

Thriving Children

By David Feddes

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. (Colossians 3:20-21)

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—this is the first commandment with a promise—"that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4)

As we think about thriving children, we're going to think about two main points.

Thriving children

1. Thriving children honor and obey their parents.
2. Thriving children have parents who are worth honoring and obeying.

The Bible calls children to honor and obey. It calls parents to be honorable and not to be the kind of parents who drive your children crazy and provoke them to wrath. If you're a child here today, you need to hear the part about children honoring and obeying their parents. And parents who are here shouldn't be elbowing their kid in the ribs and saying, "Are you listening? Are you listening? You need to obey, you need to obey." The parents need to clue in on the second part—being worth honoring and obeying.

Prosper or perish

Obeying parents seems to be a key to either prospering or perishing. That's taught throughout Proverbs. "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8). Obey your parents—both of them. "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity" (Proverbs 3:1-2). If you want to thrive, listen to your mom and dad.

If you refuse to honor and obey, you're dead meat. "The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures" (Proverbs 30:17). If you're buzzard bait, it may be because you wouldn't listen to anybody, starting with your parents. That's a tough verse. But remember that old vulture verse when you're tempted to just go off and do your own thing.

Weak father, worthless sons

The Bible tells of a weak father and of his worthless sons. "Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). These two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, are priests who seize meat from the offerings that God's people are bringing. They fatten themselves on whatever parts of the sacrifice they want to grab. And they're sleeping

around with the women who serve at the entrance to the tabernacle. That's the kind of guys they've turned out to be. They're worthless.

One reason is that they would not listen. Even when they're grown up, Eli warns them, "You're not just sinning against people; you're sinning against God. And if you sin against a person, maybe God could stand in the way and help you. But if you're going against God Himself—right at His tabernacle—and sinning against His sacrifices, what hope is there for you?" The Bible says, "**They would not listen** to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death" (1 Samuel 2:23-25). God decided that these guys are done. They're finished. And so they are not going to listen to their father's rebuke.

But the Lord also said, "I am about to punish Eli's house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and **he did not restrain them**" (1 Samuel 3:13). Eli made his suggestion to his sons. He had probably been making suggestions for a long time but never enforcing them. So when they're grown, does Eli say, "If you act that way, you're not going to be priests anymore. You're going to be fired"? No, he just said, "Boys, I hear a bad report about you. Please cut it out." They didn't cut it out. There were no consequences—not from Eli, that is.

There were consequences from God. Eli and his sons all die on the same day. The sons are killed in battle after they think that God's ark is some sort of magic thing they can drag into a battle and get automatic victories. That doesn't work out so well. They end up dead. Eli is heartbroken when he hears that his sons have been killed. But when he hears the ark has been captured, he falls over and breaks his neck. To his credit, Eli still had a heart for the Lord. He was just a weak father.

Oftentimes you'll get sermons that say, "Now fathers, don't be like Eli. Be tougher in your discipline. Be firmer with your boys." And there may be some truth in that, and we parents need to take it to heart.

But if you're one of the kids here today, it's not just Eli who was wrong. The boys wouldn't listen. Eli was too wimpy—it was his fault for not being more forceful. But it was still their fault too, for not listening to their father. You might say, "Eli's sons turned out that way because they had a lousy father." It's true that Eli didn't do what was needed in their case. Even so, what if those guys had listened to their father? What would have happened?

Growing up under Eli

Let's look at somebody else who grew up under Eli. "The boy Samuel ministered to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest" (1 Samuel 2:11). In effect, Eli was Samuel's main father figure whom he grew up under. What happened? "Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man" (1 Samuel 2:26). Under Eli's guidance, Samuel thrived in the Lord and was growing up in his body and in favor with God and in social relations with people.

In fact, it was Eli who helped Samuel to recognize the voice of the Lord. One night young Samuel keeps hearing someone call his name: "Samuel, Samuel." He's not sure what's going on. "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him... Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the young man" (1 Samuel 3:7-8). Eli realizes that God is speaking to Samuel, so he tells Samuel that next time he hears that voice, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Eli was not the best father to his own sons. But a boy who was willing to listen to the old man, despite all of his flaws, learned to hear the voice of the Lord. He learned to walk with the Lord. It makes me sad to read about Eli, because he loved God, and it's a tragedy what happened to his sons. And yet, when Eli had a second chance to bring up a boy who would actually listen to him, Samuel turned out pretty well.

If you're a young person here and you say, "My dad and mom aren't doing all that they should be doing," that might be true. They'll have to answer for that. But keep in mind that Hophni and Phinehas got one result from being under Eli. Samuel got a very different result from being under Eli. Even if you have flawed parents, if you're willing to listen to them, you still might flourish.

Why obey parents?

The Bible gives several reasons to obey parents. First, "this is pleasing in the Lord" (Colossians 3:20). The translation says, "This pleases the Lord," but literally it says "this is pleasing in the Lord." Colossians is all about the Lord being in us and us being in the Lord. Also, if you're a son or a daughter, you're picturing how God the Son obeys His Father. It's pleasing in the Lord to be dramatizing what Jesus is like in relation to His heavenly Father.

Another reason to obey parents: "this is right" (Ephesians 6:1). That's not the worst reason in the world. Do the right thing. You're keeping one of God's Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and mother."

Here's a third reason: "that it may go well with you." Your parents—they want what's best for you. Obeying them helps you to thrive—materially, relationally, spiritually. In almost all cases, listening to them is going to be what's good for you.

Now, you children should know that when I was growing up, I was exemplary in all respects and perfectly obedient to my parents. Well, actually, not! On my 10th birthday, I understood that now I had arrived at mature manhood, and it was time to graduate from the pony to the horse. I had a job every day that summer to tie a bag of oats to the saddle and ride out on my pony and dump the oats into a pan that the big bull would eat out of. That day I thought it was time to get away from Frosty the pony and move on up to Ladybird the horse. My dad said, "No, you're not big enough to ride the horse yet. You'd better stick with Frosty for a while longer." But when you're ten, you've arrived at mature manhood, and your father's opinions are not that reliable. So I decided, after my dad was gone, that I was going to ride that horse anyway.

So I got the saddle on her—the grownup saddle, not the one I had used on a pony. I got the bridle on her, tied the oats to the saddle, and I took off. I was literally riding high. It was great to be cruising along on a real horse. First a walk, then a trot, then a canter. When we got to the pasture, I decided we should gallop a while, and the horse decided to gallop a while.

There was a problem with the grownup saddle. It had stirrups that were longer than my legs. The stirrups were just flopping. And horses understand what flopping against their sides means—it means go faster. So the horse went faster, and then faster. And the faster she went, the harder the stirrups flapped. She was racing at top speed. Finally I thought, “There is no hope at all of stopping this horse” because she had the bit in her teeth and was too strong—I wasn’t strong enough to slow her down.

So I decided my only hope was to at least change her direction. So I pulled the reins to one side, and she headed for a swamp with a bunch of bumps in it. When she hit that swamp, she tripped and flipped, and I flew over her head to the ground. The horse rolled on my leg, then hopped up and raced home without me.

I stumbled back home again, covered with mud and feeling pretty sore and wondering what in the world my dad was going to do to me. But when I got home, he didn’t actually do anything—except almost fall over laughing. He evidently felt that he did not need to apply much more discipline in that case.

That’s something I can laugh about now. It’s also an occasion I could have broken my neck or been killed by a horse rolling over on me. There are a lot of near misses in our life, and some of them are near misses where we should have been listening to somebody who knew better. So a great reason to obey parents is “so that it may go well with you,” so that you won’t, at worst, end up dead meat or, at best, end up covered with mud and looking stupid, like I did.

A fourth reason to obey parents is this: You will be shaped by adults--it's only a question of which adults. Your parents love you most and know you best. If you're going to be shaped by adults anyway, you might as well pick some good ones. If you think that as a kid you're going to do what the other kids are doing and you're going to be your own person—dream on. It just isn't going to happen. You're going to be shaped by adults.

Your favorite rock star is controlled by some big corporation who set them up to be famous and advertised the daylights out of them. The beer sellers have all of their stuff targeted to certain age groups. The cigarette sellers who want to get you hooked on smoking—maybe donate a little bit of lung cancer to your cause—they know how to market their product. The pornographers are experts in marketing their product. And it's all done by a bunch of fat 50- and 60-year-old executives in corporate boardrooms who are making billions of dollars off kids who think they're rebelling against the adults. Well, they're rebelling against some adults—it just happens to be their own parents—but they are still just the pawns of these other adults who are out there pushing their buttons and taking their money and doing whatever they want to them.

To summarize, why obey parents? It's pleasing in the Lord and we're in Him. It's right. It's good for you. And you might as well listen to adults who care about you rather than adults who don't.

Perfect son, imperfect parents

Sometimes the temptation to disobey or dishonor comes because your parents aren't perfect or because they don't understand you. Just suppose that you are exactly right about something, and they don't get it, and you as a person have a higher calling.

Think of Jesus. As a twelve-year-old, he was in the temple asking and answering questions with the most learned people in the land. But His parents were missing Him, because they just lost track of Him for three days. And they were kind of panicked when they finally found Him back, and His mom said, "Well, how could you do this to us?"

And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:49-52)

So here's a 12-year-old kid moving toward his teenage years. His parents don't understand Him. That seems like a time to rebel—He's better than they are, and He knows better than they know. But what does Jesus do? He goes home with his parents, submits to them, and keeps growing in wisdom, in bodily size, in his relationship with God his Father, and in his relationships with others.

That echoes what happened with Samuel—increasing in stature and in favor with God and man. So you have the perfect Son with imperfect parents who's still honoring them and submitting to them and benefiting and thriving as He grows in stature and in favor with God and man.

We've seen that thriving children honor and obey their parents. Let's move on to our second major point:

Thriving children

1. Thriving children honor and obey their parents.
2. Thriving children have parents who are worth honoring and obeying, who do not needlessly provoke them but bring them up in God's glad way.

Fathers, don't drive your kids crazy. "Fathers, don't provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). "Fathers, don't provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Focusing on fathers

These Bible verses tell children to obey "parents" and to honor "father and mother." Yet "fathers" in particular are the focus of the command to bring up children and not provoke them. This doesn't mean, of course, that moms have no role at all, but it remains a fact that God's Word is addressing fathers very specifically here. Why focus on fathers?

- The father has the main responsibility for his children and will answer to the Lord.
- The father has the greatest power to provoke and discourage children

When that Judgment Day comes, the first person to answer for how children were brought up will be the father. It will not be the mother. It will not be the pastor. It will not be the uncle. It will not be the Sunday school teacher or the youth group leader. It will be the father. This doesn't mean pastors have no responsibility in relation to the children, or that mothers have no responsibility. But the first and primary responsibility will be on the shoulders of the father.

If God asks on Judgment Day, "Did you read the Bible each day with your family?" will you say, "Well, I really liked sports on TV, and I couldn't squeeze Bible reading in very often"? Will you say, "I was too busy with more important things?" Just imagine yourself on the Day of Judgment. What are you going to say if you're asked, "What did you do to bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord?" None of us is going to be perfect. But let's face it—a lot of the excuses that we mumble throughout our week for not reading the Bible with our kids, or not listening to them, or blowing up on them—those kinds of excuses will all ring hollow on Judgment Day when we're in the presence of the Lord who knows everything.

At any rate, the father does have the main responsibility for his children. This can be a touchy topic. I have heard some moms complain, "I wish my husband would be the father and the assertive man and leader that he should be." I've heard a few of those "I wishes" from women who later couldn't handle it very well when their husband did try to become the spiritual leader of the family. Because all of a sudden the mom sees her turf shrinking a little, or some changes in the relationship happening. And that can be a challenge for moms who say they want the father to take more responsibility. Be careful what you wish for—you might get it!

Sometimes men don't handle this wisely or tactfully either. They don't lead in a considerate way; they become pushy and domineering. But my point is, if what we seek is fathers leading their families in a godly way, then fathers and mothers both have to be willing to help bring that about.

I think there's another reason, though, that Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21 focus on fathers—not just because God holds fathers primarily responsible for children, but because the father needs the command the most not to provoke your kids and drive them crazy. I think fathers are more likely than mothers to ignore their kids' feelings and to trample on them.

This certainly was the case at the time Paul wrote these letters. Originally, he was writing to Greek and Roman fathers who had the power of *patria potestas*—the right of life and death over their wife and children. Men could run roughshod and do whatever they wanted, even killing their wife and children, and get away with it. So fathers in that kind of a culture would need a very strong warning not to provoke or to crush their children's spirits.

But even in a culture that's not quite like that, it may still be the case that men are more likely to crush a child's spirit. We fathers may need that word from the Lord even more than mothers need it.

At any rate, these Scriptures addresses the fathers. You can speculate on what you think the reasons are for that. I think it's primarily that the father has a leading role, and then also that the father is the more likely to do the greatest damage in harming or provoking children—certainly in terms of physical abuse and also in some other possibilities.

Loving discipline

When we think about this, one end of the spectrum is the Eli approach—where he doesn't restrain his children, he doesn't insist on anything, he doesn't discipline anything. And the other end of the spectrum is the father who is a brute, who is nasty, who is a disciplinarian to the point of crushing his children's spirit. The best alternative to spirit-crushing discipline is not to have no discipline, but to have loving discipline rather than wrong discipline.

The Bible makes clear that discipline is important: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15). "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol" (Proverbs 23:13-14).

The point of loving discipline is: if you love your kid at all, you want the best for them. You want to spare them from terrible consequences, and you need to show them early in life that disobedience and sin are painful and harmful. Measured discipline is a lot better than the total destruction that comes from being an undisciplined person who has learned to live a wicked and disobedient and dissolute life. So loving discipline is vital—not discipline that crushes the spirit, but nonetheless discipline that's firm.

How do you discipline in a manner that doesn't crush a child's spirit, that doesn't provoke them to wrath? If kids just read that out of context—"Fathers, don't provoke your kids to wrath," or "don't make your kids upset" or "don't drive them crazy"—they might say, "Dad, you're provoking me to wrath because you didn't say I could go shopping for the 14th time this week" or because you declined some other request. "I'm mad because you didn't give me what I wanted. The Bible says not to provoke me!" Sorry, kids, but it doesn't work that way. Just because you get mad at your parents for not giving you your way, it doesn't mean your parents provoked you unreasonably.

Getting a good crop

As we think about discipline, let's look at a passage from the book of Isaiah. It's about farming, and it pops up in Isaiah seemingly out of nowhere. God is saying how He's going to punish Israel and then restore Israel, and then all of a sudden you get this little passage about farming. You might wonder, "What was that farming stuff doing, kind of dangling in the middle of nowhere, between these prophecies of judgment and restoration?"

Well, God is a Father who knows how to discipline, how much to discipline, when not to discipline, or when to put a stop to discipline, and when to start doing something to grow what's positive, not just discipline what's negative. Here's what God says in Isaiah:

Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place? ... Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod. (Isaiah 28:24-27)

A farmer doesn't just plow, plow, plow, plow, plow, plow, plow: "Okay, we'll plow again. And we'll plow again. We'll plow in March, we'll plow in April, we'll plow in May, we'll plow in June, we'll plow in July—we'll just plow." That does not produce much of a crop. If all you're doing is plowing and you never plant, you're not going to get anything. You plow only in order to plant. You dig up the weeds only in order to help the good stuff grow.

"When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place?" The farmer plants all these good crops after he's done plowing. So he doesn't plow all the time. And once he's got the stuff planted, he's not digging it up every two days to see how it's doing.

Now, in terms of discipline and parenting—if you are constantly disciplining, constantly trying to stop bad stuff from happening, always digging and trying to control everything—you might not get too many weeds, but you're not going to get any kind of crop at all. If you have a negative view of child-rearing—"I'm trying to bring up my child not to do bad stuff"—sorry, that doesn't cut it. Bringing up your children not to do bad stuff is no vision for child-rearing at all. The main question isn't, "How do I stop bad things?" but "How do I make good things flourish?"

God says, "Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cumin. But dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod." We might associate the rod with getting really tough, but a rod is not a club. There's a time at harvest when you've got to get rid of the chaff—you thresh it. Certain kinds of crops may require heavier threshing equipment, but other crops need lighter equipment and a lot lighter touch. You don't just take the huge threshing sledge and go right over them. You don't use big, heavy stone wheel to grind it to nothing. A little stick is good enough. You go tap, tap, tap, and it's enough to separate out the chaff. You get rid of the bad stuff, and you keep the good stuff. Some discipline is more of a tap, tap, tap—it stings, rather than smashes. It accomplishes its purpose without crushing.

So you see what's going on in God's discipline. He's saying, "I'm a smart farmer. I invented farming; I invented farmers. Just as a farmer knows how much plowing or threshing is needed, I know how much Israel needs in terms of discipline without being wiped out as a nation. And I will restore Israel and make her thrive again."

When we human fathers reflect our heavenly Father, we realize that in childrearing we shouldn't only be plowing. We need to be planting and building up what's good and healthy and helping our children to thrive. And we don't always have to bring out the big guns in discipline and crush what they've been doing wrong. It may take just a little stick instead of the big stone and the big threshing sledge. We need to understand that there's a great difference between loving discipline and outright cruelty.

Correction vs. cruelty

- **Disciplining:** fair, loving, limited
- **Damaging:** bullying, bodily injury
- **Scolding:** rebuking, correcting, private
- **Screaming:** raging, exploding, insulting, public humiliation
- **Directing:** teaching and example
- **Dominating:** rigid control, forcing kids to fit the same mold

What's the difference between good correction and unhealthy cruelty? Disciplining is fair. It gives the punishment that's deserved—but no more. It's done in love, and it's limited. You don't say, "Well, I'm gonna just do this forever." Some books on discipline say you've got to spank your child till they cry, and if they don't cry, give them another whack. And if they don't cry, give another whack—harder. And then another one—harder. Get a grip. There's a difference between disciplining and damaging—which is bullying and causing bodily injury.

When some people who have worked with abused children, or who have been through abuse themselves, hear that verse, "Punish your child with the rod; he won't die," that verse can sound pretty sad to them. Because they say, "I know a few who did die—or a few who came mighty close." Even if the body wasn't killed, the spirit was. When Proverbs say, "Discipline your kids. They're not going to die from it," it's in the context of speaking to wise covenant fathers. It's not talking to idiots who abuse. There's a great difference between limited discipline and just unlimited bullying.

Another kind of abuse is how you use your words. You can scold—and it's fine to scold. Kids need to be rebuked. They sometimes need to be corrected. But it should be done not to shame them in front of all their friends or in front of lots of other people. It should be done privately, personally, and again—in love.

Screaming, raging, exploding, insulting them, doing it in front of a lot of others and making them feel stupid and like nothing—that's verbal abuse. There's a huge difference between a good, sound scolding and vicious screaming. And if you don't know the difference, then keep your mouth shut for a while. That's the only thing there is to say.

There's a major difference between directing children and dominating them. In directing, fathers and mothers are to teach children. We direct children by what we tell them but also by who we are, by our example. Directing wisely is very different from dominating, trying to have rigid control over your child every second of the day, or having a certain template for your children where you force them into a particular mold.

I'm not very fond of certain books that tell you that you need to teach your children early in life to fit your schedule. "Let them bawl for three hours. If they think they've got to eat sooner than you think they should—too bad. You've got a little baby? They'd better learn to fit your schedule

and learn it quick." And there's just this sense that every child should be made to conform to the same schedule, and the schedule is entirely defined by the parents. That kind of rigid control over children might be convenient for you, but is it good for them? There may be occasions when it's okay to let a child cry for 10 minutes and learn to sleep through the night. That's fine. But there are certain kinds of parenting advice that are written by and tailored to control freaks. Don't be one of them.

If you like books like that too much—burn them all. If you tend to be sloppy and undisciplined and unscheduled anyway, maybe one of those books would be a healthy corrective. But if you like those books where you get to control everything and dominate every detail—trash them all. Because you probably need something different.

Here are some suggestions for healthy discipline: be careful, be consistent, be understanding, be compassionate, be teachable, be involved, and be godly.

Be careful

- Punish direct disobedience or defiance, not goofy stunts or careless spills.
- Spanking is more appropriate when kids are quite young and respond best to quick, physical consequences.
- Parents who grew up under abusive parents might be wise not to spank but to find other forms of discipline.
- Fairness does not always mean treating all children the same. Each child is different.

Punish direct disobedience or defiance,, when your kid's getting in your face, or they're not doing what you said. But if they accidentally knock over a glass of milk with their elbow, don't say, "How could you be so stupid? You want a spanking the next time you do that?" Hey, spills happen. It's easy to get irritated when there's a spill, because it's a pain in the neck and you've got to clean it up. But that doesn't mean the kid was sinning against the Lord—or sinning against you, for that matter. It means they're a kid. And tomorrow you'll probably spill something yourself.

I think spanking is most appropriate when kids are fairly young. I don't have hard and fast dates for when it's best to start, or how old they need to be for their first spanking, or how old they need to be for the last spanking. Kids of a certain age may respond better to quick physical consequences than to a long lecture that they don't understand, or to other forms of time-outs and punishment. So spanking might be appropriate in some cases for younger children.

Parents who grew up under abusive parents might be wise not to spank at all, but to find other forms of discipline. You might object, "The Bible says you've got to use the rod." Well, you also have to use wisdom as you're applying the Bible. You should never use the rod if you're not able to control your temper while you're doing so. There may be parents who grew up under abusive parents who can do much better than their parents did—and be very restrained and calm. But if you can't restrain your temper very well, then leave all physical forms of punishment alone.

Fairness does not always mean treating all children the same. You can have a definition of fairness that says every offense that this child did should be treated in the same manner as if that other child did it. Of course, you shouldn't play favorites. But different kids are different. There are some who are repentant and sorry with one look at them. There are others who need some pretty firm discipline to understand what was wrong. And of course there are some kids who learn to make a sad face in order to avoid consequences. It's not always easy to know for a parent to know what's best in a given situation. There's no way I can explain this fully or follow it perfectly in my own life. But I want you to keep in mind that each child is different. One child may get more spankings than another--and deserve more. Or spanking is something they are more responsive to, while another form of discipline is more effective with a different child. I've had kids who would rather get spanked than get grounded for a few hours. So guess which one they get? They're probably going to get grounded.

Be consistent

- **Punishment fits the crime:** Children know what to expect if they do something wrong. Consequences consistently fit the offense and don't vary with a parent's mood.
- **Walk the talk:** Parents must consistently do what they order their children to do, and avoid what they tell their children to avoid.
- **Parents agree:** Father and mother are consistent with each other. If one says no, kids can't get the other one to say yes.

Be consistent. Make sure the punishment fits the crime. And that means that kids need to know what to expect if they do something wrong. They need to know that it depends on them doing the wrong—not what mood you're in.

You know what that's like. Sometimes your kids do something wrong when you're in a jolly mood, and even though they did something wrong, it was kind of cute, and it was kind of funny, and it got a chuckle out of you, and the children got away scot-free—with the encouragement of your laugh. Later, they do the very same thing when you're in a sour mood, and your volcano goes off and death is near. But it was the same offense. The only difference was what mood you happened to be in that day. One way of provoking your children to wrath is for their punishment to depend on whether you're in a good mood or a bad mood, rather than on whether they actually deserve and need to be disciplined.

You need to walk the talk. Parents who lecture their children on alcohol consumption had better not be getting drunk themselves. Don't try to get your kids to do what you're not doing yourself. We have to be consistent. What we order our kids to do, we do. What we tell them to avoid, we avoid.

Another aspect of consistency is that dad and mom are consistent with each other. The kids, after a while, figure out which parent is more permissive or gives in more easily. So if one parent says no to the child, they go to the other parent. If they ask, "Mom, can I do this and such?" and she says "No," they might say to themselves, "Well, Dad's kind of a soft touch. We'll go to him—maybe give a compliment or two—and then say, "Oh Dad," and they'll ask the question they just ask Mom as though the question had never occurred to them before or had been asked in the previous 30 seconds in a different room. It's important that moms and dads are consistent with

each other. If one says “no,” that means “no,” and the child doesn’t get a “yes” out of the other parent.

Be understanding

- He who answers before listening--that is his folly and his shame. (Proverbs 18:13)
- The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. (18:17)
- A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even tempered. (17:27)
- A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. (29:11)

Be understanding. That means you listen to your kids. That means you listen when they’ve done something you think is wrong. They may have their excuses—but hear them out. Maybe there was a good reason, maybe there wasn’t. You don’t know unless you listen. “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.”

If two kids are in a fight, I’ll guarantee you that the first kid’s story is going to be different than the second one. “The first to present his case seems right, until another comes forward and questions him.” As a parent, you need to listen to both kids before deciding what to do.

“A man of knowledge uses words with restraint; a man of understanding is even-tempered.” When you’re an understanding person, you are able to keep your temper level. You may wince hearing these things, unless you’re a far better person than I am. My temper is not always even.

“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.” When your temperature gets too hot, your ears shut down, and so does your brain. So it’s important to cool it. Especially when you’re dealing with your kids, if your temper’s too high, just chill for a little while. Don’t try to deal with them right away. Wait. Get back together with them when you’re ready for it.

Be compassionate

- As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. (Ps 103:13-14)
- Be alert to your child’s maturity level, limits, abilities, moods, tiredness, challenges, fears.
- The main calling of a Christian parent is to display God’s grace and love to children, to show compassion and forgiveness. Admit your own need of grace, and treat kids with grace.

God knows us. He knows how mature or immature we are. He knows what our weaknesses are, what our vulnerabilities are—and He deals with us accordingly. In the same way, we need to be alert to our children’s maturity level. If you’ve got a five-year-old, don’t expect 15-year-old maturity from them. If you’ve got a 15-year-old, don’t expect to exercise the same control over them that you would over a five-year-old. You have to understand your child’s frame. You need to know their limits and their moods.

When you've got a three-year-old who's crankier than cranky at 8:30 at night, you do not need to whip out the largest Bible in the house and say, "It says here in the Word of God, 'Do everything without arguing or complaining so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God in a wicked and perverse generation.' Now, you little scoundrel, do everything without arguing and complaining!" Instead, you might want to just say, "I think that kid's tired." Stick them in bed. Save the lecture for a different day. Now, I'm not telling you kids that every time you're tired, you have the right to throw fits and be a crank. But parents have got to understand their kids' frame.

If you've got a teenage child, sometimes a lack of sleep is a problem there too. But there may be other things going on in their life that make them behave a certain way. You might respond only to what they're doing at that moment, or to the thing you didn't like. But oftentimes, there's something else going on. Be ready to listen to what's challenging another person, what their fears are. Deal with your children as a human. Be compassionate.

The main calling of a Christian parent is to display God's grace and love to children—and to show compassion and forgiveness. You are living in la-la land if you think the main calling of a parent is to produce perfectly behaved children. It's not going to happen. And if you try, you will ruin them.

This doesn't mean that you don't have standards of behavior, or that you don't discipline for wrong behavior. But your aim is that they know what it's like to live under grace—to live under love, to be forgiven sinners, even if they are sometimes disciplined sinners. "The Lord disciplines those He loves" (Hebrews 12:6), and so should parents. But we need to show compassion and forgiveness to our children. And we need to admit our own need of grace. Sometimes you know you're wrong—you know you provoked them. Don't keep that knowledge to yourself. Tell your kids, "I blew it. I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Admit your own need of grace, and treat kids with grace.

Be teachable

- Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Proverbs 26:12)
- He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe (Proverbs 28:26).
- The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor. (Proverbs 15:33)

And related to that—as parents, be teachable.

"Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There's more hope for a fool than for him." Harold Camping was a radio speaker who claimed to know the date of Jesus' return. Once he was visited by my mentor, Joel Nederhood. Dr. Nederhood was of the same generation, had a PhD in theology, and knew all sorts of stuff. He was a great man of God. Joel goes to visit Harold Camping and says, "Harold, you've got to cut that out. Nobody knows when Jesus is going to come back. Don't think you've figured it out." They talked at great length, and all Dr. Nederhood

could say at the end of it was, “Harold, you have one problem: you won’t listen to anybody.” That’s this verse. He was wise in his own eyes. He wouldn’t listen to anybody. According to Camping, the whole church was wrong. All the congregations of the world and all of its pastors were under the dominion of the evil one—and he, the rich construction engineer who became a speaker on religious radio, knew the Bible better than all of the churches and all the pastors throughout all of church history. He was a fool. And those who listened were not much smarter. “He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.”

“The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.” I’ve talked about a guy who foolishly set dates for Jesus to return and wouldn’t listen to anyone who tried to tell him otherwise. But one of the great challenges in each of our own lives is to be willing to listen to others. Sometimes the others we need to listen to is our spouse; they can help us and correct us.

Sometimes it’s our own kids. God puts certain kids into your life as a parent for a reason: to shape you in a certain way. If you want to get cured of being a law to yourself and your own selfish pig, having a couple of kids in your life will probably do it. In my own case, getting married challenge me nearly as much as having children did. For me getting married was all good. I got all sorts of good stuff from being married to my wife and not much of a downside. But with kids—even though they are a great joy—there are diapers to change, and there is orneriness. When you get people in your life who cross you, that’s when you finally find out who you are. When everybody is just going along with you and provides everything you want, you haven’t learned anything about yourself except, “That’s a great person who is wonderful to me.” You learn a lot when you have to deal with a child who is bugging you.

Another thing you learn, of course, is you learn to love somebody just because you love them. When you’re a father or a mother, in one sense you’re helpless. You’re stuck with loving your child no matter what they pull. And that puts you in a vulnerable position.

If people don’t like a church, they can leave it and go somewhere else. If they don’t like a spouse, they can bail out on them. But it’s really hard for people to just stop loving their kids no matter what shenanigans those kids pull. So one way that kids raise their parents is they teach you what it is to love unconditionally. And they teach you how you need to listen to somebody else who’s quite different from who you are, and do what’s best for them, and not for you.

Be involved

- Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)
- You shall teach God's commands diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deuteronomy 6:7)

It’s a 24/7 job to be a parent—and to be a father in particular. So be involved in their lives. Be listening to them. Be sharing from your own life with them.

Be godly

- We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God. (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12)
- The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)
- If godly fruit thrives in you, faith will not be forced upon your children in a way that provokes them. They will find it delicious.

If you must discipline, so be it—but make sure there are a lot more hugs than spankings in your house. Make sure there are a lot more encouragements than scoldings in your house. If the only time you talk to your kids is to correct them, you need to evaluate your conversation and change it to more "encouraging, comforting, and urging."

The most important thing about parenting is, in a sense, to forget about parenting for a while and simply be a person who bears the fruit of the Spirit. If you are full of love... if your house and your personality are bubbling with joy... if there is peace and calm about you... if there is kindness and goodness... if you're faithful and you keep your word and your promises... if you're gentle... if you have self-control... then it doesn't matter if you didn't read a book about parenting techniques. If you have that fruit in your life, you're not going to have to force your faith on your kids—they're going to want it. They're going to see the difference between you and others, and they're going to want who you are and what you've got. The best thing that we can do as fathers and mothers is simply to seek after God and ask that Christ be formed in us—that his character and his fruit be in us.

And as we do this, again let me remind you—it's all in the Lord.

Parenthood pictures the Fatherhood of God

- You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:11)
- The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. (John 5:20)
- Our Father who art in heaven. (Matthew 6:9)
- If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11)

We fathers are picturing the fatherhood of God—for better or for worse. God says to his Son Jesus, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." And we do need to convey to our children that we love them and that we take huge pleasure in them—that we are delighted to have them as our sons and daughters.

"The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing." And we fathers can take a cue from that too—that we love our children, and that we're sharing from our own heart and from our own life, and helping them to understand what we're up to.

Jesus teaches us to pray to "Our Father who art in heaven." And we need to learn to respect our earthly fathers so that we can show respect also to our Father in heaven.

Jesus says, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” That’s in a little different context, but it’s still helpful for those of us who are fathers. We’re called to reflect the Father, and we’ve got to admit—we’re evil. We’re sinners. We’ve got problems. Even so, if our son asks for bread, we don’t want to give him a stone. If he asks for a fish, we don’t want to give him a snake or a scorpion. God gives us the desire to seek what’s best for our children. And even though we’re never completely free of evil in this life, we can at least in some dim way reflect the Father’s love, his discipline, his care, his teaching of his children.

Children's attitude to parents pictures attitude to the Father

- I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. (John 8:28)
- I do as the father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:31)
- Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)

As for you kids, your attitude toward your parents pictures the attitude of the Son toward the Father. Your attitude and actions are saying something about Jesus. He said, “I do nothing on my own authority, but I speak just as the Father taught me... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” Jesus loved to do—and loves to do—what his Father says. During his time on earth, says the Bible, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Now Jesus was never disobedient, but he was called by his Father to do some very, very hard things—supremely, taking the entire sin of the world upon himself and being nailed to a cross so that other people could be saved. Your father here on earth is never going to ask you to do something as hard as what the Father in heaven asked his Son to do. And Jesus obeyed his Father. He learned obedience to the infinite degree when he obeyed his Father—even in bearing the world's sin and dying. Sure, we’re not perfect like Jesus, but we’re also not called to achieve the things that his Father called him to do either.

As children, let’s obey, honor, love our parents. As parents, let’s do all we can to help our children to thrive in the Lord.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your instruction. Give us the wisdom and the balance to implement your Word as you desire. Help us above all to be devoted to you, to delight in you, to bear the fruit of the Spirit. And as we do that, Lord, may that fruit of blessing overflow into our family, into the lives of all around us. Father, help families who struggle. Help parents who even now have a tense relationship and a difficult relationship with their children. Lord, turn their hearts back toward one another, that the parents can again become tender and affectionate and delight in their children, and that the children can again look at the parents with a different eye—not one of resentment or judgment of the parents’ failings, but once again to honor and to obey. We pray, Lord, that you will forgive our many sins and heal our many wounds by the blood of Jesus Christ and by the work of your Holy Spirit. And help us, Lord, as parents and children, to encourage each other in walking with you. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

Thriving Children

By David Feddes

Slide Contents

Thriving children

1. Thriving children honor and obey their parents.
2. Thriving children have parents who are worth honoring and obeying.

Colossians 3:20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord [literally: "is pleasing in the Lord."] 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Prosper or perish?

- Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. (1:8)
- My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. (Proverbs 3:1-2)
- The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. (Proverbs 30:17)

Weak father, worthless sons

- Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. (1 Sam 2:12)
- **They would not listen** to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death. (1 Samuel 2:23-25)
- I am about to punish Eli's house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and **he did not restrain them**. (1 Samuel 3:13)

Growing up under Eli

The boy ministered to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest. (1 Samuel 2:11)

Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man. (1 Sam 2:26)

Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him... Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the young man. (1 Sam 3:7-8)

Why obey parents?

- "This is pleasing in the Lord." You are picturing how the Son obeys the Father.
- "This is right." You are keeping one of God's Ten Commandments.
- "That it may go well with you." Your parents want what's best for you. Obeying them helps you thrive materially, relationally, spiritually.
- You will be shaped by adults--it's only a question of which adults. Your parents love you most and know you best.

Perfect son, imperfect parents

And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:49-52)

Thriving children

1. Thriving children honor and obey their parents.
2. Thriving children have parents who are worth honoring and obeying, who do not needlessly provoke them but bring them up in God's glad way.

Focusing on fathers

Col 3:21 and Eph 6:4 tell children to obey "parents" and to honor "father and mother." Yet "fathers" in particular are the focus of the command to bring up children and not provoke them. Why focus on fathers?

- *The father has the main responsibility for his children and will answer to the Lord.
- *The father has the greatest power to provoke and discourage children.

Loving discipline

- Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15)
- Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24)

- Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol. (Proverbs 23:13-14)

Getting a good crop

Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place? ... Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod. (Is 28:24-27)

Correction vs. cruelty

- **Disciplining:** fair, loving, limited
- **Damaging:** bullying, bodily injury
- **Scolding:** rebuking, correcting, private
- **Screaming:** raging, exploding, insulting, public humiliation
- **Directing:** teaching and example
- **Dominating:** rigid control, forcing kids to fit the same mold

Be careful

- Punish direct disobedience or defiance, not goofy stunts or careless spills.
- Spanking is more appropriate when kids are quite young and respond best to quick, physical consequences.
- Parents who grew up under abusive parents might be wise not to spank but to find other forms of discipline.
- Fairness does not always mean treating all children the same. Each child is different.

Be consistent

- **Punishment fits the crime:** Children know what to expect if they do something wrong. Consequences consistently fit the offense and don't vary with a parent's mood.
- **Walk the talk:** Parents must consistently do what they order their children to do, and avoid what they tell their children to avoid.
- **Parents agree:** Father and mother are consistent with each other. If one says no, kids can't get the other one to say yes.

Be understanding

- He who answers before listening--that is his folly and his shame. (Proverbs 18:13)
- The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. (18:17)
- A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even tempered. (17:27)
- A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. (29:11)

Be compassionate

- As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. (Ps 103:13-14)
- Be alert to your child's maturity level, limits, abilities, moods, tiredness, challenges, fears.
- The main calling of a Christian parent is to display God's grace and love to children, to show compassion and forgiveness. Admit your own need of grace, and treat kids with grace.

Be teachable

- Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (26:12)
- He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe (28:26).
- The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor. (15:33)

Be involved

- Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:4)
- You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deut 6:7)

Be godly

- We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God. (1 Thess 2:11-12)

- The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23)

- If godly fruit thrives in you, faith will not be forced upon your children in a way that provokes them. They will find it delicious.

Parenthood pictures the Fatherhood of God

- You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:11)

- The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. (John 5:20)

- Our Father who art in heaven. (Matthew 6:9)

- If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11)

Children's attitude to parents pictures attitude to the Father

- I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. (John 8:28)

- I do as the father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:31)

- Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)