

CHILDREN AND PARENTS  
COLOSSIANS 3:20-21

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

As home schooling parents for several years my wife and I had occasion to participate in outings with other home schooling families. We were part of a home schooling group in Connecticut which had a fairly even split between evangelical Christians and those with mostly non-religious backgrounds. .

On field trips, the contrast in behavior between the children from evangelical families and children from non-evangelical families was striking. On these occasions the Christian kids were under control and reasonably responsive to their parents, and the other kids were out of control and driving their parents crazy.

What was the reason for the difference? My conclusion was that it had to do with the parents' view of parenting and authority and the nature of children. The Christian parents had a Biblical view of these subjects. The others picked up their views from other sources. My perception was that many of these other parents came of age during the rebellious days of the sixties and seventies when any kind of authority was viewed with suspicion. These parents sought to avoid coercion and physical discipline as much as possible. There are some trends in our society that still promote this kind of thinking.

Several years ago I went to the public library and skimmed through a number of books on parenting to find out what kind of parenting advice is available, and I found just about every view of parenting imaginable that all were authored by someone with a Ph.D. Parents without a Biblical framework can be left confused, frustrated, and/or resentful toward their children. University of Chicago sociology professor James Coleman says, **"I think we are becoming the first species in the history of the world which is unable to care for its young. Overall, child bearing is one of the biggest casualties of the modern age, which is being ushered in by this generation."** (Landon Jones, *Great Expectations*, 1980, p. 250)

We Christians have an infallible guidebook that gives us basic instructions about the job of parenting. It is infallible because it is given to us by the One who made us, our Divine Manufacturer. The passage before us obviously doesn't tell us everything that we need to know about parenting. But it gives us the most important principles that we need to know about how to be effective in raising kids.

Our overall subject is the New Testament book of Colossians. We have seen that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to a small church in a small town in western Asia Minor to counter the false teaching of heretics there. In the first two chapters he talks about basics of Christian theology. Here in #3 he applies that theology to real life situations. In our immediate context he describes how Christian families should operate. The last two

Sundays we saw what he had to say about the proper roles of men and women in marriage. Today we shall see what he has to say about children and parents. When we get to the part about not provoking our kids, I will give you the chance to suggest some specific things that we can do to avoid that problem.

I.

First, we will look at THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESPONSIBILITY...), as it is described for us in v. 20 of Colossians #3. Paul writes, “**Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.**” The author appears to be addressing children who are younger and who are living at home with their parents. This is supported by the parallel passage in Ephesians 6 which speaks of raising up these same children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

A.

So let’s look at THE COMMAND. (I. A. THE COMMAND) “**Obey your parents in everything...**” The foundation for this admonition is the Fifth Commandment of the Old Testament: “**Honor your father and your mother...**”, which is cited in the parallel passage in Ephesians #6. Honoring one’s parents means different things at different stages of life. When we are children at home, it means obedience. As young adults in our twenties and thirties and forties, it means respecting them and seeking advice and letting them spend time with the grandchildren. As people in our forties and fifties and beyond, honoring our parents means seeing that they are taken care of in their old age, that their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are met.

The primary responsibility of Christian young people who are living at home and who are dependent on mom and dad is to obey them. Literally the word that Paul uses means “to hear under.” It implies a willingness to listen to someone and then to follow through on what that person has said. Christian young people, if you want to be pleasing to God, obey your parents--- in all things.

The apostle here is addressing Christian families. He is assuming that he is dealing with parents and children who are believers. That may not be the situation that all of us have. The responsibility of Christian kids who have one or more unbelieving parents is still to obey them, unless they give an order for something that is clearly contrary to God’s Word. If they tell a child to rob a bank, he should not do it. God has told us not to steal. If they tell a child not to read the Bible, obey God instead. Occasionally kids find themselves in homes where they are being physically or sexually abused. In those situations kids should look for help from an adult whom they respect outside of the family.

The implication for us parents is that we need to require obedience from our kids. We need to do that from a very early age. The longer that we wait, the harder it becomes to get that obedience. What we also have to keep in mind is that as our children get older, we need to give them more freedom, and there need to be fewer things about which we demand obedience from them.

B.

Consider then THE REASONS (I. A. B. THE REASONS) for this obedience that is to be required from our children. The **first** reason is contained right in v. 20. Paul says that IT PLEASES THE LORD. (B. 1. IT PLEASURES THE LORD) In v. 18 he says that it is fitting in the Lord for wives to be subject to their husbands. In v. 22 he says that slaves should obey their masters because of the fear of the Lord. Here he says that children should obey their parents because it is pleasing to the Lord. Kids make God happy when they obey their parents.

The **second** reason that children should obey their parents is because THE NATURE OF CHILDREN REQUIRES IT. (B. 1. 2. THE NATURE OF CHILDREN...) Every parenting theory makes a judgment about who children are and who we human beings are. The conclusions which we make about that will be largely determinative for the parenting approach which we adopt. The Bible says that there are two primary characteristics that we human beings have. First, we are made in the image of God, and therefore have great value and worth. Second, we are sinners who are prone to go contrary to the course of behavior that God desires from us.

Our non-Christian homeschooling friends understood the first part. At least they recognized that their kids are very valuable creatures, whether they recognized their Creator or not. That understanding did a lot to help their parenting, and many of these kids probably turned out well because they had parents who really loved and respected them.

But many of these parents, and many parents in the world around us, don't understand the second part. Children are born with a sin nature. They have a selfish nature. They want what they want when they want it. In Romans #5 v. 12 (ROMANS 5:12) we are told, "**Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—...**" We are all born sinners because we are descendants of Adam. We inherit a sin nature.

Parenting theories that fail to recognize the sinful nature of children de-emphasize the importance of obedience. If children are basically good, then they don't need much correction. They will naturally turn out well. (PROJECTOR OFF) When we have conflicts with our kids, obedience is not essential. Compromise is more important. For us to get our way with the kids may just be selfishness on our part, so the thinking goes. To require obedience is simply to impose our will or our power upon them.

French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, who abandoned his own children who were born from his mistress, reflects this thinking. He said, "**...no kind of habits ought to be impressed on children; ...you should leave them to the natural consequences of their own actions; and..., when reason comes to exert itself in a maturer state, all will be right.**" Such is the thinking of many parents with a permissive parenting style.

Occasionally we may encounter Christian parents who go to the other extreme. They recognize that their kids are sinners. But they don't treat them as valuable creatures made in the image of God. They focus on beating the sin out of their kids. The parents give their children little freedom. They are rigid and narrow. They are legalistic. And they are likely to produce resentment in their kids.

Effective parenting will require obedience from younger children because it will recognize that children are both wonderful valuable creatures and creatures who have a natural bent toward sin. Because of that bent toward sin parents need to require obedience from their kids.

As kids get older, they need to be allowed to have greater freedom. We also have to take into account the personality of each child. By the time that I was a teenager, I had already become pretty self-disciplined and I did not need much for boundaries. I was not by that point inclined to get into trouble. Some teenagers need more definite boundaries.

Christian professor Mike Adams, who teaches at UNC-Wilmington, noted this about the behavior of teenagers when they go to college: **"It is chic and it is hip to rebel against your parents. When you're presented with these radical ideas and you parrot them back to your professors, you immediately receive positive reinforcement. They shun you if you adhere to those traditional values and shower you with love and attention and approval if you do otherwise."** (*World*, 11/21/2009, p. 28) Such is the challenge of secular colleges.

The **third** reason for the necessity of requiring obedience from children is that IT TEACHES RESPECT FOR PROPER AUTHORITY. (B. 1. 2. 3. IT TEACHES RESPECT...) When children don't learn the importance of obeying their parents, they will come to disrespect them. When they don't learn respect for their parents, they will tend to not respect teachers and church leaders and bosses and government leaders.

Back in the 1980s, when I was living in Massachusetts, a study was done of public school children in four Boston suburbs. Children were given psychological tests in the fourth, eighth and twelfth grades to see if there were any indicators in the earlier years of who would later become involved in taking illegal drugs. The students who became involved with drugs in their later years described themselves on tests as willing to lie, cheat, hurt others, break rules and disobey parents. Classmates described these kids as disobedient, rebellious, impulsive, irresponsible, untrustworthy, disorganized, insensitive and lacking in motivation. These characteristics were clearly evident already by the fourth grade. The lead researcher from Massachusetts General Hospital concluded that the children's early attitudes toward authority foreshadowed their actions as they grew older. ---Parents need to require obedience from their children, especially in their younger years. When children don't learn that respect, they become disrespectful of other authorities and even their own peers.

The **fourth** reason for the importance of requiring obedience from children is that IT WORKS. (B. 2. 3. 4. IT WORKS) It tends to produce good kids. Listen to this *US News and World Report* article: **“Several recently completed studies that tracked more than 100 children for nearly twenty years have provided the first objective test of which discipline styles work best, and all point in the same direction. Parents who are not harshly punitive, but who set firm bounds and stick to them, are significantly more likely to produce children who are high achievers and who get along well with others.”**

I was reviewing the scholarly literature this week to find out what the current thinking is about the best parenting style. There are different ways in which the scholars classify parenting styles. One of the simplest classifications, which is used by some of the scholars, divides parenting styles into three categories: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. The permissive parenting style is pretty much self-explanatory. The authoritarian style is the approach where parents are demanding and strict. One scholar defines the authoritative style in this way: It refers to **“parents who are demanding and responsive to their children at the same time, in addition to having a set of clear rules and expectations about their children’s behavior and performance.”** (Jewell Rivers et al, *Journal of Family Social Work*, Vol 15, Issue 3, 2012) That sounds pretty Biblical, right? It turns out that many of the supposed parenting experts in recent years are recognizing that this is the best approach to take in raising kids.

One study caught my eye because it was different. It was a study of parenting styles in the country of Oman. Oman is this monarchy at the entrance of the Persian Gulf. It is a mostly Muslim country whose culture is probably closer to that of Jesus’ day than that of the present US. The researchers there tried to determine what parenting style was associated with academic success among kids in that country. This was their conclusion: **“The results showed that as parents adopt authoritative parenting styles, their children are more likely to develop high levels of academic efficacy beliefs.”** (*Educational Sciences*, 2020:10:229) In other words, what I would describe as a Biblical parenting style works.

By the time that children are 1 ½ to 2 years old parents need to begin to establish some limits and boundaries for their behavior and they need to enforce them. There are a variety of discipline methods that parents can use. But in the early ages it seems to me that it is appropriate for parents to use physical discipline in those situations where children are directly disobedient and defiant toward reasonable commands. As they get older, other methods are more appropriate and effective. If we do a good job when they are young, it will usually get easier as they get older.

II.

Let’s consider then from v. 21 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS, ESPECIALLY FATHERS. (II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS...) The Apostle Paul says, **“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”**

A.

Consider first THE FOCUS ON FATHERS. (II. A. THE FOCUS ON FATHERS) Verse 20 indicates that children have a responsibility to obey both parents. But here fathers are singled out for attention. Why is that so?

I suspect that there are at least two reasons. First, fathers were expected to be the head of the household. That was understood to be true in the culture in which Paul and the Colossians lived. But most importantly, the Bible indicates that fathers are to be the head of the family. In our culture that isn't always thought to be necessary.

Fifteen or twenty years ago there were several articles published by psychologists which argued that dads are not that necessary for a successful family. An article entitled "Deconstructing the Essential Father," which appeared in *The American Psychologist* magazine was typical of that. The authors concluded, **"We do not believe that the data support the conclusion that fathers are essential to child well-being and that heterosexual marriage is the social context in which responsible fathering is most likely to occur."** (*The American Psychologist*, June, 1998) Today the scholarly effort is being made to find support for raising kids with two parents of the same gender. In my Google search I could not find much among the scholars in more recent years supporting the idea that fathers have little value in childraising.

The sociologists cite a lot of evidence that so many of our nation's social problems have a connection with children who are raised in homes without fathers. The statisticians say that about one fourth of all kids in the US are in that situation. That National Center for Fathering cites these statistics: 63% of youth suicides come from homes without a dad, 90% of homeless and runaway kids come from fatherless homes, 80% of rapists, 79% of high school dropouts, and 85 % of incarcerated youth come from homes without fathers.

Christian psychologist Paul Vitz wrote a book entitled *Faith of the Fatherless*, in which he studied the families of prominent atheists of the last four centuries. He discovered that all of them had fathers who were weak, abusive, missing or dead. These included the worst mass murderers of the twentieth century--- Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. So children do need fathers around.

Still there is hope for families who don't have a dad around. Good kids do come out of those families. They come out of those families because of God's grace, lots of prayer, involvement of extended families, and supportive churches. There are extra challenges in those families because dad isn't around. But it can be done when single parents entrust themselves to Jesus.

Ben Carson (BEN CARSON) is a classic example of that. He was raised by a single mom who had to work three jobs at times to support the family. She was also illiterate. In earlier years she had several psychiatric hospitalizations for severe depression. Yet she was a godly woman who loved her kids and set boundaries for them.

At one point she limited her sons to one hour of TV a week. She made them go to church, and she made them read two books a week and give her a book report about them. Ben eventually went to college at Yale and then medical school. At age 33 he became chief of pediatric neurology at Johns Hopkins University. He became famous for separating conjoined twins in extremely complicated surgery. He later ran for president and recently served as US Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Not bad for a fatherless kid from the public schools of Detroit.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The focus is on fathers in v. 20 because fathers were expected to be the head of the household, and **secondly** because I suspect that moms are less likely to exasperate their children than dads are. This is not specifically taught in the Bible. This is my conclusion and interpretation. Moms can and do exasperate their children at times. But on average moms are more intuitive. They are more sensitive to their kids. They are by nature nurturers. They are more sensitive to the emotional feelings of children. We dads on average---there are exceptions--- tend to be less intuitive. We tend to be less sensitive. We are also the heads of the family. So there is more danger that we may exasperate our kids than that moms will do it.

B.

So lets consider then THE DANGER OF PROVOKING CHILDREN. (PROJECTOR ON--II. A. B. THE DANGER OF...) There is only one other time that the original Greek verb here is used in the New Testament. In the other usage it is used in a positive sense of stirring somebody up. Here it involves stirring up children in a bad way, in a way that causes irritation and exasperation.

The result of this provoking of children is discouragement, losing heart. Discouragement or exasperation can quench a child's spirit. It can hurt their zeal and enthusiasm for life. It can hurt their confidence. So the question is what kind of things do parents, especially fathers, need to avoid that might exasperate their kids? Toss out some ideas or give me some examples of things that are exasperating to kids.

1. Not spending time with our kids.
2. Constantly saying "no." Temptation as busy, harried parents is to toss out a lot of "no's" to kids that bother us and keep bugging us for things. Sometimes we need to say "no." But we need to say "yes" as much as we can. Eg. little kids who have a natural desire to explore. Instead of always telling them not to touch things, move the things that they shouldn't touch out of reach.
3. Comparing kids with other siblings, especially in unfavorable ways. Causes sibling resentment, exasperation, anger toward parents.
4. Favoritism. Cf. Joseph in OT

5. Withholding praise and reward.

6. Pushing too hard for achievement. Sometimes living out our lives and unfulfilled dreams through our kids. Some parents push their kids to be in eighteen zillion activities, and they don't have any time to just play.

7. Treating kids as intrusions.

Our culture today places a high premium on independence. The real man's man is John Wayne, the rugged individualist. Wives are encouraged by elements in our culture to find a career and to establish an identity separate from their husbands and families. Parents are encouraged to help their children become independent. Authority figures are questioned. Parents today have more of a tendency to back up their kids rather than their teachers when it comes to matters of discipline. Most of us have probably seen the bumper sticker around that says "Question Authority."

The Bible, however, treats dependence, respect for authority, and obedience, in their proper contexts, as virtues. Listen to what the Apostle John says in the second chapter of his first epistle. After addressing his readers as "little children" in v. 1 (1 JOHN 2:3-4), he says in vv. 3-5, **"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, (1 JOHN 2 :5) but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him."**

You see, the most important relationship in all of life is our relationship with God. In this relationship with God a high value is placed upon obedience, upon rightful respect for authority. When we as parents insist that our children learn obedience and respect for authority, we establish a foundation upon which they can build a proper relationship with the most important authority of all. May God give us the grace to help our children learn obedience, without causing them exasperation.