

Sermon: Missional Parenting Ephesians 6:4

We are in Ephesians and we have been going rather slowly through the letter.
This morning will be no different as we consider just one verse- but oh, what a verse it is!
It deals with the vast subject of parenting.
In the bible, parenting, or raising the future generations of God-lovers, is really in the background of nearly every passage of scripture.

So, just because Paul devotes only one verse to parenting, that does not mean it is unimportant.

Now, as we read Ephesians 6:4, you will notice that Paul only addresses the fathers.
That does not mean that mothers are not included in his advice.
Because back in verse 2, Mothers were included as he recited the 5th commandment which says: Honor your father and your mother.

So, Paul's instructions are to fathers as the head of the household but mothers are also definitely included in this.

Paul writes:

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

This is God's word.
The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

Cite Ray Cortese.

You have a sermon outline printed in your bulletin.
And the first point there is...

I. The Challenge of Parenting

Parenting is a daunting task.
It's above everyone's pay-grade.
There is no exact science in parenting.
What works well in one situation with one child, may not work well with another.

And this holds true even in the same family.
Parenting requires a tremendous amount wisdom- much of which, parents don't have until after the fact.

Parenting is exhausting-
And that exhaustion is normally physical with young children.
The amount of physical labor involved is ridiculous.
I remember being surprised by this.
The laundry, the shopping, the car seats, the diapers, the clean up.

Yet as children grow older the exhaustion often becomes more psychological and spiritual.
As you wonder if your child is being properly nurtured and educated.

There may be learning disabilities to deal with, health problems, hospital visits, relational difficulties, insecurities and broken hearts.

And this is to say nothing of their sin problem.
Parenting is spiritually and psychologically challenging.

Parenting is humbling as well.
Kathy Keller's said: As a mother, I am only ever as happy as my least happy child.
There are many parents with broken hearts, as they have perhaps lost children to death.
Or perhaps their children are in a wayward state.
Maybe they are growing well and are showing responsibility but are far from the Lord.

Another way that parenting is humbling is that it reveals our true character.
It reveals to us what we really believe and who we really are.
If we have anger problems or control issues, insecurity or pride, they will all be revealed in our parenting.

Because parenting is such a challenge, we need the help and direction of God's word.
And the first instruction we have is in Ephesians 6:4 is...

II. What Not to Do Do Not Provoke Your Children to Anger

Now this seems like a very specific command- very isolated.
Yet the implications of this simple command are far reaching.

Because this command speaks to parents mis-using their authority.

Now there are two main ways a parent can provoke a child to anger.
The first is through over-parenting.
Over-parenting occurs whenever a parent is too demanding or too controlling with their children.
It also shows itself in being overly protective.

What lies behind over-parenting is fear.
Fear that the child will get hurt or fear that we might lose control over the child.

And this says a lot about the parent's idolatry of their children.
As a parent, God has placed you in their life as a steward.
A manager.
The child does not belong to the parent.
The child belongs to God.
And overly restrictive parenting is a result of the parent idolizing their child.

Another way we can over-parent and idolize our children is by seeing their behavior and performance as an ultimate reflection on us.
This is a temptation for many parents.
They live to see their child become a high performing person.

Maybe through academics- demanding perfection of their child- even to the extent where the parent does the child's homework for them.

Or through athletics. Pressuring children to become excellent in sports when the child really isn't all that interested.

Some parents are way too interested in having their children become high performers.

We see this in how parents might dote on their children's successes and hide their failures.

We also see this in how parents behave at their child's sporting events.

Over-parenting also takes the form of helicopter parenting and lawn-mower parenting.

Back around 2007, I first heard the term helicopter parenting.

National Public Radio reported a strange phenomenon- where parents were actually calling their child's college professors to find out why their child did not receive a higher grade in the class.

It also reported that parents were calling prospective employers to help negotiate the terms of their child's first work contract.

That's helicopter parenting. Where the parent is always hovering over the child.

But there is also lawn mower parenting- where the parent mows down every obstacle in their child's path.

Paving the jungle for their children so that they face minimal resistance.

Regarding the whole idea of safe spaces, one CNN commentator named Van Jones said the following in regard to his own children:

"I think it's a terrible idea for the following reason: I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe emotionally. I want you to be strong... I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take the weights out of the gym. That's the whole point of the gym!"

It is a temptation for parents who have means and abilities to make their children's lives easy.

To swoop in so that they don't have to learn how hard life can be.

And when they do this, they rob their children of the joy of conquering life's hardest challenges themselves.

They rob them of developing grit, tenacity, endurance and humility.

They rob them of the "gift" of failure and of the opportunity to develop empathy with those who try and fail.

Worst of all, this sort of over-parenting robs children of learning dependence upon God, who alone is their source of strength- if only they needed him and cried out for him.

Such over parenting will serve in the end to exasperate a child, as they learn that their parents kept them from really maturing.

So, the first way parents can provoke their children to anger is through over-parenting.

The second way is the exact opposite and that is through under-parenting.

Under-parenting is marked by a lack of parental discipline and structure.

It's inconsistent and unpredictable.

Sometimes we as parents demand diligence and discipline from our kids when we ourselves are not diligent and disciplined.

And when our children see this inconsistency, they will be exasperated.

How can a parent chide their children for spending too much time in front of the screen while they are addicted to their phones or computers?

For our parenting to be effective, we have to be consistent.

Our children must know what to expect.

And we need to have integrity.

A final way that we under-parent is by not being a steady authority in our children's lives.

Our children see this- when their dad or mom is most interested in their child's approval.

We can call this buddy-parenting.

What is most important is not the discipline of the child but rather that the child likes the parent, and that the child feels safe and loved at all times.

Whenever we discipline our children- in that moment, our children probably don't feel very loved and cared for. They may even think that the parent is being demanding, controlling and cruel.

But what is really happening is that the child is learning some hard, cold facts.

And that is, that they are not in authority. The universe does not revolve around them.

One of the best things a Christian parent can do is teach their child, through discipline and punishments that the child is not the center of the universe.

Dis-obedience and disrespect are never cute.

One pastor tells the story of how he was in a high-rise hotel and he got on an elevator at a high level, say the 25th floor.

And a mother with her 5 year old child also got on the elevator.

He pressed the button for the ground floor. And after the doors closed, the child proceeded to press all the buttons so that the elevator had to stop at every floor. Now, this child was old enough to know what pressing those buttons would do.

And the mother just took it in stride saying, "Isn't she cute?!"

Cute was not the first word that this pastor thought of in describing that child in that moment.

By nature, our children are rebellious to God and they must be taught in a thousand different ways that they cannot buck authority.

They are not God.

God is God and they must learn to bow their hearts before authority.

Parents, God has not placed you in your child's life to be their friend.

Not yet, not while they are young.

They need a dad. They need a mom.

They need an authority in their lives to teach them to that they are not at the center of the universe.

God is, and he has placed you in their lives to teach them that.

We do great harm to our children when we under-parent them by seeking their approval.

And if I can offer any advice, it would be that our parenting should err on the side of being a bit strict.

When in doubt, be less permissive regarding your children's behavior.

Then as your children grow, and as you grow in wisdom, it will be much easier to become more permissive than to trying and reign them in.

The parenting trend in our culture is to be overly permissive.

To allow our children to behave poorly at the table.

To allow children to call adults by their first names instead of Mr. and Mrs. Or Herr and Frau.

When we teach our children manners and demand a level of self-control, we are not forcing upon them anything that will hurt them.

Quite the contrary, we are teaching them that they are under authority and that life does not revolve around them.

In short, we are seeking to rescue their souls from hell.

Don't be afraid to parent your children.

Their very souls depend upon it.

Now, Paul's command to not provoke our children to anger is part of a larger biblical program.

And that program is spoken about more directly in the second half of the verse where Paul says:

but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

This brings us to our third point which is...

III. What to Do: Disciple Your Children

Disciple and discipline obviously are related words.

When Paul commands parents to bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, he is pointing us in a very clear direction.

That is, towards the Lord.

And this shows us what our mission in parenting ought to be.

In Deuteronomy 6, the Lord said:

4 "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.

So that's it. That's our mission in parenting:

To teach our children to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and might.

We have to be clear about this.

Our mission as parents is not to raise high performing children...

Or respectful children... or hard working children... or happy children...

Or prosperous and successful children.

No all of those things are secondary.

Our primary mission objective in parenting is that they would love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and might.

And what this means is that parenting is God's "Plan A" for evangelism and kingdom advancement.

Right there at the beginning of Scripture, in Genesis 1, God tasked Adam and Eve with a mission:

To be fruitful and multiply, to rule the earth and to subdue it.

And this they were to do as an act of love toward God.

God gave parents the ability to procreate in order to fill the earth with little God-lovers who would grow to serve the Lord in their every endeavor.

Loving God with all the heart, soul and strength.

This is a holistic mission in parenting.

Often times we relegate spiritual matters just to salvation.

Often in the church, parents just want to see their children's souls saved.

Yet God's mission is much more expansive than that.

It's comprehensive.

Sure, love for God begins with conversion and faith in Christ, but it extends to every aspect of life:

To work, to education, to relationships, to recreation, to family.

Our mission in parenting is to teach our children to love God with every ounce of their being in every endeavour they undertake.

It's not just limited to their salvation.

It's about living for Christ comprehensively.

And so parenting us ultimately about discipleship.

It's about raising up disciples of Christ who love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and who love their neighbour as themselves.

So let me ask you parents: is this your mission in parenting?
Do you have missional clarity?
And are you working a plan in order to fulfil this mission?

It is easy, natural even for us to lax about or attentiveness to this mission.
And in our laxity to define and execute God's mission, it's not as though our children are static.

If we do not take an active role in discipling our children to love the Lord, we can rest assured that our culture will shape them into its mold.

The first way it will shape them is by encouraging them to become materialistic- where their primary aim is financial prosperity and personal freedom..

The American dream is one where you are independently wealthy and no longer have to work a difficult job that you don't like.

It's early retirement and the dream of travelling the world. Or settling down in beautiful home in a lovely area.

The Europeans tend to bring an element of health and security into their dreams- so that they can live long and at ease with nothing really bad ever happening to them.

Yet God's mission for us is that we love Him with all we are- with all our might and all our mind, all of our days.

In addition to being tempted towards materialism, prosperity and ease, our culture will shape our children into it's mold so that their thinking is a product of the age.

In our current cultural moment, there is no real truth. Not ultimately.

Truth today is a relative thing.

What's true is true for you.

And into this vacuum of objective truth, science becomes the ultimate arbiter of what is right.

Science and personal opinion- these are the cultural truths of our day.

Yet God's word teaches us He is the truth.
And that his word is truth.

The difference between the culture and the scriptures on this matter couldn't be more stark,

And so we must raise our children to know God's truth and to see the world from his perspective.

No human authority is ultimate.

No personal opinion is ultimate.

God's truth is ultimate.

And unless we are emphatic about this with our children, the culture will shape them into it's mold.

Paul wrote in Romans 12:2:

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the

will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

There is a pattern of this world. A mold for thought and behavior.

And Christian parents are to see to it that their children are raised in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Hear the words from the Harvard student handbook of 1642:

The first rules for the governance of the Students of Harvard, 1642.

2. "Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the maine end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3) and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning."

And so we need to rethink the educational impact that our culture is having on our children.

Are they a product of our culture or a product of God by faith?

As parents, we must have missional clarity.

Our mission is not our child's happiness and self-sufficiency.

Our mission is the formation of their souls for God.

And so, to do this we need to have a plan.

And this brings us to our final point

III. The Plan of Discipleship

Now this task of raising children who love the Lord may seem like a difficult task.

But let me assure you that it's not merely difficult.

In our own strength, it is impossible.

I mean, just think of yourself.

How well are you doing at loving the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?

Not very well if your being honest.

And so how are your children ever going to learn to do something that you yourself don't do very well?

And this is why you have to get your children down to the stream.

In Psalm 1, the Psalmist writes:

Psalms 1:1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; **2** but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

So what's the stream?

It's the law of God, the word of God.

It's the people of God, the sacraments of God.

It's prayer to God and worship and instruction.

We don't have the resources to make our children lovers of God, but God does.

And the one place on earth where all of these means of grace exist is the church.

Get your kids to church.
Weekly worship, especially in a pandemic, communicates to our children that we are in need.

We need God. We need his direction.
We need his people.

Weekly Worship is the primary place where we are reminded that life is not about us.
It's about God's reign and authority.

And our relationship with God is to be primarily fueled by our worship at church.
And this is so vital
Because if we are ever to be effective at discipling our children, we must first have living relationship with God.

Not only does worship encourage our souls.
It's the place where our children can be loved on by other believers.
Over the years at this church, my kids have watched so many families come and go.
And yet the impact on my children has been positive, as they have gotten to experience the ministry and love of so many different people.

So many different people in the church have loved on my kids.
And this has been the case since their first week of life.

So get your kids down to the stream.
Bring them to the waters of the word, sacrament and prayer.
Let the people of God minister to your children.

And by God grace, they will grow strong.
In the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Amen.