

GUIDELINES FOR GODLY PARENTING

A Reading Supplement from Grace Community Church

***And you, fathers, do not provoke your
children to wrath, but bring them up in the training
and admonition of the Lord.***

Ephesians 6:4

The children's duty in the home is to obey. The flip side is the *parents'* 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 for kids.

[There is much to say] about the effect of human depravity on the child. But let's remember that parents are depraved, too. Our own natural inclinations are bent toward sin, just as our children's are. *Christian* parents have a tremendous advantage, because as redeemed people they have regenerate hearts. They have godly desires and righteous appetites. Unlike unregenerate people, they are capable of truly loving God, and, in fact, love for God is the driving passion that distinguishes a true Christian (Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 John 5:2).

Nonetheless, even Christian parents still struggle with the remnants of fleshly appetites and ungodly habits. Like the apostle Paul, we often find ourselves doing the very things we hate (Romans 7:15-24). We are all too prone to fleshly and sinful behavior, and this has its inevitable effect on our parenting.

[Scripture teaches us that] God has assigned parents authority over their children, and He has commanded children to obey their parents in "all things" (Colossians 3:20). That does not mean, however, that parents are automatically always right. There are times when parents permit their own sinful attitudes and actions to surface in their parenting. When we do that, it exasperates the child. And God solemnly warns parents not to let this happen.

"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). The same commandment is echoed in Colossians 3:21: "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged."

Our first impression, reading this in English, is that it is addressed to fathers in particular, perhaps because they are the head of the home, or

perhaps because fathers have a greater tendency than mothers to exasperate children. But a closer look reveals that this commandment is not necessarily addressing fathers alone. The word translated “fathers” in Ephesians 6:4 is *patera*, which *can* refer to fathers in particular but is often used to speak of both parents. Hebrews 11:23, for example, says, “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his [*patera*].” There the word clearly refers to both parents. I’m convinced Ephesians 6:4 is using *patera* in a similar way, encompassing mother and father alike. Certainly, the *principle* in this verse applies equally to both parents. And the *responsibilities* of nurture, training, and admonition clearly pertain to mothers as well as to fathers. So this command applies to *parents*, not merely fathers.

In Paul’s day, Ephesians 6:4 literally confronted the whole social order. Families were presided over by fathers (not “parents”), and fathers could do whatever they pleased in the context of their families, without compunction or social stigma. No Roman father ever felt the duty to avoid provoking his children’s wrath. The responsibility lay only with children not to provoke their *father’s* wrath—and if they did, the consequences could be severe.

Rome had a law called *patria potestas* (“the father’s power”). This principle gave men who were full Roman citizens absolute property rights over their own families. The children, the wife, and even the slaves were regarded as the patriarch’s personal chattel—and he could do with them as he wished. By law, he had full authority to dispose of all family matters—or family *members*—in whatever way pleased him.

In effect, then, *patria potestas* also gave the patriarch absolute authority over every area of his children’s lives. Fathers arranged marriages for their children. They could also force them to divorce. A displeased father could disown his children, sell them into slavery, or even kill them if he wished—all without resorting to a court of law.

When a child was born, the child was placed between the father’s feet. If the father picked up the child, the child stayed in the home. If the father turned and walked away, the child was either left to die or taken to the forum and sold at auction. Most children auctioned away at birth were raised to work as prostitutes or slaves.

A Roman man named Hilary wrote this letter to his wife, Alis, sometime in 1 B.C.: “Heartiest greetings. Note that we are still even now in Alexandria. Do not worry if when all others return I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech you to take care of the little child, and as

soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If—good luck to you—you have another child, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it [throw it away].”¹

Seneca, a contemporary of the apostle Paul’s, described Roman policy with regard to unwanted animals: “We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge a knife into a sick cow. Children born weak or deformed we drown.” Such was the state of society’s attitude toward children in the apostle Paul’s time.

Things are frankly no better—and may even be worse—in our culture. Millions of unwanted babies are aborted each year. And statistics show that most children in foster homes in America are not there because they are orphans or because their families are financially destitute. Most are there simply because their parents did not want them. Children have become a disposable commodity in our society, just as they were in ancient Rome.

The Bible calls Christian parents to a different standard. It was a revolutionary standard in the apostle Paul’s day, and it still runs counter to society’s values in our day. Scripture does not give fathers dictatorial power over their children. Children are not to be regarded as property of the parents. Instead, Scripture speaks to parents as stewards of the Lord, responsible to provide a proper nurturing environment for children—whom the Lord has graciously placed into their care. Like all stewards, parents will ultimately give account for how they have fulfilled their stewardship. And the primary standards by which our parenting will be judged are what Paul sets forth in Ephesians 6:4.

What are the specific duties the apostle Paul outlines in this crucial verse? I see the following three.

DON’T PROVOKE THEM TO ANGER

“[Parents], do not provoke your children to wrath,” Paul writes. This is a caution, a warning, designed to put parents on guard against stirring their children’s anger either deliberately or through careless but unnecessary provocations.

There are times, of course, when children become sinfully angry with their parents apart from any provocation. The child’s own selfishness, immaturity, or wrong attitudes might be the cause of the anger. In such cases, it is the child who is sinning.

But there are other times when the parents are guilty of provoking their children’s anger—by thoughtlessly aggravating them, by deliberately

goaded them, by callously neglecting them, or by any number of other intentional or careless means that exasperate them. When that happens, it is the parents who are sinning—and provoking the child to sin as well.

Remember that our children are commanded by God to honor us. Therefore when parents provoke their own children to wrath, they are causing them to sin against the Fifth Commandment. In such cases the parent is not only guilty before God for disobeying Ephesians 6:4, he or she is also doubly guilty for causing the child to stumble. This is an extremely destructive sin.

Christian parents who goad their children to anger, or fail to give them the nurture and admonition of the Lord, forfeit all the benefits of a distinctively Christian family. Virtually no environment is more unwholesome for a child than a nominally Christian family where parents invoke the name of the Lord but neglect to provide the proper loving nurture and admonition. Many children from such “Christian” families end up more hostile to the things of the Lord than kids who have grown up in utterly pagan surroundings. Christian parents who neglect Ephesians 6:4 will reap what they have sown—pain and heartache equal to or surpassing that of worldly families.

The Greek word translated “provoke” is *parorgizō*, meaning, “to anger” or “to enrage.” It might describe a lashing, open rebellion; or it could also refer to an internal smoldering and a seething, secret vexation. Both kinds of “wrath” are commonly seen in children whose parents have provoked them.

How do parents make their children angry? There are many ways to do this. Here are some of the common ones:

Overprotection

You can anger your children by fencing them in too much. Smothering them. Never trusting them. Always assuming they are not telling you the truth. Never giving them an opportunity to develop independence, thus making them feel stifled and crushed.

This is a particular danger in today’s world. Parents certainly need to protect their children—especially in an environment with so many dangers. When I was a child I could freely roam our neighborhood. I could get on my bike and ride around in relative safety. Unfortunately, the world today is a lot more hazardous than it was when I was a child, and many parents live in neighborhoods where they simply cannot give their children that much freedom.

But overprotection poses a danger, too. Remember Laban, in the Old Testament? He was an overprotective, domineering parent. He dealt dishonestly with Jacob to get him to marry Leah, Laban's eldest daughter, even though Jacob loved Rachel, the younger one. Laban then permitted Jacob to marry Rachel too, in exchange for a promise that Jacob would stay and work for Laban for seven years (Genesis 29:26). When the time came for Jacob to move on, Laban begged them to stay (30:25–27). His overprotective parenting, and his subsequent meddling in his son-in-law's marriage, cost his own daughters a healthy marriage.

Ironically, despite Laban's overprotective meddling in his daughters' affairs, the daughters' assessment was that their father did not truly care for them—that he counted them as strangers and had devoured their rightful inheritance (31:14–17). What he no doubt thought of as an expression of parental attachment came across to them as evidence that he did not really love them.

Parents who smother their children with overprotection often convince themselves that they are acting in the child's best interest. But it is a sure way to provoke a child to anger. Overprotection communicates a lack of trust in the child. Children over-sheltered by their parents begin to despair of ever earning the parents' trust. They may even conclude that how they behave is irrelevant. Rules and restrictions without privileges become a suffocating prison. Many who cannot abide such confinement finally rebel.

Children need some degree of freedom and independence in order to grow, to learn, and to make their own mistakes. They will never learn to handle responsibility unless they are given a degree of liberty. Mothers who bind their children to the apron-strings are merely fostering resentment. And fathers who refuse to give their children breathing room will exasperate their children in exactly the way Ephesians 6:4 forbids.

Overindulgence

The flip side of overprotection is overindulgence. Excessively permissive parents—parents who spoil their children—are as likely to stir their children's wrath as those who smother them.

Studies prove that children given too much freedom begin to feel insecure and unloved. And why not? Scripture clearly says, "He who spares his rod hates his son" (Proverbs 13:24). Parents who indulge or coddle their misbehaving children are actually displaying unloving behavior toward them. Is it any wonder that the children sense this and become exasperated?

Our society has fostered increasingly permissive attitudes toward children for many years. We are now reaping the harvest of a whole generation of angry young people.

Favoritism

A third sure-fire way to provoke anger in our children is by showing favoritism among siblings. Isaac favored Esau over Jacob, and Rebecca preferred Jacob over Esau (Genesis 25:28). Remember what terrible agony resulted in that family? Esau and Jacob became bitter rivals. Jacob repeatedly used trickery and deceit to try to eclipse his brother and vie for his father's blessing. He lured Esau into bartering away his birthright, and he ultimately beguiled Isaac, with Rebecca's help, into giving Jacob the blessing Isaac meant for Esau. The resulting tension literally split the family, and Jacob had to flee for his life from his brother (Genesis 27).

Nonetheless, the tendency toward favoritism spilled over into the next generation as well. Jacob's best-beloved son was Joseph, whom he favored with a many-colored coat. That provoked such jealousy in the other brothers that they conspired to kill Joseph. They ended up selling him into slavery instead. And thus another family was torn apart. Though God ultimately used it all for good, the favoritism itself, and all the jealousies it provoked, were entirely evil, and they bore much evil fruit.

Don't make the error of favoritism with your children. Don't give gifts or privileges to one that you withhold from another. Don't even compare your children with one other. Don't say things like, "Why can't you ever be like your brother?" Don't use one child's virtues or talents as the standard against which to measure another's performance. There's nothing more humiliating for a child than to be demeaned or debased by an unkind comparison to a sibling or classmate.

You want to really destroy a young child? Just make him feel inferior to everyone else in the family. Portray him as the black sheep of the family. You will saddle him with a terrible sense of frustration, and you will provoke him to wrath in the process.

Unrealistic Goals

Many parents provoke their children to wrath by constantly pushing achievement. Pressure your child to fulfill goals you never accomplished, and you'll destroy the child.

It is certainly every parents' responsibility to encourage and prompt their children to higher levels of achievement. In 1 Thessalonians 2:11 the apostle

Paul reminded the Thessalonians of his fatherly concern for them: “We exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children.” The exhortations and the fatherly charges certainly have their place, but notice that they are to be balanced by loving comfort. Parents who only push their children to achieve more, without comforting them in the midst of their failures, are goading their children to resentment.

Push your children to unrealistic or unrealizable goals and you will rob your child of any sense of fulfillment. When my sons were young and playing organized sports, it seemed every team they ever played on had at least one father who had brow-beaten his son so much that the child lived in fear of failure and therefore did not play up to his potential. I have known many parents who kept unrelenting pressure on their children to achieve higher grades. Most such parents are motivated by sheer selfishness. They are merely trying to fulfill their own unrealized childhood goals through their kids. That’s an unfair burden to place on any child.

One beautiful teenage girl I knew was literally driven insane by pressure from her parents. I visited her in a padded cell where she lay in a catatonic state, motionless except for a constant trembling. She had been a top-notch student, a cheerleader, and a homecoming princess. But it was never enough for her parents. Her mother in particular kept constant pressure on her to achieve more, look better, and act differently. Everything she did was an occasion for her mother to tell her how she might have done it better. And under so much pressure, she finally cracked. After several weeks of rest and medical treatment, she recovered to the point where she no longer needed to be institutionalized. Finally, she was sent home—right back into the pressure-cooker environment her mother had made of her home life. A short time later she took her own life. Why? Her words to me sometime before her final breakdown: “No matter what I do, it never satisfies my mother.” Believe me, that young woman had achieved far beyond her mother’s own potential, but the mother was trying live out her own fantasies through that daughter. What a tragedy! She goaded her daughter into a self-destructive rage.

Discouragement

In a similar vein, you can provoke a child to wrath by discouraging him. Remember the parallel verse in Colossians 3:21, which says, “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, *lest they be discouraged*” (emphasis added). Avoiding discouragement is the whole thrust of this commandment.

Parents provoke their children to anger when they constantly criticize them but never reward them, never praise their accomplishments, and never allow them to enjoy their own successes. A child who feels he can never get his parents' approval will soon give up trying to earn it at all. There may be no quicker way to provoke your children to wrath than by perpetually discouraging them.

This is easy to do. Always focus on what they do wrong, and never notice what they do right. Always notice their faults, but never say anything about their positive qualities. Ignore their natural gifts and talents, and harp on the things they don't do well. Be constantly suspicious of them.

I had a simple rule of thumb in raising my children: For every time I had to point out to them something that was wrong, I tried to equalize it soon thereafter by pointing out something they had done right. It wasn't always easy. ("I like the way you've arranged your drawer.") But a loving parent can always find *something* as a source of encouragement. And every child responds well to encouragement and approval.

I remember what it was like as a child to feel I could sit at the table a hundred times and *not* spill a glass of milk—but no one ever noticed *that*. Spill something one time, however, and it would not go unnoticed. Parents, make it a point to notice when your kids do well, as much as you notice when they don't.

Haim Ginott wrote, "A child learns what he lives. If he lives with criticism he does not learn responsibility. He learns to condemn himself and to find fault with others. He learns to doubt his own judgment, to disparage his own ability, and to distrust the intentions of others. And above all, he learns to live with continual expectation of impending doom."² Raise your children like that and you are certain to provoke their wrath.

Neglect

Another way to provoke your children to wrath is through neglect. Fail to show them affection. Show them indifference instead. Don't take an interest in what interests them. Don't be concerned for their needs. You will stir the wrath of your child.

The classic biblical example of a neglected child is Absalom. Though David was by no means indifferent to his son (2 Samuel 18:33), he *treated* him with indifference, and Absalom grew up with a contempt for his own father. He murdered his own brother (13:28-29). He deliberately undermined David's kingly authority (15:1-6). He plotted David's overthrow (15:10). He defiled his father's wives in the sight of all Israel (16:22).

When the full tab came due for David's fatherly neglect, it ultimately included rebellion, civil war, and finally Absalom's death.

Many parents communicate a similar neglect by treating their kids as an intrusion. Too many children overhear their parents say things like, "Well, we'd love to go with you, Albert, but we've got these kids. And we can't get anybody to stay with them. It's this way all the time." If you want to exasperate your children, simply make them feel unwanted. Make them feel like they're standing in the way of things you'd like to do. Act like you resent them, and they will begin to resent you.

I made an arrangement with my sons, Matt and Mark, when they were growing up. I went to their games, and they came to my sermons. It worked marvelously. I did not neglect them, and they did not neglect me.

I had a friend in the ministry who traveled the country speaking to youth groups. He was on the road a lot, and between speaking engagements he often came home for just a day or two. While he was home once, he overheard his little boy talking across the fence to the boy next door.

"Hey," the little boy said to his pal. "Can you play catch?"

"No," was the reply. "I'm going to play catch with my dad."

Then my friend heard his own little boy reply, "Oh. My dad doesn't have time to play with me. He's too busy playing with other people's kids."

My friend wisely changed his ministry so he would have more time to spend with his son.

In many ways neglect is the worst kind of child abuse. Our streets and cities are filled with neglected children, and virtually all of them are angry. Their parents bear much of the responsibility for that.

Condescension

You will provoke your children to wrath if you refuse to allow them to grow up. If you put them down or laugh at them when they say naive or immature things; if you constantly talk down to them; or if you stifle them every time they want to try something you think is too grown up for them—you will never encourage them to grow, and you will actually confirm them in their immaturity.

The apostle Paul said, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). That's the natural course of the maturing process. Parents should encourage their children in that

pursuit, not extinguish the child's enthusiasm for growth. Don't treat them condescendingly; encourage their growth. Let them make some mistakes without getting hammered.

When my son Matt was a toddler, he once flushed my watch down a toilet. I asked him, "Why did you do that?"

He looked at me with solemn eyes. "I just wanted to see what it would look like going down," he said.

Did I punish him severely? No. *I'd* like to have seen what it looked like going down, too. I remember being that age.

Sometimes kids say childish and funny things, and it is natural for parents to enjoy the humor of such situations. But be careful not to crush your child in the process. Don't laugh in his face. Don't belittle him for his natural childishness. Usually if you must laugh, it's better to laugh later. In the meantime, while they grope their way through the maturing process, give them encouragement and support and confidence. Let them present their ridiculous ideas. Let them experiment with thinking for themselves. Otherwise you will discourage and aggravate them in the very way the apostle Paul cautions parents against.

Withdrawing Love

Don't employ love as a tool of reward and punishment. I cringe when I overhear a parent say, "Mommy won't like you if you do that." Sometimes parents do this unconsciously, by behavior that suggests they care less for the child when he disobeys. They might also send a similar message subliminally when they praise their children with words like, "That's such a good little girl! Mommy *loves* you when you're so good."

Scripture says love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8). Real love doesn't rise or fall based on the achievements or failures of love's object. Does God's love for us fail when we fail Him? Not at all. In fact, "God demonstrate[d] His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In other words, the greatest expression of God's love toward us was that He sacrificed His beloved son to atone for our sins and reconcile us to Himself, while we were still in a state of utter enmity against Him (v. 10).

Parents must model the same kind of love for their children. Threatening to withdraw our love when they misbehave undermines love itself, and it provokes our children to anger.

Excessive Discipline

Too much chastisement is another guaranteed way to provoke a child to anger. Some parents seem to have the opinion that if discipline is good for a child, an abundance of discipline must be *really* good for them. They ride their kids constantly, holding the threat of corporal punishment over their heads like an unrelenting sword of Damocles.

Such behavior is really nothing but brutality. The father who throws his weight around, or uses superior strength—whether physically or verbally—can be devastating to a child’s spirit. It’s so easy for grownups to do, because they are physically, intellectually, and verbally so much more skilled than a child. But parents who treat little children that way will reap the whirlwind when kids reach their middle teenage years. Kids who have been bullied will grow up with a mean streak themselves—their wrath provoked by their parents’ own unkindness.

I’m amazed at how easily some parents use hurtful words in rebuking their children. They say things to their kids they would never say to anyone else—things that would crush a sensitive child’s heart, and would goad *any* child to wrath.

Scripture says that God always disciplines His children in love (Hebrews 12:5-7). The writer of Hebrews seems to acknowledge that human parents are all too prone to discipline their children capriciously or erratically: “Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness” (vv. 9-10, KJV).

Unfortunately, human parents do sometimes tend to discipline children selfishly or impulsively, but God’s discipline is always for our good. Christian parents should strive to make the child’s own interests the goal of all our discipline. If we do that, we minimize the risk of perturbing and exasperating them unnecessarily.

So that’s the negative side of Paul’s instructions to parents: Don’t exasperate your children. What about the positive side? “Bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Notice the two aspects of that: training, and admonition. We’ll examine the training aspect first.

GIVE THEM THE RIGHT TRAINING

The Greek word translated “training” is *paideia*, from the Greek word for “child,” *pais*. *Paideia* means “tutorage, instruction, nurture.” The same word is used once in 2 Timothy 3:16, where it is translated “instruction,” and four times in Hebrews 12:5-11, where it is translated “chastening.” So the notions of chastening and discipline, as well as positive instruction, are inherent in the word *paideia*. Many people automatically think of corporal punishment when terms like “discipline” and “chastening” are brought up. And corporal punishment would certainly be included in all that is meant by *paideia*. But we’ll set that topic aside for the moment, however, and take it up in our discussion of the word “admonition” below.

Meanwhile, much more than corporal punishment is encompassed in the word *paideia*. It is a comprehensive word describing all aspects of child-training—guidance, instruction, and both positive and negative discipline. The King James Version translates the word as “nurture” in Ephesians 6:4. I like that translation. I think it captures the gist of the loving instruction and care that Paul is calling for in this verse.

Note the words “bring them up.” We must *bring* our children up. They will not get there themselves. This has been one of our recurring themes in this book. Parents must take an active role in shaping the character of their children. Proverbs 29:15 says, “A child left to himself brings shame to his mother.” Again, what ruins most children is not what their parents *do to them*, but what they *do not do for them*.

The real key to the challenging work of bringing our children up correctly is to create an environment of nurture and loving instruction in which their hearts become fertile grounds for God’s truth. It is the child’s *heart* that parents are to nurture.

Proverbs 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.” All the matters of life proceed from the heart. Jesus said, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mark 7:21-23). A similar saying is recorded in Luke 6:45: “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Whatever fills your heart will determine what your mouth speaks.

Parents must realize this and nurture the child's heart. The child's depravity is a heart problem. When we deal with misbehavior, it is not primarily a behavioral issue. Rather, the misconduct reflects the fallenness of the child's heart.

In fact, parents should be very clear about this: behavior is *not* the crucial issue. A change in behavior will not fix the child's root problem. As we have emphasized repeatedly, a change in behavior without a change in heart is nothing but hypocrisy.

How can parents nurture the child's heart? To begin with, parents need to help the children understand that they have sinful hearts. Children themselves need to know that all their evil words, thoughts, and deeds spring from a sin-tainted heart, and the only remedy for this is the gospel (see chapter 3). In other words, keep the child's own heart-need always in the child's (as well as the parents') focus, so that your children never lose sight of this fact: Not only is regeneration their greatest need; it is also your greatest concern as a parent. Ted Tripp has written a marvelous book for parents, titled *Shepherding a Child's Heart*,³ in which he offers much helpful advice on how to maintain the proper focus in our parenting. He suggests that the child's heart is the world's smallest battlefield—and the conquering of it calls for all-out hand-to-hand combat.⁴

He's right. Your child's heart is a battlefield where sin and righteousness are in conflict. Your child's *greatest* problem is not a lack of maturity. It is not a lack of experience or a lack of understanding. It is a wicked heart. Those other things will exacerbate the heart problem. But the remedies for immaturity, ignorance, and inexperience are no cure for the main problem. Your child will not "outgrow" his own depravity.

As parents, we must target the child's heart. We cannot merely target behavior, or our parenting will be shallow and superficial, and we will raise our children to be spiritually shallow.

The goal of parenting is not behavior control. It is not merely to produce well-mannered children. It is not to teach our kids socially commendable behavior. It is not to make them polite and respectful. It is not to make them obedient. It is not to get them to perform for our approval. It is not to conform them to a moral standard. It is not to give the parents something to be proud of.

The ultimate goal and proper focus of biblical parenting is redemptive. Parents are responsible to lead their children to Christ. As we have emphasized previously, parents are not capable of *guaranteeing* their child's conversion. Parents cannot obtain salvation on their children's

behalf. But from the time a child is born until there is fruit that indicates he or she has been born again, parents are in the role of evangelists, constantly pointing and urging their children toward Christ, who alone can remedy the heart problem that causes them to love unrighteousness.

Any objective less than that is merely behavior modification. Frankly, non-Christian children can be made to conform to an external moral standard. All kids can be taught obedience to their parents. We know from all that we have studied so far that teaching our kids those things is a vital *part* of the parents' duty. *But those things are not to be confused with the main goal.*

Don't just teach your children external self-control; train them to understand temptation and resist it. Don't just teach them manners; teach them why pride is sinful and why greed, lust, selfishness, and covetousness dishonor God. Punish them for external offenses, but teach them that the *root* issue is always a deeper problem—corruption in their hearts. When you correct them, do it not merely to satisfy the offended, irritated, frustrated parent. That's anger; it's vengeance. But when you correct them, help them to see that it is first of all *God* who has been offended—and that He offers reconciliation through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

As we have stressed repeatedly [in earlier chapters], this involves teaching them the whole counsel of God. It involves "doctrine"..."reproof"..."correction"..."instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). But its proper focus is first of all redemption. We have not achieved much if we merely teach unregenerate children to conform to a behavioral standard. As Ted Tripp writes, "A change in behavior that does not stem from a change in the heart is not commendable; it is *condemnable*."⁵

A passage we keep returning to is Deuteronomy 6:6-7: "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." That defines the parenting responsibility. Notice that the proper focus begins with the *parent's* heart: "These words...shall be in your *heart*." Parents whose own hearts are cold and devoid of the Word of God cannot properly shepherd their own children's hearts.

Now notice how beautifully the context of this commandment sets forth the parents' whole agenda, beginning with the familiar words of verse 4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" Here is the parent's first task: *Teach your children about God.*

Verse 5 is also a familiar commandment. Jesus called it the First and Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” This is the second stage of parental instruction: *Teach them to love God.*

Stage three is a corollary: *Teach them to obey God from the heart.* “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children” (vv. 6-7). The “words” this refers to are the inspired Word of God—and the law in particular. The inescapable implication is that we are to teach our children about obedience to God from the heart.

Fourth, *teach them to follow your example.* “Teach them diligently to your children, and...talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (vv. 7-8). In other words, show your children that the Word of the living God is always on the tip of your tongue—at all times in your life and in every experience of your life. Let them see that your life is dominated by divine truth. Let them see all of life as a classroom. View every occasion in life as an opportunity to teach them about God. Take every opportunity to point them to heaven. Make everything that happens a path that leads them back to Scripture.

Jesus was the absolute master at this kind of teaching. He drew spiritual lessons from all the world around Him. Water, fig trees, mustard seeds, birds, bread, grapes, pearls, wheat and tares, cups and platters, men and women, light and dark, nets, dinners, vineyards, foxes—everything in life opened up a window into divine truth. All parents are called to a similar teaching style with their children. Every flower, every rock, every mountain, the ocean, the sky, the cricket’s chirp, the roaring waterfall, little babies, a puppy, a squirrel, and on and on—all these things make a well-equipped classroom to teach them truth about God, and to envelop them in the nurture of His truth.

Pay attention to the language of verse 8: “Bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” That is simply a way of saying parents must keep the Word of God perpetually at the forefront of our minds, and always at hand. Verse 9 continues: “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” In other words, make these truths the distinguishing mark of your household. Those expressions aren’t literally meant to prescribe phylacteries

(amulets containing scraps of Scripture, bound to the forehead and hands by leather straps) or mezuzahs (boxes with Scripture verses nailed to the doorposts). Instead, they are charging parents with the responsibility of making the truth of Scripture the very focus of the household.

Here's another lesson from Deuteronomy 6: *Teach them to be wary of the world around them.* Verses 10-12 say, "So it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant; when you have eaten and are full; then beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage."

Parents need to prepare their children for life in a world full of temptations, idols, and even "good things" that can distract their hearts from the true God. They must not forget the Lord.

All of that—and more—is encompassed in the word *paideia*, "instruction," or "nurture" (κῆν). Nurture your children in an environment like that, targeting their hearts with the truth of God's Word, and you will be providing the kind of instruction Paul calls for in Ephesians 6:4.

ADMONISH THEM WHEN NECESSARY

The other word Paul uses in this verse is "admonition," or *nouthesia* in the Greek text. It's a word that speaks of a rebuke or a warning. But it also conveys the sense of a mild, loving parental admonition. It's virtually a synonym of *paideia*, rather than a contrasting term. Both words include the connotation of parental discipline and chastisement.

Here we revisit a subject that we introduced in chapter 4 [not included in this booklet]: corporal punishment. The subject is inexplicably baffling to many parents. Part of the problem is the confusion of the times in which we live. It has been popular for more than half a century to decry corporal punishment as inherently inappropriate, counterproductive, and detrimental to the child. A group of researchers studying corporal punishment summed up their perspective: "We suggest that reduction or elimination of corporal punishment could have major benefits for children and for reducing antisocial behavior in society."⁶ Psychologist, mother, and well-known anti-spanking activist Penelope Leach distills the typical humanist perspective on corporal punishment: "I am a part of that non-spanking group, both as a mother and as a psychologist. I believe that spanking—or tapping, or slapping, or cuffing, or shaking, or

beating or whipping—children is actually wrong. I also believe...that far from producing better disciplined people, spanking makes it much more difficult to teach children how to behave.⁷

Notice how she equates spanking with “slapping,” “cuffing,” “shaking,” “beating,” “whipping,” and, inexplicably, “tapping.” But those are not all the same thing, and they should not be likened to the rod of discipline administered in love.

Opponents of corporal punishment will often cite surveys and statistics that seem to support their findings, but precisely because they *begin* by equating brutal acts of violence against children (“slapping,” “cuffing,” “shaking,” “beating,” “whipping,”) with properly administered corporal discipline, their results are skewed. *Of course* cruel punishment and brute violence against children is wrong, and counterproductive, and unbiblical.

Scripture does nonetheless prescribe the rod of discipline as a *necessary* aspect of parenting. In fact, Scripture flatly contradicts modern opponents of corporal punishment: “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly” (Proverbs 13:24). “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him” (22:15). “You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell” (23:14).

Moreover, according to a recent article in *U.S. News and World Report*,⁸ “parenting experts” have based all their findings against corporal punishment “on a body of research that is at best inconclusive and at worst badly flawed.”⁹ According to the article, some recent studies indicate that spanking, when used appropriately, does indeed make children “less likely to fight with others and more likely to obey their parents.” And there is also evidence to suggest that childcare psychologists and the news media have deliberately suppressed researchers’ findings that argue in favor of corporal punishment. One “expert,” confronted with evidence that calls the anti-spanking perspective into question, said, “There’s enough evidence to decide we don’t need [spanking]...even if the evidence isn’t that strong.”¹⁰

However, one study on spanking that began by eliminating examples of actual *abuse* (punishment where parents actually bruised or injured their children), cited statistics that suggest nonabusive spanking does actually benefit the child more than alternative forms of discipline. In one very thorough study, Psychologist Robert E. Larzelere, director of residential research at Boys Town in Nebraska, failed to find any convincing evidence that nonabusive spanking, as typically used by parents, damaged children.

Even more surprisingly, Larzelere's review revealed that no other discipline technique—including timeout and withdrawal of privileges—had more beneficial results for children under 13 than spanking, in terms of getting children to comply with their parents' wishes.¹¹

But the article also concludes that the secular parenting experts' public stance against corporal punishment is not going to change anytime soon.

Naturally, no child-development specialist is about to run out to write a book called *Why You Should Spank Your Child*—which may be one reason why the news media have buried the notion that spanking might in some cases be a useful discipline technique. After ethicist Kevin Ryan, director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, was quoted in the *New York Times* a few years ago saying, "Mild physical punishment is appropriate in extreme cases," he says, "I never got so much hate mail about anything."¹²

Many who oppose corporal punishment simply are not willing to look at the facts and statistics rationally. One critic of spanking bluntly states that as far as he is concerned, "hitting children is not a subject to which rational debate applies. It is another manifestation of Americans' unique exploitation of children as models for absolutist behavior standards and austere punishments that grown adults would not impose on themselves."¹³

Christian parents should not be duped by such histrionics. Scripture itself *prescribes* corporal discipline and cautions parents not to abandon the use of the rod. The opinions of self-proclaimed "experts" who disagree frankly amount to little. In the end, the facts will be found to agree with the Word of God. And in that vein, the *U.S. News* article actually offers some tidbits of very sound advice: "One lesson of the spanking controversy is that whether parents spank or not matters less than *how* they spank....A single disapproving word can bring a sensitive child to tears, while a more spirited youngster might need stronger measures. Finally, spankings should be done in private to spare children humiliation, and without anger."¹⁴

It might be worthwhile to reiterate a truth we stressed in chapter 4 [not included]. Parental discipline should never injure the child. It is never necessary to bruise your children in order to spank them hard enough to make your point. Spanking should always be administered with love and never when the *parent* is in a fit of rage. That sort of "discipline" is indeed abusive, and wrong, and detrimental to the child—because it shatters the environment of loving nurture and instruction Ephesians 6:4 calls for.

Furthermore, spanking is by no means the *only* kind of discipline parents should administer. There are many other viable forms of punishing children that, on occasion, can be used in addition to the rod. If the child responds immediately to a verbal rebuke in a given situation, a spanking is probably not necessary. Other punishments, such as withdrawing privileges, can also be used as alternatives to spanking if the situation warrants it.

Much of our parental “discipline” should be totally positive. Parents can—and should—provide guidance for their children by rewarding them for positive behavior, as well as by punishing them for wrong behavior. Both sides of the equation are important. Positive motivation is entirely legitimate and can often be an effective means of getting children to obey. Notice, in fact, that the promise God Himself attached to the Fifth Commandment is a positive motivation. The commandment was reinforced with a promise, not a threat. It is often appropriate to say to your child, “If you do this, I will reward you in this way.”

Balanced discipline involves both negative and positive reinforcements. In fact, we might sum up all discipline by saying it means *giving the appropriate reward for the conduct*. When the conduct (including both attitude and action) is good, a positive reward is warranted. When the conduct is bad, a negative reward is in order. It’s not exactly rocket science, is it?

Yet parents seem incurably confused about these issues. Even many Christian parents I know are practically paralyzed with fear about whether and when and how and how much to discipline their children. But what Scripture says is actually quite simple and straightforward: You have a depraved and foolish child, and if you want him not to be so foolish, spank him (Proverbs 22:15). You have a solemn responsibility before God to provide an environment of nurture and instruction where your child will constantly be exposed to God’s truth (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). In short, you need to be careful not to provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Any parent who masters those few, simple principles will not go far astray.

END NOTES

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3. Ted Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Pa.: Shepherd, 1995).
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. *Ibid.*, 20.
6. *The Journal of the American Medical Association Science News Update*, August 13, 1997.
7. Penelope Leach, "Spanking: A Shortcut to Nowhere," http://cnet.umbca/orgs/prevention_cruelty/spank.htm.
8. Lynn Rosellini, "When to Spank," (*U.S. News and World Report*, April 13, 1998). The article is online at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/980413/13span.htm>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Review by Psychologist Robert E. Larzelere of study on spanking; see <http://www.buildingbetterhealth.com/article/hscoutn/102436718>.
12. Quote by Kevin Ryan, director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, *New York Times*.
13. Mike A. Males, *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1996), 116.
14. Rosellini, *ibid.*

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