



What does it mean, Fathers do not exasperate your children?

What does it mean in Ephesians 6:4 where it says Fathers do not exasperate your children? The initial thought that comes to mind is the idea of an overly authoritarian father making life hell for his child either through excessive punishment or unjust and rough treatment.

It is quite likely that the apostle Paul may have witnessed some harsh treatment of children among the Graeco – Roman communities in Ephesus where recently converted fathers still managed their families according to their own upbringing. In Paul's day the head of a Roman family exercised a sovereign authority over all members of the family, which extended to the right to kill his own child if necessary. Children were often treated like slaves.

Thus, Paul will have observed that unjust improper parental treatment could have the effect of angering the child so that he or she finds it difficult to honour the parent. Such improper use of parental authority could include arbitrary, inconsistent, foolish, harsh and cruel treatment. Parents need to be consistent, so that their life and doctrine match up. Raising children involves setting an example just as Christians are called to follow the teaching and life of their Lord Jesus or their teacher Paul. Words and practice go together. In our relatively well heeled societies there should be no need for children to live out in the street and yet some do; many out of sheer rebellion but others because they have become exasperated by their unjust fathers. These fathers, like their ancient Roman counterparts, don't understand that parental rule is not meant to be arbitrary but is derived because they and their children (whether they realize it or not) are accountable to their Creator.

However, I wonder whether such harsh treatment is the real problem among the majority of parents today. It seems to me that exasperating children is the result of a different problem today, more akin to Eli's sin, who was excessively soft with his sons. I venture to submit that many children today do not enjoy regular corporal and remedial discipline for disobedience and defiance. This is to their detriment and indeed the detriment of family, church and society. According to judge Samuel, both Eli's sons were wicked men. 1 Samuel 2:12 says they had no regard for the Lord. They slept with women who served at the entrance of the tent and although they were priests, they treated the sacrifices with contempt. Why was that? Chapter 3:13 tells us; Eli failed to restrain them and his sons became covenant despisers. They were womanizers and thugs and rebels which came about because of parental weakness. Certainly, God holds every individual responsible for his or her own sin, but Eli's failure to restrain is clearly a contributing factor to his sons problems later in life.

Eli's example

The example of Eli teaches us an important lesson. In family life parents must rule whether they feel they are natural born leaders or not. Weakness of character or being unfit as a parent doesn't absolve the responsibility or the terrible consequences of failure to rule the children well. The picture of feeble old Eli, faithful to God's cause and ready to die for the ark of God but unfaithful to his duty as a parent and unable to restrain his sons, suggests to us the causes and consequences of parental weakness. The main cause in view here is the soft touch. That is, following the easy or natural way rather than the rule of law or duty. It is good-natured weakness (misnamed as kindness) which shies from thwarting a child's will or plans, and winces at rebuke or punishment of a child. This is really little more than a form of laziness that won't take the trouble to rule and guide the child according to God's Word. Sadly such weakness often results in the greater pain of seeing

the child grow up into adulthood unrestrained and unprotected. As it often happens the child may forsake his parents, or his Lord and the Church later on in life. If churches are diminishing in numbers and membership is predominately made up of the aged, then you can be sure that the sin of Eli has been a contributing factor.

Therefore the apostle writes; bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Our children are the Lord's and so we train them for Him. But where do we begin? Its such a huge task often fraught with difficulty. There are so many outside influences and pressures that militate against good parental upbringing. A state education system gets its values from who knows where?; peer group pressure, worldly philosophies such as self esteem impressed upon us by the new priesthood of psychology which purports to give us better wisdom than the scriptures. However, the apostle Paul's injunction would surely have us begin with God and even blind Freddie can see that God is a God of order. That is plainly evident from the order we see in our solar system down to the order we see in the makeup of an atom. It is also evident in the expression of law and order among God's covenant community. There is divine law for everything. Therefore, I believe it is essential that in order to bring up our children in the fear and instruction of the Lord we teach children from the earliest age to conform to God's good order and obey His law. For the child with little understanding this is the foundation of a useful and happy life; a life of order and self control. When a child begins to live by the rule of law, impulse or circumstance will not rule that child but there will develop in him a steady sense of purpose and the ability to know and do what is right.

Acknowledgment of Jesus as Saviour may be worthless if the child does not know Jesus as Lord. Such a child who only knows Jesus as his or her friend may grow up thinking he is OK because of his faith, but then, later on in life, may think nothing of flatting with a non-Christian, going to the rugby on Sunday, leaving Mum to clean up his messy room, and so on. Therefore, it is important to cultivate the habit of order in a little child, for example: Teaching him to wash his hands regularly before meals, keeping his room tidy, not allowing him to back chat or speak insolently to his parents, obeying without question, honouring the Lord's day, and helping regularly with household chores without being allowed to complain. Such external habits of order will pass on into habits of the mind later on in life and will be a mighty force in his moral, spiritual and intellectual life. The child will then develop a sound character, firmness of purpose and strength of will. Moreover as God's law is taught to the covenant child, in its proper context, the great redemptive acts of God will also be revealed. Then, through the indwelling and leading of the Holy Spirit, the child will learn about Jesus Christ as Saviour and will learn to love Jesus as well as learning self denial, holiness and the grace and humility that ought to be characteristic of the Christian. Parents must remember that obedience precedes understanding and that as Proverbs points out, a child can't learn unless he or she is under control.

Authority, discipline & love

For such training to bear fruit several important elements may not be neglected, such as parental authority. We are not talking about the harsh kind of authoritarianism which may be unjust or unloving and which exasperates the child. Real authority is a personal possession and a powerful influence if it comes from God. However the effect of that influence and authority over the child will depend to a large extent on the weight of the parent's own moral character as he or she seeks to reflect God's ways; and how consistently they seek to apply the word of God to every area of life.

Another is discipline, an aspect of child training that no parent may neglect. It is in this area that force must at times be exerted. In the Scriptures chastisement refers to the use of a rod to inflict pain sufficient to correct a child's rebellion or wilful disobedience. (Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:13; 29:15) Parents will help a child become obedient and respect their word and God's Word by proper use of the rod. Some parents will say that the rod doesn't work. They say I've smacked my child and it hasn't made any difference. But it takes the best part of a childhood to make a difference. It is consistency that is the key.

And last but not least there must be love. What is love!? Too often love is interpreted the wrong way. Let your children have some fun, be nice to them. Give them anything they want. Buy them a

computer and let them spend hour after hour playing time-wasting and brain-numbing games. Indulge them. But what greater love has a man than he lay down his life for a friend? Or what greater love has a mother than she deny herself a career and an extra income to stay at home and produce and train up her covenant blessings. What greater love has a father than he sacrifice personal pleasures or things so he can provide his children with the best of Christian education and skills so that they will be well equipped for church and society. It takes a little love to drag ourselves away from the study or the TV or our hobby out in the garage and spend enough time to regularly teach our children the faith of our fathers. It also takes love to muster the fortitude and firm resolve necessary to apply discipline. A truly loving mother will teach her children that love is not about self gratification but about self giving and that the currently popular nonsense about self esteem and the like is destructive, serving only to produce precocious and wilful children with artificially inflated egos. Rather, true confidence can only be gained by effort and hard work with godliness and that godliness in every area of life should be the motivation behind every thought, word and deed. (2 Corinthians 10:1-5)

All parents without exception have been given the responsibility to rule their children and if they honestly seek to do so by the grace of God, step by step, their efforts won't go without reward. They will certainly not frustrate their children. God loves the children and wants them trained for Himself. Train up a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it. Leave them to their own devices and they will surely be exasperated!

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