first by obeying and honoring their parents.

So in this passage we find two important lessons for children about obeying and honoring their parents. First, parents deserve to be obeyed and honored by their children and God Himself actually requires it. In the setting of the first century Christian church, honoring one's parents was second in importance only to honoring God.

Second, honoring and obeying parents is an important life lesson. If children learn to honor and obey parents they will be much more likely to honor and obey other authority figures as well.

Parents are to submit to and obey God

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Ephesians 4:4

In this verse Paul teaches that parents are to submit and obey as well, but in their case they are to submit to and obey God in the way they parent their children.

The Greek word Paul used here for Father is "Pater" and it literally means "male parent." Most commentators agree that Paul probably intended to direct his comments to both parents, but since the father was the dominant family figure in that culture that is why he used this word. John MacArthur explains it this way:

"The word technically refers to male parents, but was also used of parents in general. Since Paul had been speaking of both parents in verses 1-3 he probably had both in mind here. The same word is used in Hebrews 11:23 for Moses' parents."¹

So we should read this as applying to both parents. Now that Paul has instructed the children about their godly responsibility to obey and honor their parents, he issues a word of caution to fathers and mothers. He says, "Do not exasperate your children." The Amplified Bible provides greater depth to the translation of this verse:

"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."

In other words, “Don’t make your children angry and resentful by treating them harshly and unfairly.” Now this obviously does not mean that if your children get angry with you then you must be in the wrong. Instead, it is a word of caution from the Apostle Paul to parents to give careful thought to how you are parenting your children. Again John MacArthur is helpful:

“In the pagan world of Paul’s day, and even in many Jewish households, most fathers ruled their families with rigid and domineering authority. The desires and welfare of wives and children were seldom considered. The apostle makes clear that a Christian father’s authority over his children does not allow for unreasonable demands and strictures that might drive his children to anger, despair and resentment.”²

This brings us back to our earlier discussion. Sometimes parents are so intent on making their children toe-the-line and adhere to a long list of rules and regulations that they drive their kids nuts. There does have to be structure and discipline, but there also needs to be a reasonable balance, especially as they get older.

Some of you reading this suffered as children under the heavy hand of an unreasonable or even abusive parent. You know the pain, hurt, frustration and exasperation that results from living under the control of an angry, dictatorial and abusive parent, constantly being criticized and belittled, seldom complimented. Some of you may even be parenting your own children like that now.

In this verse Paul makes it clear, that approach to parenting is not ok. In the Bible God has given us the proper parenting model. We are to do it in accordance with the instructions and guidance He gives us, not according to our own opinions of how children should be raised and disciplined. God does not give Christian parents the liberty to make it up for themselves as they go. We are to “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Parents are to provide instruction and discipline, that is true, but they are also to provide copious amounts of love and compassion, gentleness and warmth. In fact, in the Greek the term “bringing them up” includes the implication of nourishing and cherishing them. We are to nourish and cherish our children with the instruction and discipline that is approved by the Lord.

Remember, as Christians Jesus is our example in all areas of life – including how we raise our children. So we need to remember how He dealt with children. His interaction with little children was always clothed in compassion, gentleness and warmth. In Matthew 19:14, when His disciples attempted to shoo the children away, Jesus essentially said, “No, no, wait. Let the children come to Me. I enjoy them. I want them to be with Me.” Jesus also spoke warmly and glowingly of children for being so trusting and open and He said that we adults need to be more like them.

Jesus was not harsh and demanding with children. He would not have been angrily chasing them around the house with a belt, shouting at them, threatening them, abusing them. Jesus was firm, but He was also warm and gentle. There are clear Biblical standards to be obeyed, by everyone, of all ages, but the standards are to be enforced and applied out of a heart of love.

Parents, you can help or hurt your children by the way you parent them. Would your children describe you as a firm but fair parent who guides and directs, but does so

with love, gentleness and compassion? Remember, you are supposed to be a picture of Jesus to your children.

You may already have a broken relationship with one or more of your children. If you do, there is a good chance that you are at least partly to blame. There were probably aspects of their behavior and attitudes that were wrong and needed to be corrected, but are you sure you dealt with them in a Biblical way? In the midst of all the discipline and correction were you a picture of Jesus to them? If not, then you have some apologizing to do and God would probably have you take the first steps to repair the relationship.

Why not go to that child, regardless of their age, and admit that although their behavior was wrong, your response was not what it should have been either. Why not swallow your pride and ask that child for forgiveness, and then let the healing begin.

Pride is an ugly and destructive thing and it often keeps us from admitting when we are wrong. In a defensive posture we will usually fix our minds on the wrongness of the other person's behavior and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge our own fault. But if you will be big enough to take the first step, admit your own faults to the child, and then ask for their forgiveness, you will be amazed at how the Holy Spirit will use that to begin mending the broken relationship.

There are few things as painful as a broken relationship between a parent and a child. Usually the problem begins with misbehavior on the child's part. But in the case of a broken relationship, especially between a parent and an older child, the situation was many times made worse because the parent did not respond in a Christ-like manner. That's what Paul intended to warn us against in Ephesians 4:4.

It has been said that we are our "worst selves" when we are with the people closest to us. Children tend to misbehave the most in the home, and parents tend to be the least patient and compassionate in the home. Children will often obey the rules and perform well in school, at church, and on the Little League team, but then be perfect terrors at home. Everyone else thinks they are little angels but you know them when they aren't trying to impress anyone.

Likewise, parents will often be patient and kind with co-workers and neighbors, they will be pleasant and considerate at church, but behind closed doors at home they can be snarling and demanding, critical and moody. But as Christians there should be only one of us. We should be the same in public and in private. In fact, the most important influence we can have is in the home. What Paul has done in his teaching on the family is to call all of us, husbands, wives, parents and children to honor Jesus with the way we live. The most important place for us to do that is in the home.

1. MacArthur, John *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Word Publishing, Nashville, 1997, p 1814

2. Ibid.