

"Fathers"  
Colossians 3:21 June 19, 1994

Barbara and I, along with our first-born, who was not quite two years of age, were visiting my parents in their home. Grandma's and Grandpa's house was less kid-proof than our own and so there were vases, books and other ornaments decoratively placed around the living room.

Kim, our two year old, had been in the house several times before and knew that there were certain things that she was not allowed to play with or even touch.

In spite of that past education, there was a particular vase that caught her attention that day and she went to it and picked it up.

I went to her and reminded her that she was not to touch it and I put it back and diverted her attention with a toy.

I decided not to move it out of her reach because, though we would do that with many things - it wasn't appropriate to do it is someone else's home and furthermore Kim needed to learn that "no" meant "no".

I truly thought that was the end of it until I saw her, a little later, eyeing that vase from across the room. Then she inched her way over to the shelf where the vase was setting.

She looked at the vase, looked at me, and looked back at the vase.

Then she looked at me with an absolutely defiant expression while with her hand she reached over and as deliberately as anyone could took hold of the vase and picked it up.

With her eyes fixed on me, she pulled the vase in and began to walk away with it.

Well, dad, what do you do then?

We may laugh about it as we hear this story told.

We laugh because it is such a common experience.

I know I've told that story before but I tell it again because for me it classically illustrates so many issues of parenting.

There was the issue of authority:

How could this little sample person so defiantly disregard my authority?

There was the issue of embarrassment for me as a young father:

How could I have a child who was so disobedient?

My mother and father were watching - How would I respond?

And certainly there was the issue of obedience - a teachable moment.

It seemed at that moment that everything was on the line.

What was I to do? How is a father supposed to act?

This is Father's Day, 1994 and it so happens by the providence of God that we have come in our study of Colossians to the 21st verse of chapter 3.

I invite you to open your Bible to that verse (Col 3:21) to look at it with me.

In Colossians 3:21 Paul addresses his remarks to fathers.

How is a father to act in his relationship to his children now that he is a Christian?

At the beginning of this third chapter of his letter to the Colossians the Apostle Paul wrote of how different believers lives would be because of their new relationship to Jesus Christ.

He urged them in verse 8 to rid themselves of such things as anger, rage, malice, slander etc.

In verse 12, they were instead to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and peace.

As I have mentioned the last two weeks, what Paul is doing in verses 18 and following is to make very practical application of the challenge he lays before them in the first half of the chapter.

Knowing and loving Christ makes a difference in the relationships of life.

Two weeks ago we looked at the relationship in marriage from verses 18-19.

Last week we looked at verses 22-25 and the instruction to employees in the world of work.

Today we look at how the life of a father is changed because of his relationship to Jesus.

I am intentionally not addressing verse 20 today.

This summer the associate pastors of our church will be preaching a series of messages from the 10 Commandments.

The 5th Commandment deals with the same issue as verse 20 and the subject will be developed at that time.

Today, I want us to think about the relationship of a father to his children.

It doesn't take an investigative reporter to see that there are differences in kids - and differences in homes.

I see the effects of poor parenting every time I pick up a newspaper, every time I go to a grocery store, or anytime I'm observing a group of people interacting with their children.

Young fathers today see the effects of poor parenting all around them and they want to do it differently.

They are saying, "God, help me" "How do I raise these kids?"

I'm glad for that question because for too long there were very few people asking it or else they were waiting until their children neared adolescence before they asked it.

What is the counsel of the Lord on raising our children?

First, to whom does God, through Paul, address his remarks? "Fathers"

In verse 20 Paul tells the children to obey their "Parents". Notice it is a word that certainly includes both parents.

Then when he comes to verse 21 he uses a different word: "Fathers".

Why? First of all I think it would be pressing the point way too far to suggest that his remarks in verse 21 don't apply to mothers - for clearly they do.

Especially to a mother who alone is raising her children.

But I think the remarks are addressed particularly to fathers because in the culture to which this was first written as in our culture, fathers tended to one of two extremes - either they were autocratic or they were uninvolved (emotionally, if not physically absent from the family).

In the contemporary Roman culture fathers had unlimited power and authority over their children.

Not only the Roman but also the Greek and Jewish cultures, that influenced these people, allowed for severe punishment for disobedient children.

I believe it is a principle of God and human living that with more authority comes more responsibility.

It's true in government, industry, and in all relationships of life - and its true in the home as well.

If men are going to be the leaders in their homes (which is what the Bible teaches) then they will bear primary responsibility - and so Paul addresses himself to fathers.

And what is the instruction? READ v 21

I know, and you know, this isn't all God says about Christian child-rearing. Then isn't it interesting that of all Paul could have said to these men about fathering, he chose this?

Notice the positive instruction to each group prior to this:

V 18 Wives submit

v 19 Husbands love

v 20 Children obey

v 22 Slaves obey

v 4:1 Masters provide...

v 21 Fathers, do not...

Has Paul touched on a tendency among fathers that was too true then and too true today?

I know a dad, not of this church, who, unfortunately, has done precisely that - his discipline has been capricious and often excessive.

On one occasion he will completely overlook certain behavior and on the next occasion he will explode in violence.

He loses control of himself and is unreasonable, unfair, and unkind.

I have watched the children through the years and I sense a smoldering hostility.

Haven't you met children like that?

They are like volcanoes waiting to erupt.

There is a sullenness about them that is eerie.

And the closer you get to the situation, you know it is only a matter of time before the anger explodes.

Paul's instruction seems so appropriate: "Don't embitter your children"

That word "embitter" can be translated "provoke".

Don't provoke your children.

The word "embitter" means to "stir up".

Paul writing to the Ephesian Christians said something similar: "Fathers, don't exasperate your children"

Don't arouse them to anger.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not suggesting fathers never do anything to which their children would respond angrily.

Children may become angry but the instruction to fathers is don't give them reason to be angry.

Key word is "reason".

Their own sinfulness may give rise to their anger in response to your actions

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The instruction here is, may it not be your sinfulness which gives rise to their anger.

To "embitter" is to increase the gravity or the intensity of the feelings.

Little by little through his early years the child grows frustrated and more discouraged and angrier.

Ounce by ounce the provocation's add up until there is a heavy weight on the child that he eventually tries to throw off through rebellious behavior but usually can't get rid of his whole life.

How many fathers and mothers have sown such hostility by their unreasonable demands, their unfair discipline (which really ought to be called abuse) and their cutting remarks.

Before going on with negative and positive descriptions of how fathers discourage or encourage their children I want to address the issue of discipline.

It might be tempting in the light of just this 21st verse to suggest that Paul is promoting permissiveness.

As if he were saying, "Fathers, make certain you never cross your kids."

Of course that is not what he is teaching.

On the authority of other passages of Scripture we know there is a major assumption unstated, but implied, in this passage.

In the parallel passage of Ephesians 6:4 we read:

"Father's don't exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Fathers instead of embittering or exasperating them, "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord".

This word "Training" is in the NASB translated as "Discipline".

In fact, the Greek word that is here translated "train" is usually translated "discipline":

Remember Hebrews 12?

"The Lord disciplines those he loves. And He punishes everyone he accepts as a son. God is training you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined then you are not true sons. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

The concept of "training" is this issue of "discipline".

If a father is planning to "bring up his children" then he cannot overlook discipline.

Unfortunately, the very word "discipline" conjures up negative images in the minds of most people.

In the name of discipline many parents have abused their children.

In the name of discipline many parents were themselves abused as children.

I hate "abuse".

I know of nothing in life that I detest more than child abuse. When I see it, I physically hurt - it rips at my insides.

And nothing has caused me more inward shame then when I have hastily and wrongly punished my own children unfairly - it was abuse.

I hate "abuse" but I love "discipline".

"Discipline" is not negative when I see how God uses it.

In this very passage it is obvious that discipline is a part of "nurturing" of "bringing children up".

Every time it is used in the N.T. it is in the context of helping someone learn how to act, how to set limits, how to become self-disciplined.

My daughter, Stephanie, told us a couple of years ago about a visiting professor at her college who said that a parent should never curb a child's expressions of their emotions. So that you do not repress your children you must allow them unbridled expression of their feelings.

Now there is some wisdom in what the professor was saying - we must allow children to feel and express emotions but how sad to never train/discipline the child in the productive expression of those feelings.

Someone wrote, "every generation is only 20 years away" from anarchy - total lawlessness - loss of self-discipline because no one cared enough for the next generation to discipline them.

In every area of life, children need someone there to guide them, to show them the limits, to keep them from hurting themselves until they learn enough self-discipline to go it alone.

Children operate under a misguided notion that goes something like this: "If you love me you'll want me to be happy!"

But a wise parent knows that there are many things in life that will bring you temporary happiness but a lifetime of sorrow.

Thomas Howard says it so well when he uses the illustration of the child who wants another candy bar.

His thinking works like this:

If one candy bar tastes good and makes me happy, then another candy bar will make me happier.

And if you say "no". The child says, "Why not? You're being cruel. You don't like me. You want me to be unhappy. You hate me."

How do you argue with that? It has all of the apparent evidence on its side - candy bars do taste good and they do make the child happy.

And if we love him and want to make him happy then surely we will give him the candy bar.

That logic is so apparently good but so absolutely wrong!

We've been there - we know that too many candy bars will make him sick - and I love him and don't want him to sick or become a pig - and so I forbid him this pleasure.

"How do I possibly explain to him that this cruelty on my part is boosting him directly on towards a freedom and power he can't even imagine right now - the freedom and power to desire and to choose authentic happiness.?"

Left to himself, in his lack of self-discipline, he will ruin not only his appetite, but eventually his life and his eternity.

Surely a candy bar can't ruin him - or can it?!

The child says, "If you love me you'll want me to be happy.

BUT the godly parent is operating under a different notion:

"Because I love you I want you to be good"

Because goodness will yield not just temporary happiness but a lifetime of joy.

The word "NO" along with the authority and discipline to back it is a saving word - you are saving a child from his undisciplined self.

A child doesn't know there is a lot he doesn't know.

For his sake, he must have an outside authoritative voice or he will ruin himself.

And by having a authoritative parent who loves him enough to discipline him he will learn how to submit to THE authority - he will learn the real freedom in obeying "Thus saith the Lord."

Do you love your child - then you will discipline him/her!

I believe the assumption that is being made in this Colossian text is that fathers will discipline their children.

The question is how to discipline without embittering them.

I'd like to note for you several actions that can make children bitter. Things that embitter them, things that stir them up to anger, that provoke them.

These things, I suggest, are implied in the command, "Fathers don't embitter your children or they will become discouraged."

First, Dad, be generous not selfish.

Kent Hughes tells of a cartoon where a father comes home from work, grouchy because his boss treated him unfairly.

The dad is irritable toward his son,  
the son kicks the dog,

And the dog runs down the street biting the first man he sees who happens to be the father's boss.

Dads, how often are our actions toward our children governed by our irritability, our discomfort.

We are in a bad mood and so the kids have to be careful.

How often do our demands on our children flow not out of a desire for their good but out of our own selfishness.

There are fathers who must think their children exist for them.

It doesn't take a child long to figure out that a father's petty demands are rooted in selfishness not generosity.

It's reasonable to ask, "Is this request or demand or discipline of my child genuinely for the sake of my child or is it truly only for my sake?"

Secondly, I'd say, "Dad, be kind, don't embarrass your children."

Certainly a child will become embittered if we repeatedly attack their personhood.

Two year old Jims, the son of one of pastors, Jim Kimbriel, was walking across the floor of our home and stumbled.

The way it happened was cute and we laughed.

But the instant embarrassment that he experienced made us realize again how vulnerable a child is and careful we must be to not do what impacts them as ridicule.

Our embarrassment of Jims was accidental but how many fathers use ridicule and embarrassment as a means of punishment or as just a means of meanness.

Humiliation breeds hostility not self-discipline.

And a child can tell the difference between meanness and fairness.

Be kind! Consider the feelings of the child that have nothing to do with the discipline you are giving or the demands you are making.

All discipline and correction of children should be done as privately as possible.

Thirdly, Dad, be consistent not capricious.

How sad for a child to live in fear not knowing what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior especially when the same action will bring acceptance one time and wrath another.

If an action is o.k. today it ought to be o.k. tomorrow.  
If it is wrong today it ought to be wrong tomorrow.

Doesn't it make you angry to see a child punished or ridiculed for something they didn't know was wrong?

I've been a father for over 27 years, and if you count my relationship to each of my three daughters separately, I have 75 years of fathering experience.

Among many other things, experience has taught me that consistency is difficult.

In fact, do you know what it requires - self-discipline.  
Consistency requires self-discipline.

It means that we, fathers, will know what is right and wrong, will live by those rules ourselves and will patiently hold our children to those standards.

Dad, be consistent not capricious.

Fourthly, Dad, be reasonable not harsh.

Pastor Gordon MacDonald tells of being at the beach one hot Summer day.

He said, I shivered at the implications of what I saw happen.

"An eight year old was getting a bit too enthusiastic with a group of five-year-olds in the water.

He didn't know his own strength and what started out as fun was now getting out of control.

Moments passed and some of the parents on the sand were getting uneasy.

They kept looking at the father of the bigger boy wishing him to do something.

That father seemed to ignore it until all of the sudden with a booming voice:

"Robert, get out of that water this instant.

"Blast it, Robert, I'm getting sick and tired of the way you're acting. Look at what you've done. Can't you keep your hands off those kids?"

The child - nervously glancing sideways to see who else was taking in the tirade - offered a whimpering response "But Daddy..."

"Don't talk back to me", the father responded more loudly than before.

"Don't argue with me. I saw what you were doing, and I'm disgusted with you. Now sit down here on the beach until we go and (think about what is going to happen when you get home)."

The humiliated child slumped to the sand and kept his eyes down so as not to see those staring at him.

The father sat back down with his friends and began talking as if nothing had happened.

"But something had happened", MacDonald writes, "A child was crushed."

Getting grounded for a month for missing a deadline by five minutes is not fair.

Getting a spanking the first time a child tries out a four-letter word at home isn't fair.

All children have a built-in sense of fairness and justice.

And if you violate that continually you will embitter your children.

Dad, be fair not harsh.

Fifthly, Dad, be forgiving rather than constantly critical.

I think it is right that people strive for excellence.

I think we should encourage children to do the best they can.

But each age, each level of maturity, and each person has a competency of its and his or her own.

To force our level of perfection on a child is to discourage them.

One of the most difficult and indicting things I ever heard from my children when they were younger was "I can't ever seem to get it right for him."

Our children can be embittered when we continually denigrate their efforts - when in their eyes they never measure up to our expectations.

Dad, be forgiving rather than constantly critical.

Lastly, Dad, being loving rather than aloof, distant.

Boswell, the famous biographer of Samuel Johnson, often spoke of a day he went fishing with his father.

Years later someone wanted to see what his father thought of that day and so checked his journals.

Of that day the elder Boswell wrote, "Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted."(MacDonald p 79 The Effective Father)

What a sad commentary on that man's understanding of fatherhood.

In an October 1985 Seventeen magazine article one girl lamented the fact that her father was not making contact even though he was physically there.

She wrote: "have you ever heard of a father who won't talk to his daughter? My father doesn't seem to know I'm alive. In my whole life he has never said he loves me or given me a goodnight kiss unless I asked him.

"I think the reason he ignores me is because I'm boring. I look at my friends and think, 'If I were funny like Jill or a super brain like Sandy or even outrageous and punk like Tasha, he would put down his paper and be fascinated.

"I play the recorder, and for the past three years I've been a soloist in the fall concert at school. Mom comes to the concerts, but Dad never does. This year, I'm a senior, so it's his last chance. I'd give anything to look out into the audience and see him there. But who am I kidding? It will never happen."

I'm afraid that selfish aloofness is a disease the modern father is very susceptible to.

I love the line from Eliot Daley where he said of himself: "Incredible. I mean, what have I done in my whole life that was of any more significance than fathering three human beings? Once they were not - didn't exist. Now they live."

They are worth the investment of my life..

Dad, be there, loving not aloof.

"Fathers do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged."