

# THE EARTHLY PATTERN OF THE HEAVENLY FATHER IN CHILD-REARING

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The first thing Paul says in Ephesians 6 is, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” And he seems to be suggesting here, that in the context of the authority that a father has—the recognition that that authority that a father has is the authority of one who is first of all personally submitted to the Lord Jesus Christ and seeking to see in his life the lineaments of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ wrought into his being—then, one thing that ought to be true universally of Christian fathers is that there is a kind of gentle-firmness in the way in which we bring up our children, that there is a sweetness of administration of fatherly responsibility and authority, that there is something about the father that begins to make it something of a pleasure for a child to have such a father to obey—especially when that child struggles with his or her own sin and needs to subdue it in order to obey the wisdom and the words of the earthly father that God has given to them.

And so there is a word here for us—and I wonder actually if there is a word here particularly for us in our kind of community where how we parent is so important and in some of our lives where we want as rigorously and as fully as we possibly can to apply biblical principles to our parenting. Was it that the apostle Paul realized that in the virtue of seeking to apply biblical principles and biblical truths in our parenting, we might actually do that while we ourselves lacked the spirit of the biblical truths? I think I have seen fathers insisting on a level of sanctification in their children that I rather suspect is lacking in the level of sanctification they insist on in themselves—in which case they are not exercising their covenant faithfulness to their children in the way in which they are rearing them, but their fleshly domination over them. And they cannot really be interested in their children’s spiritual advance if, as a matter of fact, that kind of advance is something they have resisted in their own lives. At the end of the day, what they are really interested in is the pride of the flesh that enables them to boast about how their children are doing the next time they send the Christmas letter out.

And so, his first word (there’s no escaping the force of this) to Christian fathers is actually a word of self-examination: Am I provoking my children to anger? Do I insisting on a pattern of life that is manifest to them—even although they couldn’t express it in theological terms—it’s manifest to them that they are having a demand placed on their lives that I have escaped because I happen to be their father. So he begins with this negative word that is marvelously balanced with this positive word: “Do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Now, that’s a perfectly good translation of what Paul actually says; but, I do think its significant that the verb that Paul uses here, in verse 4, “bring them up” is a verb that echoes the very disposition that he has said to husbands, that they are to have to their wives—he says, “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it.” And he’s echoing that language; and you see what he’s saying. He’s saying, “You look after your body, don’t you?” That’s an application to us, isn’t it? There’s not a nation in the world that looks after its bodies more carefully than people in the United States. I know there are glaring exceptions, but, by and large it is true. We nourish our bodies. And we have this beautiful picture that this is what the Christian husband does for the Christian wife—the Christian husband has a gentle, nourishing love for the one that he married. But you Paul is saying. He’s saying, “That same affection that you have for your wife, Christian father, is to be manifest to your children.”

I actually think there is a considerable danger, in much of the literature I have seen, that the actually picture of being a Christian husband comes more from Hollywood than it does from Scripture. And it is altogether possible to be a Hollywood-style Christian husband and an Amityville-style Christian father—lacking this tenderness. Now, isn’t that something that the Bible emphasizes again and again and again in our ultimate model of fatherhood—the tenderness of God towards his children, the affection of God towards his children.

Paul is saying, “Let that seep into the lives of your children.” If for no other reason than if you do not express the affection of the heavenly Father the end result will be that the heavenly Father Himself will be distorted in the eyes of your children.” You understand that, don’t you? That there is almost inevitably going to be a tendency in the minds of our children that they will think of the heavenly Father, first of all, in terms of the categories in which they understand their earthly Fathers.

Now, you know there’s an amazing amount of pastoral ministry goes on behind the scenes in which ministers are sitting people down and saying, “You do not get your model of your heavenly Father, from your earthly father. You need to turn all that on your head and understand that you get your model of the heavenly Father from the relationship between the Heavenly Father and the Heavenly Son. And you need to see that you’ve been brought into fellowship with the Heavenly Son in order that you may know and experience his heavenly Father as it were with a heartbeat that is in tune and in time with His love and affection for his Heavenly Father;” but, you know, that’s a stage beyond where most of our children are when they are 7 or 8 years old. When we teach them to pray, “Our Father, not who is at the table, but ‘Our Father, who is in Heaven,” the only categories by which to interpret fatherhood that are available to them are you—if you’re a father.

And here’s the awesome thing—they’re almost bound to think of His fatherhood by extrapolating from your fatherhood—and, in extrapolating from your fatherhood they are not likely to be sophisticated enough spiritually to say, “I need to phase out all the bad parts in my dad’s fatherhood if I’m going to understand His Fatherhood.” No, actually the very reverse is going to be the case. They’re going to think, “I have a sense of what His fatherhood is like”—and God’s Fatherhood, therefore, is going to be an exaggerated form of that.

So you see now why the Apostle begins with the negative, “Fathers, he says, don’t provoke your children to wrath,” and then with this marvelous positive, “That just as you care for your body, and care for your wife with a native love and husbandly affection, so you care for your children with that kind of affection. The reason is because the air that our children first breathe in spiritually is the air that I have first breathed out in the home spiritually. And they catch it! I can have all the theological propositions right. I can know Berkof off by heart. I can know Calvin’s Institutes backwards. I can know all the writings of James Henley Thornwell, R.L. Dabney and all the rest of them and breath a profoundly unChrist-like spirit—and that’s what my children will pick up. And you see it over and over again—I recognize there are some extraordinary—thank God there are extraordinary exceptions to this; but by and large it’s true that God has so constituted the nature of human kind placing us in families in such a way that—not only genetically are we connected to our parents—but in our nurture we are connected to them; and we take on, unconsciously, but really the dispositions of our parents to all kinds of things—and supremely that disposition that runs through them all—that disposition of their true heart to their heavenly Father.

\*An excerpt taken from Sinclair Ferguson’s 2007 talk, “The Man of the House”—an exposition of Ephesians 5:22-6:4.