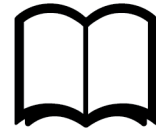


Seen, not heard?

Where Kids Fit In

John Howell Jr.



**KIDS
THESE DAYS**

Biblical Help for Families

One of the ways I tease my children (but hopefully not to the “provoking” stage that we will learn about in the next chapter) is to compare the experience of my childhood to their childhood experiences. As have dads throughout recorded history, I exaggerate my stories considerably in explaining how hard I had to work cutting lawns in the neighborhood, how far I had to walk to get to school, how rarely I received a pair of new shoes, and so forth. My stories of yesteryear have become so far-fetched that I can barely keep a straight face when I’m sharing them, and these recollections have become a running joke. But it is actually more than a joke, because I’m trying to hang onto some common-sense parenting and trying to gently remind them that life is not set up to be all about them. I am also attempting to let them know that life in this sin-sick, fallen world can be very challenging at times. As tough as this news may be for our children to swallow, they need to learn that they are not the sun, and the rest of us the planets orbiting around them.

As much as my childhood in the 1970s and 1980s contrasts with the childhoods my three offspring have experienced and are experiencing, I can only imagine how the parents who raised “The Greatest Generation” in the early 20th Century would react to what they see in today’s families. It is from that era that I reach back and grab the now-defunct phrase, “Children should be seen and not heard.” This implies that children were taught that their will was to be subordinate to the leadership of the adults, and that they as children were to behave in the presence of adults in obedience and meekness. As foreign as this type of training may seem to us today, I would assert that their parenting style was much closer to the Bible’s instructions than are today’s philosophies and parenting styles.

The Power Passages: Ephesians 6:1-4; Proverbs 22:6

Our study is now transitioning from general principles of the value of children, the value of marriage, and the general importance of authority and is moving on to the application of these biblical truths in the family. It is time to get very specific, so let me just put it out there for you. As a teacher and school leader, I saw some very bad parenting habits that produced predictably bad outcomes. For example, the following philosophies and goals (all I have which I have heard articulated by parents) are bad philosophies and excuses, and will likely bring great harm to your child or children:

- “I just want my child to be happy.”

- “I didn’t get to have much when I was growing up, so I want my children to have what they want.”
- “I don’t care what Mrs. Smith the teacher has told me, because I believe my child’s story instead. My child may not be perfect, but he wouldn’t lie to me.”
- “I’m not going to spank my child because I don’t want to teach him that violence is the answer.”
- “I have a hard time fussing at my child, because I just love him too much, and he’s just too cute.”
- “It is a phase. I’m sure he will grow out of it, so I am going to just ignore his actions for now.”
- “Maybe you can do something with my child. I just can’t make him mind me.”
- “She doesn’t do that at home. I’m sure she is being provoked by the other children.”
- “My child is misbehaving because he is bored. He is very smart, and he just needs to be challenged.”

Following any of the above philosophies or leaning on any of the above excuses are sure-fire ways of raising a child who is unhappy, insecure, unsure of boundaries (but deep-down badly hoping they do exist and will be applied to him), and destined for a life of turmoil. And it is at this point that I need to be transparent with my readers: my wife and I have allowed many of these problematic parenting modes to impact our decision making, emotions, or comments on occasion. The key is to recognize these harmful, sinful impulses and to move away from this “stinking thinking” through the divine energy and wisdom provided by the Holy Spirit of God.

Fathers and mothers in past generations had a better understanding of their biblical responsibilities. Therefore, they weren’t as interested in their child’s happiness as they were interested in preparing their child for life’s challenges. They knew that fulfilling a child’s wishes and desires as each whimsical “want” is expressed by their child will produce, over time, ungrateful, insatiable human beings. That now-past generation of parents (and grandparents) also knew Solomon’s teaching on properly administered corporal punishment. “*The rod and reproof bring wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth this mother to shame*” (Prov. 29:15). Solomon, as we know, had a lot to say about raising children, and the subject often comes up in his proverbs. This wise king reminds his readers that parenting principles have eternal consequences.

So, let’s keep a safe distance from the harmful swarm of “helicopter parents” who hover about little Johnny making sure he is happy and trying to fix any problems or issues he encounters. Let’s stay on guard lest we get caught up in modern parenting trends and find ourselves part of the scary (and toxic) movement of “dive bomber parents” who swoop in to try to get their children out of trouble with authority by attacking authority figures (teachers, law

enforcement, or others in charge of their children). Let's instead get very close to the Bible, and see what the Word of God teaches about parenting.

Thankfully, we will find that the message is not complicated.

1. A child has one easy-to-understand responsibility

No matter how intelligent we think we are, we can all be grateful that our heavenly Father makes the important matters of our human existence very simple and very understandable. For example, the salvation that He offers through the work of Jesus Christ is extended as a "gift," to be received by faith. We can all understand the concept of a gift, even a young child. Prior to the new birth, we are "lost." That concept is very understandable. We read in the Bible that we are born "dead," spiritually speaking. That is very clear, and it would require deliberate distortion to communicate this truth incorrectly and say that we can somehow on our own produce life and save ourselves. Additionally, the good and godly qualities that flow from the life of a Christian are described as "fruits." We can all understand what that means and how that works because we have all seen fruits on the vine or tree. And what about the teaching that Jesus Christ is "the Light of the world." That simple truth speaks to our hearts as well. As Bible students can attest, I could go on for awhile with this listing of simple illustrations that communicate profound truths. The point: our God makes the important principles simple enough for even a child's mind to grasp.

We have learned in our study that God makes it clear that children are a very high priority in His way of looking at life. We have seen the love that is communicated when the Lord Jesus hugs and blesses the little children (Mark 10). We know what God says about them, but what does He say to them? In light of God's consistency in making important spiritual truths understandable in His Word, what does a holy, majestic God have to say directly in His Word to children? Here it is:

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right" (Eph. 6:1).

Could this instruction be any clearer? I don't think it could! I am not asserting that it is easy for the child to carry out the instruction (more on that to come), but I am asserting that the instruction can't be misunderstood. Neglected, yes; misunderstood, no. This powerful simplicity is part of the sublime, supernatural nature of God's plan and God's Word. The Bible doesn't say, "Children, give strong consideration to your parents' suggestions: for this is usually right" (how'd that teaching get so popular?). The Bible doesn't say, "Children, your parents are usually idiots so beware their teachings and listen to your equally immature friends or perhaps the little devil on your shoulder instead." As school principals can attest, that ill-fated plan seems to carry the day on many occasions. No, the Bible says *"children obey your parents,"* and, furthermore, it is as if God implies, "trust Me with the outcome of that plan."

These simple instructions apply in a broader sense, however, than to only the parent-child relationship. When the parent transfers the care of the child to another adult in authority, this principle of *"children, obey your parents in the Lord"* transfers right along with the diaper bag or backpack. Therefore, in a school setting, the instructions become, "Children, obey your teacher

in the Lord...” At grandmother’s house: “Children, obey your grandmother in the Lord...” (even if your grandparents usually won’t make you obey them and are normally about the business of spoiling you ☺). The legal world explains this transfer using the Latin phrase “in loco parentis,” meaning the legal responsibility of a person or organization to take on the responsibilities of a parent. Our children should be taught this principle on a spiritual level as we teach them their simple job outlined in Ephesians 6:1.

Let’s not run past the important phrase “*in the Lord.*” As a child gets older and more mature, and as the temptations begin to expand as his universe expands, the power source of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to measure up to these simple instructions. I concede that they reach an age at which we can no longer coerce obedience, especially at the heart level. When a child is young, obedience is to be forced by just about any means necessary, with special “win-at-all-costs” emphasis given to any act of blatant disrespect to authority. However, as a child matures, the submission of the will is accomplished by the supernatural operation of the Spirit of God in the life of the young person rather than by force. (Adults, when we look back on our own childhood experiences, we only have to take a very brief stroll down memory lane before we begin to remember how we as youths performed under these same “simple instructions.”) Obviously, the only way the young person has access to this supernatural ability to die to the pride and rebellion of the self will is to be spiritually alive unto Christ via the new birth. The phrase “*in the Lord*” brings a spiritual context into these simple instructions, and the overwhelming concept of leading our children to faith in Jesus Christ is a critical subject covered in a later chapter. Nevertheless, as parents, our marching orders are to get the message of Ephesians 6:1 to our children. Consistently. Firmly. And, as we will learn from verse 4, lovingly.

Parents should also note that in Ephesians 6:2-3 the apostle Paul strengthens his instructions to children by reaching back into the time of Moses and the Law and backing up the simple instruction of Eph. 6:1 by connecting it to the 5th commandment of the famous 10 Commandments. Paul reminds his reader that the 5th commandment is the first one that also has a promise attached to it. Paul is referring to Exodus 20:12: “*Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.*” After four commandments, the fifth one includes a positive principle. That principle is that, as a general rule, children who obey their parents will live longer. The implication is that an obedient young person will avoid a deadly calamity. Please note that—given that we live in a world that is under the curse of sin and death until the return of our Lord—this is a general principle, which is to say that there are exceptions. However, let the record show that I have seen this principle play out in a very predictable manner. Anyone who has worked in a high school (or junior high school) labors under the fear of the “empty seat” in the classroom due to an untimely death of a young person. Those of us who have experienced this happen can attest that disobedience to parents, or disobedience to other legitimate authority, is more often than not a factor in the tragedy.

And none of this is complicated, at least in theory. In practice, well, that’s another matter, as parents generally speaking are failing to communicate God’s message to their children and also failing to apply discipline when children disobey.

2. This one responsibility is a “spiritual barometer”

In light of these very simple instructions to children, it follows that a measurement of how a child is handling the instructions to “obey (his/her) parents in the Lord” provides insight into a child’s spiritual health. So, if my teenager consistently is behaving disrespectfully to me, or his teacher or coach, it is a clear indicator that he is having spiritual problems and therefore needs spiritual counsel and assistance (and probably other disciplinary action as well). If my child is consistently disobedient, disrespectful, and rebellious, my child is not doing well spiritually. In the school where I served, students in grades 6-12 met each Wednesday for chapel. They grew accustomed to me asking them as a group, “How are you doing, spiritually?” They began to anticipate my reminder, which was: “The answer can be found in how you are treating your parents and teachers.” (There is really a two-part question involved. The second part is to ask them, “How much time are you spending with God?” More on that form of “relationship measurement” in a later chapter). In retrospect, maybe I should have been firmer in chapel and used the language of Proverbs. *“The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall”* (Prov. 10:8). Kids...don’t play the fool!

I am emphasizing this point because it is important for parents to address the underlying spiritual issue rather than to run around addressing the flare ups and living in fear of the results of the child’s next foolish and disobedient decision. Through prayer, counsel, and spiritual instruction, let’s *“bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”* (Eph. 6:4). Those instructions in verse 4 will be studied in greater detail in the next chapter.

Now for the zinger! (And please know that I am typing this chapter with much prayer knowing that my three children are very much a work in progress.) Just as our children’s obedience and attitude toward authority is a barometer of how they are doing spiritually, our children’s obedience and attitude toward authority is also a barometer as to the spiritual health of the entire home. Ouch! It’s true. Though I repeat again there are exceptions, rebellious children tell the story of poor spiritual leadership in the home. And dads, this is primarily on your (our) shoulders.

How do I know this? This truth comes to light when Paul is assisting the churches by providing principles whereby spiritual leaders are to be selected. This teaching from Paul can be found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in instructions to Titus in Titus 1:6-9. At the heart of Paul’s instructions to these fledgling churches as to the selection of pastors and deacons are some verses that are important to our study of the responsibility of fathers:

“A bishop [elder, pastor] then must be...one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Tim. 3:2a, 4-5).

I find this to be very illuminating and also very sobering. Paul is coaching Timothy on how to help the churches that they are planting. One of the first needs is for the missionary team to identify spiritual leaders, men upon whom to confer the task of pastoring and shepherding the new congregations of believers.

Not surprisingly, as Paul spells out what to look for in these men, he tells Timothy to seek men with good reputation who are *“above reproach”* in the community and also who are *“the husband of one wife”* (1 Tim. 3:2). (I’m not going to define my understanding of that

“*husband of one wife*” phrase as part of this study but will instead note that Timothy at the very least is instructed to bypass men who have a history of problems with women). Paul tells Timothy that the men to whom he will be assigning pastoral roles should not be “*given to wine*” (1 Tim. 3:3). He also adds that Timothy should look for men who care for the welfare of strangers, who are not apt to argue or fight, and who are not greedy for money or covetous of material goods. And then comes the area given the most emphasis by Paul, which qualification spelled out in considerable detail in verses 4-5. Here, Paul teaches there is a direct correlation with the spiritual health of a man’s spiritual leadership in his home and the behavior of his children. Paul points out that the church family that he would be shepherding is much like his own family, only bigger. So, if the home is characterized by rebellion, it should be inferred that the man lacks the spiritual acumen to lead a congregation.

I told you this was a zinger. And this principle doesn’t stop with pastors. Paul applies this same qualification to the office of deacon in the same chapter. Back in our focal passage in Ephesians chapters 5 and 6, the Bible student sees Paul applying more pressure to fathers than he does to mothers, especially in Ephesians 6:4. In the Old Testament, great leaders who accomplish amazing acts of faith are still held accountable to the responsibility of passing the spiritual baton to their children (and the Old Testament is filled with heart-breaking accounts of failures, which now serve to warn fathers of vulnerabilities in this area).

At this point, I am guilty of getting in over my head in writing and teaching about doctrines that I have not yet fully tested and experienced. I would also like to add that we must also look to the Bible’s premiere doctrines of grace rather than running about evaluating each other or the pastors that we know. We likely do not know the full story, and we have moved into very sensitive and personal matters. The enemy has targeted spiritual leaders who preach the good news of eternal life through Jesus Christ, coming after families with these legions of demons. Some strong-willed children get on the “my-way highway” despite enjoying an upbringing in nurturing, spiritually-solid environments, so let not any of us dare rush to judgment. Instead, let us pray steadfastly for God’s grace, mercy, and leadership to steer the eternal souls of our children.

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