
WHAT ARE CHILDREN FOR?
Ephesians 6:1-4; Luke 2:41-51

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For this sermon, I knew I was going to focus on Ephesians 6:1-4. Then I remembered the story about Jesus at age 12 when he upset his parents by disappearing without telling them where he was. How interesting that Paul tells children to obey their parents and here is Jesus causing a huge distress for his parents! I thought it would be interesting to put these passages next to each other to see what they teach us about parenting.

Warning: This sermon is not the magic bullet that will get your children to behave the way you want them to. Sorry, moms! The good news is that there are solutions to many behavior issues, but that is not what I am going to talk about this morning.

My premise – Almost every one of us can do a better parenting job. This is another way of saying that very few of us will ever be perfect parents. Let me ask, “Are there any perfect parents here?” Here is what I want us to hear. We may not be perfect, but it is also encouraging to know that it is possible to get it right more often than wrong if we work at it.

Now let me confess something to you. Teresa and I never gave much thought to what children are for. In fact, we had no specific philosophy of child rearing. We parented out of our own separate experiences as children. Our parents set the pattern. For the most part, we did it the way they did it. We thought we turned out pretty good, so why not do it the same way?

Actually, we never thought that either. We don’t remember having any conscious game plan for parenting our children. No bedtime schedules until they were in school. No hard and fast rules about finishing their plates before having dessert. We didn’t make them eat disgusting stuff like my father did me, like squash. We didn’t even have regular bedtime prayers with them like my mother did me when I was growing up. There was no such thing as car seats, not like we have today. We shiver now to think that we drove up and down highways with our little ones bouncing around in the back seat.

You see, we weren’t very good parents, not by today’s standards. So I am really not the one to be telling you how to be good parents. I think it is only by the grace of God that our children survived and turned out to be the adults we are so proud of. It is truly a miracle, especially when we look back and remember those times when we weren’t sure they were going to make it to their next birthday.

This is what I want to emphasize this morning, the miracle of parenting by the grace of God. I went to the bookstore. Lots of books about how to have well-behaved, well-rounded, successful children. I even

found a book with the subtitle, "Everything you need to know to have well-behaved children in five days." That has to be a best seller! But I didn't see much about God's grace and the miracle of parenting. Not even in the religious books. Every book assumes that if we do certain things a certain way, we can turn out lovely children. The truth is that some children grow up in terrible households and end up being shining lights. Others grow up in great homes and end up being rebellious outsiders all their lives.

So the first thing I want to say to you parents is that beyond everything you are doing or not doing, God's grace is at work. So are a lot of other factors you have no control over. But one thing people of faith can be sure of is the grace of God at work in our children's lives. Psalm 127 says "Children indeed are a heritage from the Lord." They are God's gifts to us. God has a vested interest in our children. And remember Jesus. He loved children. In Mark 10, his disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus. It says he was indignant with his disciples and said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Pretty strong language. Sometimes, parents, we have to get out of the way of God's grace and let God do His thing with our kids.

Now let's look at Ephesians 6:1-4. These are obviously the Apostle Paul's words to children. When a letter came from Paul to a church, the pastor would read it to the congregation. These verses tell us that children must have been in worship. Maybe Paul is writing to pre-teens and teenagers, telling them to obey their parents. But I want us to look at these words to hear what they say to us parents.

In verse 1 Paul tells the children, "Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Here is what he is saying to me. Are you the kind of parent your children want to obey? Let me suggest three short prayers for parents. You might want to add these to your daily prayer schedule.

"Lord, help me be the kind of parent my children will want to obey."

"Help me be someone they can model their lives after."

"Lord, help my children survive my parenting to become what you want them to become."

You see, realizing that God's grace is the magic bullet brings a kind of humility into parenting. I am going to do the best I know how, and maybe even learn some better ways to be a parent, but I know that none of us makes it except by the grace of God.

Paul tells the children to obey their parents "in the Lord." Parents, are we in the Lord? In our parenting, are we in the Lord? Why should your children obey you? Paul says it is only right for them to obey us when we are "in the Lord". Looks like family relationships begin with us parents and our relationship to the Lord.

There is a good reason for us to be “in the Lord”. In verses 2 and 3, Paul quotes one of the Ten Commandments. “Honor you father and your mother . . . so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

What does this say to us parents? It says there is a lot at stake in our parenting. I think we all know that, and many times we fear that we may not be doing a good enough job. We wonder what our children will turn out to be like. We really don’t want to be the cause of our children’s failure in life.

As Teresa and I talked about our parenting the other day, I came to realize that this fear may be the thing that causes a lot of us to over-parent. We really believe it is all our doing, how our children turn out. So we grab hold of a parenting method, at least with the first child, determined to turn out the perfect child. The first child wants to be perfect and plays the role, and may even become a perfectionist with unreal expectations of himself or herself. He or she may live a life of high internal stress basically trying to please the parents. Or this child might break under the pressure and simply cop out of life.

Then the second one comes along. A different personality in the making. A different environment. Number two in the birth order. And we can’t figure out why number two responds so differently from number one, not necessarily any better or worse, just different. Then if number three comes along, number two starts feeling unloved. I know what I am talking about. I am a middle child. I’m not bitter. My older sister always seemed to be the preferred child and my younger sister was spoiled. Not complaining. I’m over it. Really! Number three becomes the baby of the family, maybe until his or her dying day. This third one is the baby, the pampered one. And so it goes. Parenting is not fair!

We tie ourselves in knots worrying about our children and maybe we overcompensate for our fears by over-parenting. Let me say this without being simplistic. **It seems to me that “in the Lord” is about the most important element in parenting.** It certainly doesn’t tell you what to do when number one child suddenly flops on the floor with a screeching howl of displeasure because he doesn’t want to go to bed or number two child grabs your leg and refuses to let go while begging for a cookie or your teen gets busted for stealing hood ornaments or worse. In the heat of the moment, it seems like we have failed as parents and how embarrassing, especially if it happens in public. So we react the best we know how or just spontaneously, probably like out parents reacted. I don’t ever remember stopping to think, “Now, what would Jesus do?” when my number one son pushed my number two daughter off a stool on the patio and gave her a concussion. Or when my 16 year old number one son drove the getaway car for his friends who were stealing hood ornaments in an exclusive neighborhood in San Antonio.

But here's the deal. We want our children to live long and prosper, and the single most important element is being "in the Lord." It can keep us from "killing" our children in more ways than one.

In verse 4, Paul tells us what "in the Lord" parenting looks like.

"Parents, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Now we finally get to what "in the Lord" means in a practical sense.

It means practicing what the Lord teaches us about how to relate to one another, especially to our children. Isn't it amazing that Paul includes no advice about punishing misbehavior or rewarding good behavior? I guess he figures parents will figure that out if they are "in the Lord." Or at least they will get some training for it. Training is a big thing in the Bible. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray." "In the right way" means "in the Lord", the key to Christian parenting.

I found a definition of Christian parenting that I like. It is from a book called "Active Christian Parenting." This is a book Lisa, our Christian Educator, had on her shelf.

The purpose of Christian parenting is to enable parents and children to live together with love, respect, and care for one another while preparing children to survive and thrive as Christians in their society.

I like this because it says the home is God's training ground where we learn love, respect, and care for one another. It also says that the home is the primary place where children learn what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus and a servant of God.

Just for fun, let's look at the story of Jesus in the temple in Luke 2 from a parent's perspective. I would call this story "Be the Parent!"

Jesus is twelve years old. He goes with his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. This is a religious family, obedient to God. But when his parents head home, they realize after a day of walking that they have not seen their son. They assumed he was with family or friends, a safe thing to do back then.

They cannot find him anywhere. No one has seen Jesus. So what do the parents do? They panic big time. They hurry back to Jerusalem, which takes another day, and for three days they search for their first-born son. Can you imagine what is going in their hearts and minds? There is no FBI to help find their child. They retrace their steps. They search everywhere. Oddly enough, about the last place they look is the temple. And there he is having a how-do-you-do talk with the priests.

Now, do the parents stop to think, "What would Jesus do?" Or, since he is Jesus, the Son of God, we better take it easy on him? No. They tell him how much he has distressed them with his disrespectful behavior. Son of God or no Son of God, they are his parents. They deserve better. They don't even understand his excuse about being in his Father's house. He is only 12, after all.

Here is what I want us to see. It says in verse 51 that he rejoined his family, went home with them, and **was obedient to them**. He never did that again. In fact, in verse 52, it says he increased in wisdom and in years. Jesus actually learned something valuable from his parents who were being the Parent.

But here is the other thing to notice. Mary treasured all these things in her heart. Somehow, the bond between her and her son was strengthened. She loved him more than ever. I can imagine this story turning out a lot different if the parents had reacted differently. But they were "in the Lord", and not knowing what the future would bring, they had helped prepare Jesus for the biggest test of his obedience, his obedience to God when called to give his life on the cross for the sins of the world.

I started by saying that it is by the grace of God our children survive our parenting. And as parents, we have an awesome opportunity to prepare them for their purpose in life. All of us can do better, but in the final analysis it is God's purpose at work, and they are in God's hands. We do the best we know how. And then, at some point, they are responsible for their own decisions and their own relation to God and their sense of calling in life.

What are children for? To carry on the love relationship between God and humans. To serve God and to make a difference in the world, so that tomorrow is better than today, and the world a better place for all people because they lived.