

Marriage and Family Series
Don't Focus on the Family
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Tom Pennington, Pastor
Countryside Bible Church

Well, it's with a measure of sadness that I come to today. This is the last in our, oh I guess 10 or 12-week study in marriage and family. It's been a great time for me, to be reminded of those great truths about all that I'm to be as a husband and a father, and I trust it has been for you as well, as you've sort of contemplated what God's Word has to say about our marriages and our families. But it's appropriate today that we come to the first few verses of Ephesians 6 to deal with the issue of family, both in terms of children and fathers. This week I came across an article that I'd seen several years ago. Perhaps you read it when it came out. It was in the *Atlantic Monthly*, February of 1997. The article was entitled "Laws Concerning Food and Drink, Household Principles, and Lamentations of the Father," perfectly appropriate for a day like today. Let me just read you a portion of this article. Dad, you may want to make some notes. These are some laws you may want to lay down at your house. These are laws when at the table.

If you are seated in your high chair, or in a chair such as a greater person might use, keep your legs and feet below you as they were. Neither raise up your knees, nor place your feet upon the table, for that is an abomination to me. Yes, even when you have an interesting bandage to show, your feet upon the table are an abomination, and worthy of rebuke. Drink your milk as it is given to you. Neither use on it any utensils, nor fork nor knife nor spoon, for that is not what they are for. If you dip your blocks in the milk and lick it off, you will be sent away. When you chew your food, keep your mouth closed until you have swallowed, and do not open it to show your brother or your sister what is within. I say to you, do not do so, even if your brother or sister has done the same to you. Eat your food only. Do not eat that which is not food. Neither seize the table between your jaws, nor use the raiment of the table to wipe your lips. I say again to you, do not touch it, but leave it as it is. And though the pieces of broccoli are very like small trees, do not stand them upright to make a forest. Because we do not do that, that is why. Sit, just as I have told you, and do not lean on one side or the other, nor slide down until you are nearly slid away. Heed me, for if you sit like that, your hair will go into the syrup. And now, behold, even as I have said, it has come to pass....

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The laws go on and on, that you could set up for your family and lay down for your household. As I read that, I thought, you know, those are humorous, but in a very profound way they show how easy it is as parents to lose focus on what's truly important. Sheila and I were talking this morning. One of our greatest fears is that our children will leave our house thinking that one of the greatest sins in the world, the cardinal sin in life, is something like slouching in your chair. But even worse is for our children to leave our households and have no clear idea of what family is even all about. We live in difficult and perilous times; times in which we are driven here and there, and even Christian parents find themselves distracted by all of the stuff that's out there in families. And families find themselves adrift, wondering exactly what is the focus and foundation of life in the family all about.

Fortunately, there is a passage where God has given us a clear focus and a clear foundation on which to build our family life together. And that's the first few verses of Ephesians 6. I'd like for us to turn there this morning. Ephesians 6, let me read these verses to you; brief, to the point, but profound. And let me tell you before I read them that I have a prayer for you and for me this morning. I prayed even as our family was driving to the church this morning, God help us not to pass over these words that we have read and heard so many times, and miss the main point, and miss the profundity, the richness that is in these words. That's my great prayer for you this morning. Paul writes,

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Now as you read these verses, obviously, this is a very brief description by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus about what life in the family is to be like. He's dealt with marriage in chapter 5, and now when we come to chapter 6 he lays a very brief foundation for everything that goes on in our families. The main point in these four short verses is that God doesn't want our families to be self-centered or even family-centered. God's primary goal for our families is that they be God-centered, that they find their center, their focus, on God Himself. Now how does that happen? Certainly, a worthy goal, and if you're a believer sitting here this morning, you have a desire, even as you hear those words, that your family would be God-centered, but how exactly do you get from point A to point B. Well, under the inspiration of the Spirit, Paul here in Ephesians 6 sets forth two basic commands that will insure, if we follow them, that our families

are God-centered, that our families are focused on God. I want us to look at these two most basic commands this morning. They're brief, but absolutely profound.

The first command is given to children, in the first 3 verses. To children:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER, (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH.

Now it's interesting, Paul assumed that when this letter to the church in Ephesus was read aloud there in the congregation on the Lord's Day, that there would be children present to hear it. And so, he addresses these three verses in this letter directly to them. By the way, parents, that, in and of itself is a powerful principle. We need consistently to insure that our children, from a young age, are part of the corporate worship of the church. But notice what he tells children. His instruction to them comes in two parts.

First, he says, children, obey your parents. Now who is he talking to here? Who exactly are the children he's referencing? Well, you'll remember that when we studied chapter 5, we found in verse 31 as we talked about marriage, that when men and women leave their home, and in this context for marriage, when they leave the home, they immediately enter a different relationship with their parents. Their relationship to their parents radically changes. So, he's talking here to children who are in the home. As long as a child is in the home, under of the authority of his parents, eating their food, sleeping under their roof, he is responsible to obey.

The Greek word for "obey" is a compound word. It literally means "to hear under". Paul uses this same word in verse 5 of slaves. He says, "slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters." This word obey simply means "to willingly follow the directives of someone whom God has placed in authority over you". And in this context, specifically, it's a reference to your parents. You know, it fascinates me that this is so much a part of God's plan for human life that even when Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, grew up in a human family, He who had much to teach His parents, instead, obeyed them. Luke 2:51 says, after the incident there at the temple, Jesus went down with his parents and came to Nazareth, and, "He continued in subjection to them."

Young people, God doesn't take disobedience to your parents lightly. In fact, let's turn to Romans 1. I want you to see just how forcefully God feels about this issue. Romans 1, you

remember the context beginning in verse 18. Paul lays out the indictment of humanity. He says “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” And he goes on to lay out the course that sin takes in every individual life, as well as civilizations and humanity as a whole. And then he comes to verse 28. “And just as they” that is, really all of us “did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.” And then begins this list of all kinds of sin that includes murder, haters of God. But notice the end of verse 30. It includes a very specific sin. “disobedient to parents,” In verse 32 Paul says this. “... although mankind knows the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but they also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

Disobedience to parents is part of the reason that the wrath of God will come upon humanity. You see it as well in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 21, when God was king in Israel, when the theocracy was established, God, as Israel’s king, laid down a number of laws and some of those laws were about response to parents. This is how God feels about it. Deuteronomy 21:18,

“If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town. They shall say to the elders of his city, ‘this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all of the men of his city shall stone him to death; so that you shall remove the evil from your midst. And all Israel will hear *of it* and fear.”
[No, God doesn’t take disobedience to parents lightly.]

Now, when you look at the command back in Ephesians 6, don’t misunderstand and think that all Paul is calling for is simply doing what your parents say. You see, merely doing what your parents say is not obedience. Beneath external conformity there must be a willing heart. Romans 6:17 says that true obedience always comes from the heart. So, obedience means, as we often tell our children, it means “doing what your parents say, with three provisos: without delay, without arguing and excuses, and with your whole heart”. Anything less is not obedience. If any one of those ingredients is missing, it’s not obedience. You have not willingly, from the heart, submitted your will to the will of your parents. And parents, let me tell you, you should accept nothing less as obedience, because that’s the kind of obedience God demands. And you are to set a pattern and example for that.

Now what exactly is it that children are to obey? Well, in the parallel passage, in his letter to the church at Colossae, Colossians 3, Paul makes it very plain. Colossians 3:20, “Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.” In all things, absolutely comprehensive. There is nothing left out of this command. From the clothes you wear to the length of your hair to when you go to bed to when you get up. Nothing is exempt from this command from God. “In all things....”

Now, you say, aren't there any exceptions? Well, there are. There are two, and I don't have time to take you there. But if you want to read up on it, you can. They're implied in Peter's speech in Acts 4:19 and 20. There Peter says there are only two biblical reasons not to obey the authority that God has put over you. And by the way, this pertains to every authority. This pertains to children, to parents; this pertains to us as we work for employers. It doesn't matter what authority, us to the government, whatever authority, there are only two reasons to disobey the authority God places over us.

Reason number one is if that authority commands us to do something that God forbids. Or secondly, if that authority commands us not to do something that God requires. Those are the only two reasons to disobey authority, to disobey your parents. You must obey your parents in everything, with those two exceptions.

Now, you've heard that all your life. Unfortunately, the next part of what Paul says hasn't been stressed as much. And it is absolutely foundational to understanding Paul's main point here. Children, obey your parents, and then he adds, in the Lord. This expression is similar to what Paul says about slaves' obedience down in verse 5 of Ephesians 6. He says “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters”, and then he ends the verse, “as to Christ.” Young people, if you don't hear anything else I say, get this. You are to obey your parents, not because they are bigger than you are, not because they are older than you are, not because they have superior authority, not because they have the cash or the car keys. You're to obey your parents as part of your Christian discipleship as to Christ. You see, your relationship to your parents presents you with a very practical way in which you can carry out your obedience to your Lord.

Let me ask you, young people. Do you consistently, as a manner of life, do what your parents tell you to do, do everything they tell you to do without delay, without arguing and excuses, and with your whole heart? If not, then you are not obeying your parents. And more importantly, you are not obeying Christ. And in fact, if you are known for a pattern of disobedience to your

parents, then you fall in Romans 1. You live under the wrath of God. You are not a believer. And someday you will suffer His ultimate wrath.

You say, well you don't understand. You know, my parents, they're unreasonable. Well, I do understand that. There are some unreasonable parents. But, let me ask you a question. How do you think you ended up in that family? God did it. He didn't give you a choice. I mean, there wasn't like this check-box in the womb where you could decide what family you were going to end up in. God put you in that family. And the same God who put you in that family with those parents, said, "children, obey your parents."

This isn't about your parents. This is between you and God. You must obey your parents, not because of the character of your parents but because of your God and your Lord. God is more than capable of dealing with your parents. And He will. He'll hold them accountable for how they act and treat you as a parent. But He expects you to obey Him by obeying them.

There's a second part of Paul's command to children here. Verse 2, "Honor your father and mother". This is of course the fifth commandment quoted from Exodus 20. Paul brings in the big guns. You must honor your father and mother. The word "honor" here is a very interesting word. It has a number of nuances. Let me just give you a few that are appropriate to this context. The word honor simply means "to count as valuable, to revere, to respect, to ascribe worth to". You see, this command deals not so much with your external behavior, although it does deal with that. It deals with your attitude toward your parents. You're to honor them. You're are to count them as valuable. You're to revere them, to respect them, to ascribe worth to them. Now, how can you do that? How can you show that practically? Well, I wish we had time to turn to all of the individual Scriptures involved. We don't. Let me just give you a brief list. Here's what the Scriptures teach as to how you can honor your parents.

Number one. Obey them as long as you're in their home. We saw that in 6:1. Obey them as long as you're in their home. That's a way to honor them, to respect them.

Number two. Always show respect in how you speak to them. Both in the words you choose, and the tone you use. This thing of speaking is a big issue in the Scripture.

In fact, number three. Don't speak evil of your parents or curse them. Exodus 21:17 makes it very clear that in God's mind there ought to be harsh penalties and someday will be for those children who speak evil of their parents or curse them.

Number four. Don't strike them. Don't hit them. Don't injure them in any way. Exodus 21:15.

Number five. Listen to their counsel. This is the consistent message of the book of Proverbs. Especially Proverbs 1. If you're going to respect and honor your parents, then it means, you sit up, and you listen. You take their counsel. When I was growing up, there was a plaque on the wall in what we called affectionately the boys' room. It was this sort of bunkhouse dorm room that was out in a different building from our main house. And on the wall there was a sign there that said, "Why can't all of life's problems hit us in youth when we know everything?" Listen to their counsel.

Number six. Care for them as they age. In fact, turn to 1 Timothy. Let me show you this verse in its context. You've heard this verse all your life, but perhaps not really thought of its context. First Timothy 5:3, Paul is talking about the church taking care of widows, and then he says in verse 4. "... if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first" that is the children or grandchildren "must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God." God says, listen, here's a way to honor your parents, your grandparents. Is to care for them. Verse 8, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Now, that certainly pertains to your immediate family that lives under your roof. We often use it that way. But, the way Paul used it here, in context, was if you refuse to care for your aging parents or grandparents. It's as if you've denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever. This is how we honor our parents.

Now, notice back in Ephesians 6 the motivations Paul gives us for obeying and honoring. He gives us four of them. He says you ought to do it because of your relationship to the Lord.

Verse 1. "Obey your parents in the Lord".

Number 2. He says you ought to do it because it's God's design. The end of verse 1 he says "for this is right". Obedience to parents corresponds to God's standard. It's the way God designed the world. It's right.

Number 3. He says you ought to do it because of God's command. In verse 2 he brings out the fifth commandment, (as I said, the big gun" and he says you need to do this because it's commanded in the law of God.

And number 4. You should do it, and here God graciously provides a promise, you ought to do it because of the promise God attaches to it. Verse 2 says it's the first commandment with promise, this fifth commandment, and then verse 3 details the promise itself. "So that it may be well with you." In other words, that you may experience God's blessing. "That you may live long on the earth." It's interesting, as Paul quotes the fifth commandment here, he omits the last phrase from Exodus 20, "... the land which the Lord your God gives you" which had a particular reference to the land of Canaan and to the Israelites. Paul, under inspiration, lifts the promise out of its Israelite background, and he makes it generally applicable to all who obey and honor their parents. There'll be long life. Now this isn't an ironclad guarantee, but it's generally true as theologian Charles Hodge writes, "This is a revelation of a general purpose of God, the usual course of His providence."

What a great promise. Children, obey and honor your parents. If you want a God-centered family, children must be taught to obey and honor their parents. Not because it makes for more enjoyable family vacations, but because they understand their parents are in the place of God to them. And their response to their parents is, in fact, a response of their heart to their greater authority, God Himself.

But there's a second command Paul gives us, if we want a God-centered family, and it's really the key. This is a command to fathers. Verse 4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Now, why does God single out fathers here? You feel a bit picked on, dads, on Father's Day, that I would come to this text? Why is it that God chooses to single out fathers? It's because, as we discovered back in our study of chapter 5, that God has made us as men in the home the heads of our home. We are the head of the wife, and we're therefore also the head of the child. Men are ultimately responsible for everything that happens in their homes. He's put us in the position of authority and responsibility. Men, if verse 4 isn't happening in your house, if verse 4 is violated in some way in your household, God holds you responsible for it. And He holds me responsible for it. So, this verse is directed especially at fathers, but it also applies to you ladies, to you mothers. Just in case you thought you were going to get away here. The Greek word that's translated "fathers" is accurately translated "parents" in Hebrews 11:23. So, it encompasses both.

Now, men, notice that when God starts to talk to us about our responsibilities in the family, He doesn't talk about our authority at all. You know, sometimes we like to strut around with our authority, I'm the head of this house. I'm the king of this castle. God doesn't start there. He starts instead with our responsibility. And Paul breaks down, again, his command to fathers as

well as to you mothers, into two parts. First of all, he says, “Do not provoke your children to anger.” To us that doesn’t sound very much out of place. We’ve heard that all our lives. But I wish you could imagine sitting in a first-century church and hearing that expression for the first time, because this concept would have been absolutely revolutionary in the first century. You see, under the law of *Patria Potestas*, the Romans gave virtually full and absolute power to the father over the children. A father could imprison his son. He could scourge his son. Under Roman law he could put his son in chains. He could force him to work in the fields. He could even legally put him to death. But God, in the church, says be careful how you treat your children. Even respect their feelings. Don’t consistently provoke them to anger.

You say why is that? Why the emphasis on this? We touched on it last Sunday night as we studied that man is made in the image of God. Every human being bears the imprint of the image of God, and therefore we must take all other human beings, even our children, infinitely seriously. That little child who doesn’t know as much as you do, that little child who needs life experience, who needs to be taught and directed, who sometimes needs discipline, that child is made in the image of God, and you’d better treat them with respect, because God will not take that lightly.

Sometimes, I’m in public places, as I’m sure you are, and I see parents absolutely violating this principle, misunderstanding entirely that their children are made in the image of God. I see them publicly humiliating their children, yelling at them, ridiculing them, disciplining them publicly, snatching them; and looking around and talking to people in the store about their children while the child stands right there. I want to go to those parents, no matter how much that child is misbehaving, I want to go to those parents and say, let me just ask you a question. Do you know your child is made in the image of God? Let me ask you a question. Would you want to be treated that way? Go find a private place and deal with the child, but treat them with respect. Paul says, don’t make it a pattern to stir up anger in your children.

Over in Colossians 3 in the parallel passage he puts it this way. Again, to the church in Colossae a letter written around the same time as the letter to Ephesians. Verse 21, he says “Fathers do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.” The Greek word for “exasperate” is an interesting word. It literally means “to stir up”. It’s used both positively and negatively in the New Testament. It’s used, you remember, often Paul will say, I want to stir you up to some good action or good attitude. That’s the word. He says, fathers, don’t stir up your children. There’s an interesting use of this Greek word in the secular literature of the time. It was used to describe a bellows blowing wind on a spark and igniting it into full flame. God says don’t be, by

your attitudes and your actions and your words, inciting your children to the full flame of anger, encouraging angry exasperation or resentment.

Now, as Christian parents, if you're sitting there today and you're in Christ, you don't want to exasperate and anger your children. But you find yourself asking, as I do, what exactly do we do that encourages that? What do we do that exasperates and builds resentment and anger in our children? Well, we are tempted to deceive ourselves, and I'm certainly guilty of that as well, and so I've read a number of books this week to try to congeal out of them what are the most common ways we anger our children. Now, honestly, this deserves a full message, but I'm not going to take another full message to do it, so let me just give you a brief list and encourage you to think about these things, and read up on it some yourselves. How do we anger our children?

Number one: this is at the very top of the list, inconsistent discipline, inconsistent discipline. You want to anger your child, then blow up at them today. Let all Hell break loose in your home because they spill a glass of milk, and then tomorrow tolerate a gross and terrible sin. Or treat the same offense differently from day to day. Think of how exasperating that is for your children. Think of how it would be at work if you never knew what kind of reaction was coming, if you never knew what was acceptable behavior. And yet parents do this all the time. Ask any youth pastor. Ask Rocky, ask Jonathan. The number one complaint that comes from kids about their parents, that exasperates them is: never knowing how the parent's going to respond, never knowing the boundaries, never knowing what to expect.

Number two: unreasonable, arbitrary commands. We just have a tendency as parents to have our first response be "NO". You know, we get so many questions, no. No, the answer is no, whatever the question is, no. Unreasonable arbitrary commands.

Number three: constant nagging and criticizing, always focusing on the child's problems, and how the child isn't measuring up to your standards.

Number four: and this goes along with that: never complimenting or encouraging. Imagine how totally demoralizing it is for a student to come home with a report card, eager to show you that he or she has all As and one B, and the first response from the parent is, "what's the B for?" You would not believe how many kids grow up saying, "nothing I ever do satisfies my parents. They're never happy."

Number five: overprotection. I have to admit to you, this is something that I'm guilty of. It's kind of a Pennington trait. Overprotection will build anger and frustration in your children.

Number six: favoritism, favoritism, like Jacob to Joseph. You want to make your other children angry? Show favoritism to one of your children.

Number seven: failure to distinguish between appropriate childish behavior and wrong or sinful behavior. You know, there are parents who will absolutely blow up because the child accidentally knocks over his glass at the table. Look, the guy's growing 3 inches a day. What do you expect? He doesn't know how to control his limbs. And then they'll tolerate some gross sin. Understand the difference between childish behavior and wrong or sinful behavior.

Number eight: an unhealthy focus on achievement rather than faithfulness in character, an unhealthy focus on achievement rather than faithfulness in character. This is big in our culture. Fathers who push their sons to excel in sports, you know, who want to sort of live out their sports fantasies through their children. We've all seen fathers and mothers yelling from the sideline at this little boy who can barely pick up one foot in front of the other. Acting as if the world series was on the line. Mothers pushing their daughters to excel in academic achievement, to become the head cheerleader, to become the homecoming queen, to become the career professional, whatever it is: an unhealthy focus on achievement. You want to anger your kids. Just keep raising the bar higher than even their ability, and have them try to meet that, instead of encouraging faithfulness and hard work with the skills they have.

Number nine: neglect. I wish we had time to go back into the life of David and you could see how David set out a course for Absalom of neglect. And he reaped what he sowed. Still, Absalom was a problem, but nevertheless, neglect will build anger and resentment in your children. You know, there are many children in our day who are day care and latch key kids. They often feel that they are an unwelcome intrusion into their parents' busy lives and careers. Their parents' attitudes and actions sort of communicate to them that the children are just not wanted, and often in the way. And eventually, the children will begin to reproduce that attitude toward the parents. When I was growing up there was a popular song called "The Cat's in the Cradle". A lot of truth in that song. When you coming home son? I don't know when, but we'll get together then. Neglect.

Number ten: physical and verbal abuse. There are a number of examples of this in Scripture. The most graphic I think is Saul to Jonathan. In 1 Samuel 20, within three verses in that chapter,

he says Jonathan, you are the son of a perverse and rebellious woman, and then a couple of verses later, he tries to kill him, throws a spear at him, tries to kill him. Sometimes we're tempted to take out with physical abuse our frustrations against our children. That will absolutely drive them to anger and resentment. Sometimes though, we just use our tongues. We use a tongue that's much more gifted and quick and skilled, can out-talk our children, and we slice them to pieces. You idiot, you're never going to amount to anything.

Paul says don't do those things that provoke your children to anger. Instead, he says, bring them up. This means "to raise with tender care". You see, children can't rear themselves. They have to be raised. The proverb says "a child left to himself will" what? "bring his mother to shame. They have to be raised with "tenderness and care". The Minnesota Crime Commission, a government-initiated study of delinquency, more than 50 years ago, wrote this. Perhaps you've read it.

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it; his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toys, his uncle's watch, or whatever. Deny him these, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He's dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, no developed skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, but all children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in their self-centered world of infancy, given free rein to their impulsive actions to satisfy each want, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.

Exactly right. They have to be raised. We are to raise our children. And God has given us two primary tools to accomplish that. They're here in Ephesians 6:4.

The first tool God has given us is "discipline," discipline. In 2 Timothy 3:16 that word is translated as "training in righteousness". We are to bring our children up by systematically training them. As one Greek scholar puts it, training here means training by means of rules and regulations, rewards; and when necessary, punishments. You want a clear picture of this word, look at the Torah, God's law. You see, God laid down clear laws, and then He laid down corresponding rewards if they were kept, and punishments if they were broken. And then He carried through on either the reward or the punishment. That's discipline, and that's the tool God has given us to raise our children.

The second tool that we have to raise our children here is called “instruction”. That same Greek scholar says this is “training by means of the spoken word, whether teaching, warning, or encouragement”. This is what you say. It presupposes, by the way, this word does, a problem, and a need to set it right. And it seeks to correct the thinking as well as appeal to the will, and encourage the child to correct whatever’s wrong. If you want a clear picture of this word, “instruction”, read Proverbs. Proverbs is essentially a book of instruction. The writer of Proverbs lays down warnings. He teaches, he explains, he corrects the child’s thinking, he admonishes them. He appeals to their will to do the right thing. That’s instruction. But so far, if any good Greek or Roman, any pagan in the first century, would have heard these words, he would have agreed. Because both these words, discipline and instruction were part of the vocabulary of all first century education.

That’s why Paul adds the crucial genitive, “of the Lord,” “the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Here’s the main point. Our training and instruction must always have the Lord as it’s reference point. All of our discipline, and all of our instruction is to be centered on God. Now, there are two very practical implications of that reality, that touch us, I’m afraid, very close to the heart.

The first is this. As we teach and discipline, and correct, and lay down household rules, we must never appeal to our own authority, solely. Our authority is a temporary borrowed authority. As Charles Hodge puts it,

It is only by making God the teacher and ruler, on Whose authority everything is to be believed, and in obedience to Whose will everything is to be done, that the ends of education can possibly be attained. It is infinite folly in men to assume to be wiser than God, or to attempt to accomplish an end by other means than those which he has appointed.

What does he mean? Essentially this. You and I, parents, have no right to say, because I said so, that’s why. Who cares? And you know what, if that’s how you parent, as your children get older, there will come a time when they will say, “who cares”. Instead, what we ought to say is “you must obey me because there is a God that created you, and that God has put me as an authority in your life, albeit an imperfect and flawed authority. I am in the place of God to you, and you must obey me because God said you must obey me. And to disobey me, it’s not about me.” Suddenly you have taken up arms against God. I merely act on His behalf in this family.

When I was growing up, I often found myself in trouble, and I remember those long sermons. You think I preach long sermons, you should have heard my mother. She'll hear this tape, and I'll get in trouble for this. I remember, she always gave the sermon first, which was so difficult, because I'm sitting there listening to this sermon about how God is God and He made me, and when I disobey them, I'm disobeying God, and waiting, you know, in anticipation of the spanking that was still to follow. But that was right. That's how it should be. It wasn't about her or my dad and their authority. It was about God. You see, it puts our children's disobedience in perspective. It's not against you. It's against God.

But there's a second implication of this little phrase, "the discipline and instruction of the Lord", and it's huge. You see, this establishes the ultimate goal of our parenting, and even of our families. Our goal in everything we do as parents is not primarily to build loyalty to us, or even to the family, although those are certainly wonderful by-products. Our primary goal must be to direct our children to God, to make them God-centered. Ted Tripp, in his excellent book *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, (we recently of course had Dr. Tripp here.) In his book he lists some of the unbiblical goals that Christian parents tend to pursue. Let me just mention a couple of them that are the most common in our culture and in our city. This is how we miss the big picture. This is how we miss the goal of making our children God-centered, we get mis-directed on unbiblical goals.

One of them is this: developing special skills, developing special skills. Football, soccer, baseball, gymnastics, swimming, dance, piano: these are like local epidemics in our area. Now don't misunderstand me. These all have a place. But how much emphasis do you, in your family, give to these things? How much of your family's time? Let me just ask you a realistic question. Do you really believe that their success in life is tied to how well they can throw a ball or play the piano? Will those activities truly produce a more God-centered child? Will God measure your success as a parent by how well your child performs in a specific skill? When you stand before God, He's not going to ask how well they play the piano. He's not going to ask how well they can throw a ball. And yet, we get misdirected from the main thing.

Another common unbiblical goal Ted Tripp identifies in his book is "good education". For many parents, this takes precedence over everything else. In a recent George Barna poll, the highest percentage of Christian parents, 39% ranked the most critical outcome of their parenting, in other words, they could consider themselves a success if this one thing was accomplished. 39%, the highest percentage, said, "if I give them a good education." Many sacrifice everything on this altar. And listen, it comes in all shapes and schooling choices, whether it's public, private, or

home school. It doesn't matter. And again, there's nothing wrong with providing a good education for your children. But if the primary goal of your parenting is your child's academic career, then you are failing as a Christian parent. When your child, as I said, stands before God, God's not going to say, so, do they understand Latin? He's going to ask how well you directed their hearts toward Him. Did you have a God-centered family?

You want to know if your goals are flawed? Just look at how your family spends most of its time, energy, and resources. You see, many well-intentioned Christian parents so build their lives around their children, and their children's activities, that they unwittingly teach their children not to be God-centered, but to be self-centered. You want a God-centered family? Here's how. Parents, fathers, bring your children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. You want to know how to flesh that out? I strongly recommend that you get Ted Tripp's book *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. You read, put those principles into practice. But this is the goal. It's a God-centered child. Turn to Psalm 78. I want us to get a little bigger vision for parenting. This psalm gives it to us. Psalm 78. Here's what it's about. Here's why God put you in your role. Psalm 78:5.

For He ... [appointed] a testimony in Jacob [That is God.] ... [He] appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers That they should teach them to their children, That the generation to come might know, *even* the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children. [That's four generations.] *That* they should put their confidence in God [They should be God-centered.] And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments.

You see, you and I need to develop a multi-generational mindset. Our goal should be to have our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren be God-centered. Then, let's spend our time and our energy and our resources in a way that shows our children that God really matters to us. You, see, first, parents, we must be God-centered, and then we can teach our children to be. Don't focus on your family. Instead, make it your ambition to focus your family on God.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for these words. And yet, we confess to You, Father, that we have been guilty of buying into the mindset of our times. Lord, we're doing the same thing the world is doing. We've swallowed the lie. We've been mis-directed from our true goals.

Lord, help us to re-examine what we do. Help us to look at our daily activities, our weekly choices as a family, and to re-center our lives and our families on You. Lord, help us, in everything that we do to ask ourselves, “will this encourage my child to be more God-centered?” We pray that You would help us to see our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren have their confidence in You, to remember Your works, and to keep Your commandments.

For the glory of Your name we pray. Amen.