

Ephesians 6:1-4  
Provoking Children  
WRCoB 6.16.24

James Ryle tells the story that when he was 2-years-old  
His father was sent to prison.

When he was 7-years-old  
Authorities placed him in an orphanage.

At 19, he had a car wreck that killed a friend.

He sold drugs to raise money for his legal fees  
And the law caught up to him.

He was arrested, charged with a felony  
And sent to prison.

While in prison James accepted Christ  
And after he got out he went into the ministry.

Years later he sought out his father  
To reconcile with him  
And when they got together  
The conversation turned to prison life.

James's father asked, "Which prison were you in?"

James told him, and his father was taken aback.

"I helped build that prison," he said.

His father had been a welder

Who went from place to place building penitentiaries.

Ryle concludes,

"I was in the prison my father built."

On this day, Father's Day

I remind fathers and fathers-to-be

Every word, every action is building a building.

Will it be a home or will it be a prison?

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Our passage today is not just about

Avoiding confrontation and provocation.

It's about building on a foundation

Of love, respect, and understanding with our children

It's about being the kind of parents

Who help children grow into the amazing people

They have the potential to be.

That's what we want to talk about today.

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Our passage

Is part of a larger set of instructions

Called the "Christian household."

In it, Paul defines what healthy relationships look like

Previous to our passage

Paul describes a healthy spousal relationship

He then moves into the relationship

Between children and parents

And following today's passage

Paul ends with the relationship

Between servants and masters.

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If you read the whole section

You'll get the impression Paul is really patriarchal.

From our perspective, he really is.

However, almost every scholar will admit

That Paul's comments

When compared to the culture of his day

Are actually quite progressive.

A perfect example of this is Paul's comment in verse 4.

### **Ephesians 6:4 TLB**

**And now a word to you fathers. Don't keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord himself approves, with suggestions and godly advice.**

Ephesus was an important city in the Roman Empire.

It was located in what is now Turkey.

It was a city first established by the Greeks  
And then elaborately and lavishly added onto  
By the Roman Empire

The church in Ephesus  
Was a mix of Jewish and Roman Christians.

In this Greco/Roman context  
Children were not as highly valued  
As we might value them today.

Children were considered household property.

The father of the house had absolute dominion  
Over everyone in the house.

A father could do with his kids whatever he chose  
With virtually no legal consequences.

If a child was born unwanted  
A father could “expose” him/her.

Exposing a child meant leaving the child outside  
To starve, die of exposure, or eaten by wild animals

*The early Christian writer Tertullian attacked the Romans for the cruelty of their treatment of children: 'you expose them to the cold and hunger, and to wild beasts, or else you get rid of them by the slower death of drowning' (Tertullian 1869, Ad Nationes Book 1, Ch. 15).*

Exposing a child is still a practice  
In some isolated cultures.

I have a Nigerian friend born the second of twins.

His mother took and left him in the bush to die.

A missionary couple heard about it  
And told the mother if she would take him back  
They would care for all his needs.

To this day, he will tell you  
Christianity saved him, spiritually and physically.

A father could sell a child into slavery  
For any reason whatsoever.

A father could disinherit a son or daughter  
Scourge or imprison them for disobedience  
And even have them put to death.

So, Paul's admonishment to fathers  
Not to provoke their children is quite astonishing.

Paul advises that overly severe discipline  
Results in provoking children to anger.

Anger that potentially evolves  
Into bitterness and rebellion.

To provoke a child means that our provocation  
Causes more stress, more anxiety  
And more anger in children.

Ultimately producing all kinds of negative consequences

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There's a single mom, who struggled  
Raising her teenage son.

He always argued with her  
He was rude and disrespectful  
He constantly pushed her buttons.

One day, after a particularly heated exchange  
She realized how constantly on edge she was.

She always tried to control him  
Instead of trying to connect with him.

So, she made a conscious decision.

Instead of reacting with anger  
She chose to listen, to validate his feelings  
Even if she didn't agree with them.

She sought patience and understanding.

Well, guess what?

The change was remarkable.

Her son's anger decreased

And their relationship improved.

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But let's not get ahead of ourselves here.

Let's not swing wildly to being overly lenient.

That can be just as big a problem.

Super permissive parents harm their children as well.

Many children become unruly

Under too lenient a rule.

An article from the HuffPost

*Kids are ruder now, but it's not their fault," she said. Our society as a whole doesn't teach formal table manners, and families' stress levels are through the roof. Parents work longer hours and have less time to spend with kids, and perhaps less ability to model their interactions with others.*

When it comes to instilling manners  
To be obedient and well-behaved  
To be respectful and courteous

Parents just don't seem to have the time or the energy.

One thing I've noticed  
That despite the long hours and stress  
Parents experience

To make up for their time away from home  
They end up getting their kids  
Involved in every activity that comes their way.

It may be quality time to sit in the bleachers  
And cheer the kids' sports activities all weekend long

But at the end of the day  
If you haven't spent time disciplining them  
To clean up after themselves  
To speak respectfully to others  
To be a contributor in the household

We haven't done what the Bible has instructed us to do.

Sports and academics are important.

But spending time with your kids  
In nurturing and affirming ways



Teaching them life's lessons  
Introducing them to God and the church

Disciplining and instructing them  
On how to act in public places  
And treating one another with respect . . .

Giving them responsibilities in the home  
And limiting screen time  
Is of huge importance  
In raising well-balanced healthy kids.

Don't blame children for their rude behavior  
Blame the environment they were raised in.

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I know, I am not always calm and collected

I have provoked before  
And I will probably provoke again.

And not just as a father to my children  
And not just as a husband to my wife

And not just as a pastor to my congregation

I have likely provoked God himself.

And for that, I confess my sins, seek forgiveness  
And strive to do better.

Our passage reminds us to bring children up  
In the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

It's about guidance and teaching.

It's about showing our children  
How to navigate the world  
How to make good decisions  
How to live a life that honors God.

It's about setting boundaries  
Holding children accountable for their actions  
And celebrating their successes.

It's about letting them know  
Just how much you love them  
And want the very best for them.

It's about being their biggest cheerleader  
Their refuge and safe harbor

A trustworthy trail guide on their journey through life.

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I am father and grandfather to four wonderful children  
And four beautiful grandkids.

I am also a pastor of a wonderful church.

It can be quite the challenge to find time  
To be an attentive father and husband

And to be a good pastor

I have learned one thing, though.

I have learned it is time to leave the office  
When this happens

- When thou speaketh to thy children and helpmate thusly.
- When I answer my home phone, "WRCoB."
- When I say good morning to everyone I meet whether it is morning, noon, or night.
- When I start parsing verbs in *Fishing for Pike*.
- When I comfort my 13-year-old, with, "Honey, no worries, one day this will make a good sermon illustration".
- When I count going home for lunch as a pastoral visit. (Source: Robert A. Altstadt, *Leadership, Vol. 4*).

Paul means what he says because he says it again  
This time to the church in Colossae

### **Colossians 3:20-21 NRSV**

**<sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.**

Pretty radical teaching in the day  
When children were considered property.

So, the next time we fathers  
Feel the urge to stand up and scream  
Take a deep breath.

Remember this verse.

Remember the power of words  
Both the negative and positive power of words.

Let's choose to build our children up  
Not tear them down.

Let's choose love and patience  
Let's choose to be the best parents we can be.

Let's raise children who are not only successful  
But also, kind, compassionate  
And strong in their faith.

Let's go out and be those parents  
The ones who build their children up

One loving word and one patient action at a time.