



**KIDS
THESE DAYS**

Biblical Help for Families

What's the Goal?

Good Kids, Successful Kids, or Godly Kids?

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As parents, we sort through different forces that influence our thoughts, actions, and goals for our children. These goals change as our children grow up. I noticed a trend in the school where I served that, in time, became humorous to see play out.

It worked like this. When it was time to select a school for little Johnny or little Susie (had to work that phrase in at least once!), parents of preschoolers often set up meetings with school representatives to do some fact-finding. The goal of these meetings was for them to learn how well the school will prepare their little one, so these parents brought a series of far-reaching questions to the table. The school representatives involved would often be informed just how smart this child was, and we would learn about the parents' lofty goals that they had for their child. I'm talking serious goals, like laying the groundwork at age 4 to get into a prestigious medical college. In those meetings, the school would be on trial to determine if it had the resources to get little Johnny into Harvard or little Susie into NASA's astronaut program. (In time, I learned to deflect some of this pressure back onto the parents, reminding that a child's school—while important—was secondary in importance to the sacred work of parents.

As the school years went by, the meeting with these parents would narrow in scope and deal with particular issues of the classroom that year. There would be, perhaps, a little more humility and reality, and parents were often learning that their child was a little closer to average in his abilities than they might have initially forecast.

Then, by the time the child was in junior high school, or high school, there was another predictable shift in the tone of the parents. At that point, the tone would become very realistic, as in: "Thank you for putting up with my child. We are hoping and praying he will be able graduate with no further mishaps."

No doubt, parenting is a humbling responsibility!

In addition to the down-to-earth anxiety of "I-just-hope-my-child-makes-it," there is also the struggle for Christian parents to prioritize their goals for their child or children's worldly success and their spiritual goals for their children. Often, we parents send signals to our children that their secular and career goals are more important than their walk with their Savior. We send these signals by elevating their educational and career goals above everything else that we focus

on. For example, parents often say, “You’re not getting married until you meet your educational goals, and, by the way, we expect you to go to graduate school.” Our child may be hearing something more like this: “Dad and mom believe that my secular success is more important than God’s plan for my life and also more important than my sexual purity.”

So, what are we emphasizing to our children? What signals are we sending them? Is it for them to just please stay out of trouble and don’t make a mess of your life? Is it for them to make it in this world in terms of financial success? Or, are we raising them to focus on success as the Bible defines success? Are we trying to raise good kids, successful kids, or godly kids?

The Power Passages: 2 Cor. 4:18, Eph. 6:4

Here is an obvious statement: There is the seen, material world in which we live. We can interact with this world by means of our five senses. And here is a less obvious statement: there is the spiritual world that exists outside the reach of our senses, but is real nonetheless. We interact with this spiritual world by faith.

In my walk as a believer, I have found 2 Corinthians 4:18 to be very helpful in keeping my focus on the spiritual and thus reminding me of what is critical and what is not. Here is the verse: *“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”* This is a “power verse” that can greatly help us keep our focus on the spiritual!

The “*things which are seen*” (physical health and physique, careers, homes, etc.) are important during our time here on earth. However, the greater priority should be on the spiritual world, described in this verse “*the things which are not seen.*” The reason that the unseen, spiritual world is far more important is that this spiritual world is “eternal.” For this very obvious reason, spiritual truths—eternal truths—should drive our efforts as parents, and not the worldly, physical stuff that at best is only temporary. With the eyes of faith, we must keep focused on the reality that our child has an eternal soul and spirit, and he or she will live forever, either as a redeemed child of God in heaven, or a lost sinner in hell.

As parents, our own personal time spent studying the Word of God and our time invested in our walk with our Savior will greatly aid us in maintaining a spiritual focus and not getting swept into the passions of this world. Yes our child will one day need to make a living, have a house, and have the money he needs to meet his family’s needs. But, as important as those areas may seem, they are not as important as his spiritual well being!

The Bible’s instructions in this power passage can serve as a rudder to keep us moving toward our spiritual goals as parents. The believer can get wrapped up in the world and its activities. Parents are especially susceptible to allowing the fleshly “pride of life” to take root in our feelings about our kids. We are also very susceptible to projecting our unfulfilled worldly dreams and aspirations into the lives and goals of our children. We must stay on guard against the temptations, and help our children discover how God has uniquely made each of them, and help them discover the mission he has for them.

Now let's move from 2 Cor. 4:18, a "big picture" power passage, to a very practical power passage, Eph. 6:4. As with the God-given institution of marriage, husbands are also directed by God to provide leadership in the sacred work of parenting and leading the children.

Though Ephesians 6:4 is specifically directed to families, this verse became my go-to verse in trying to lead the discipline of a school, and I am convinced that God honored this with a student body that endeavored to do a good job with its behavior (the vast majority of our students pulled with us in a good direction). If the principles in this power passage are followed by a believer who is by faith drawing his strength from the Lord Jesus Christ, the impact will be powerful in our families (as it was in our school).

This power passage begins, interestingly, with Paul giving us a big "what not to do."

1. 'Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath'

The contrast in this passage is "provoke not" vs. "nurture them." First, what does it mean to provoke our children? The Bible states clearly that fathers should avoid this, but do we know what it means? The definitions of the Greek word—in addition to meaning "to provoke," include "to rouse to wrath" and "to exasperate." Another way I will attempt to explain this concept will be in using examples of what "provoking" or "exasperating" looks like. Then, adding a solid understanding of "nurturing" a young person (the good way to parent) should complete our understanding of "provoking" (the bad way to parent).

Here are broad ways to provoke one's child:

- If I fail to parent or train my child with love as the primary guiding force, I will provoke my child to wrath. *Agape*, which is God's love flowing through us supernaturally on the basis of the believer's position in Christ, is the highest and most powerful form of leadership. When a father is pushing his child with anger, frustration, pride, sarcasm or other dysfunctional emotions as the primary guiding force, a child will in time be provoked to wrath and lash out or act out in some way (or many ways). Children are very good at sensing authenticity. They will see through our smokescreens and sense the guiding forces of our hearts. When we slip into these dark modes of parenting, we need to confess this sin to our heavenly Father, and discuss our mistake with our children as well, reassuring them that we love them! I will confess that I have often felt compelled to go to my children and admit that I made a mistake as a parent. These moments have often turned into wonderful teaching moments when, due to my vulnerability with them, I had the full attention of my children.
- If I mistreat my wife and allow my marriage to flounder, I will provoke my child to wrath. If I behave in a boorish, abusive, or disrespectful manner toward my wife, my three children are going to be unsettled deep in their hearts. If I persist, look out...they are going to act out! In the school, if I saw a marriage hit the rocks, in time I would see the couple's child get into trouble. It is if at some deep level, the child says, "Ok, if my dad can act like a jerk, I can too!" Or perhaps this is what is going on in the child's heart: "If my parents are going to go to war and not look after my emotional needs, then I'm

going to do whatever it takes to let them know I'm here and I need them." Getting into trouble is a sure-fire way for a child to get his parents' attention. *(Important note: the exceptions to this were children who were engaged with a growing walk with their Savior, especially those active as leaders in their youth group and closely linked with a pastor or other strong spiritual leader. Remember one of the amazing principles from Chapter 1: our children are often used by God to teach us!).*

- If I place unrealistic (and unbiblical) demands on my child, I will provoke my child to wrath. Remember that the child's primary marching order is to "obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). If I as a father, with little regard for balance, push my child extremely hard in academics, sports, or toward any goal, in time my child is going to push back. He will say, "I know I am supposed to obey, but what my dad is pushing me to do is crazy and impossible." Exasperation sets in. And then, this thought could evolve to the point he says, "I can't possible obey his extreme wishes that I become a college quarterback, so maybe it's time to re-think this whole 'obey-your-parents' thing." Our child will easily sense what our heart's passions are. If our passions and investments of time (for example, sports, or perfect grades in school) don't match our stated beliefs (for example, our "preaching" to our child about the importance of studying the Bible or our walk with the Lord), our kids are smart enough to see through our phoniness. And in time they will push back at our inconsistencies.
- If I use "legalism" as the guiding force in the spiritual training of my child, I will provoke my child to wrath. Again, our kids deserve us to be straight with them, and they will quickly pick up on our motives when we are not. If I turn their Christian training into a list of rules and push them only by the force of my authority, I will damage their understanding of God's grace. If I want my child in church to make me look good as a parent, that is legalism. My child will figure that out and, in time, push back. I realize there is a fine line here, and that we for a season make many choices for our children. But if we are not connecting with them at the heart level and bringing them along in their spiritual journey with patience and love, they will smell our phoniness and rebel. Highly legalistic parenting or hypocritical parents have pushed many young people away from Christianity. As is the case with every believer's growth, our children deserve time to grow and grace from their parents in its process.
- If I use sarcasm, belittling humor, or teasing as a common way I communicate with my child, I will provoke my child to wrath. Though this sounds obvious, this is a sinful habit that can develop. The Bible teaches that the believer is to "edify," or build up, each other (Rom. 14:19). At times, we seem to honor this truth more effectively with our Christian friends than with our own children. Aggressively teasing or "messaging with" a child who is under my authority is a sure fire way to stoke anger in the heart of that child. When we mistreat our children in this fashion, they don't have any good options with which to respond. If they respond in the way that they are being treated, they will be seen as disrespectful. So they will either smile and pretend it's okay, even though it hurts them, or they will respond in anger.

- If I am inconsistent or show favoritism among my children, I will provoke my child to wrath. Part of a child's security is wrapped up in him living in a consistent universe in the home. Let's say my child, for example, talks disrespectfully to me or to his mother on several occasions, and I ignore this disrespect. Then he smarts off again, and I suddenly spring into action and come down hard on him, yelling like a crazy man. Maybe it's because I'm tired and have had enough. Maybe it's because my wife has nagged me into action. It doesn't matter, because the issue should have been addressed consistently and in a proactive manner (before I lost my patience) rather than by me blowing up on the kid in a reactive manner. Of course, showing favoritism as a parent is an obvious mistake, but nonetheless this possibility lurks if we as parents are not sensitive to the Spirit's leadership in our lives. There are accounts of this mistake of favoritism in the Scripture, even among the heroes of the faith, with devastating consequences.

It is clear that a pattern is setting up here. If a father is not walking with his Savior, and thereby radiating the love of Jesus Christ in his other relationships (marriage, parenting), there will be other dark, fleshly forces that will flow into the vacuum. These sinful, ungodly principles and emotions will contaminate our parenting attitudes and actions. In time, our children will rebel. We will have exasperated them and possibly provoked them to wrath. What this "wrath" might look like varies greatly, but whatever the action or attitude may be, it is usually the result of ungodly, unbiblical leadership in the home.

2. 'Fathers...bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord'

The good news is that the Bible teaches about a way in which we can avoid provoking our children to wrath. There is a formula given whereby a father and mother can lead a child to spiritual maturity. The formula calls for us to "nurture" them proactively, and admonish them privately when they make a mistake. In another study, we will break down the many facets of "discipline" and learn that proactive counsel and teaching is a critical part of the discipline of a child. The word "nurture" also carries this reminder.

This word that is translated here in Eph. 6:4 as "nurture" is the only Greek word I am going to throw at you for this entire study:

Nurture = παιδεία (paideia, pronounced "pahee-di'-ah")

This word appears six times in the New Testament and conveys a very important concept. In Ephesians, the word is translated "nurture" but in other verses is translated into English as "chastening," "chastisement" and "instruction." The definition of the word is somewhat broad, listed in Strong's as "the whole training and education of children" and having to do with the cultivation of a child's mind, morals, and body.

I admit, that is an overwhelming definition from the perspective of a parent. How do I measure up as a dad? How do I help my child to grow in mind, morals and body? Well, while we are sizing this up, let's look briefly at the other word, "*admonition*," which means "mild rebuke or warning." So, I'm going to do my best to put it all together as I understand this verse.

Yes, when I look at the definition above I am faced with the fact that it is a tall order to be responsible for my child's complete development, or "nurture." However, this responsibility is not carried out in a few dramatic, triumphant victories or milestone parenting accomplishments. Instead, nurturing my child is a responsibility that is carried out with my child through countless small interactions (and perhaps a few pivotal, dramatic moments as well) over the course of many years.

Also, it is important not to overlook an important dimension of the word "nurture" that is not in Strong's definition but does come through in the English translation. Connected to the word "nurture" is an emphasis on love. Think about it...the words "love" and "nurture" are indeed very closely connected. This connection lets us know as parents that, again, and not surprisingly, we see the Bible emphasizing *agape*! Love! This glorious, powerful component of the new life we have in Christ continues to be the glue that holds all parts of the family together. That is why Paul is careful to write: "*Fathers, bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*" (emphasis added). This little phrase at the end of Eph. 6:4 reminds us that our source of power, our source of love, our source of wisdom for the task, is wrapped up in what flows from the Lord Himself—divine love! The Lord Jesus is our only hope to measure up to such a monumental task. But He is enough! He is sufficient for husbands to be able to love their wives with a special, sacrificial love. He is sufficient to empower wives to respond to their husband's leadership in Christ. He is sufficient to empower a child to obey his parents. And He is sufficient to lead my work as a dad as nurture and admonish my children.

Take the Lord Jesus out of the picture, though, and you'll soon have a mess on your hands! But with Him and His resources, there can be victory in our homes!

I am also encouraged by the fact that "admonition" doesn't evoke the idea of a constant battle with my child, or dramatic confrontations that end in spankings. Instead, "admonition" carries with it the idea of calling attention to our child's mistakes through an ongoing stream of mild warnings or rebukes. This is to be a steady flow of information to our children, flavored with love and patience. These mild (loving) warnings and loving explanations are the most effective facet of discipline as we proactively help our child to understand our directions and goals for them.

In closing, it is clear that Christian love should be strongly embedded in our work as a spouse and a parent. It should also be increasingly clear that these relationships require large investments of our time. To "*nurture*" our children implies ongoing, patient investments of time. To "*admonish*" also implies ongoing, patient investments of time into the lives of our children. More on this principle of the significance of the investments of our time will come in a future study, but, for now, let's acknowledge there are no shortcuts in this process of bringing up our children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

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