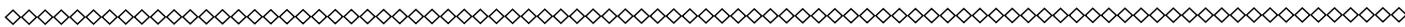




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Sermon Brief
Text: Col. 3:20-21
Title: Parenting Children
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today is a very special day in the life of our church. Those opportunities that come along periodically for us to dedicate a new baby to the Lord present us with the chance to focus attention on the role of the Christian family in today's world. I look forward to these occasions because they are special in the life of our church. To be sure, they involve a lot of extra work in preparation, but the joy of celebrating family and family values from a Christian perspective is particularly delightful.

Today I want to focus on two short verses found in Colossians 3:20-21. Turn with me to this text.

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.¹

Paul's letter to the Colossians came during a particularly hard time for the apostle. He was imprisoned in Caesarea Philippi awaiting the disposition of the charges brought against him by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.² The time period was the late 50s of the first Christian century. From every indication we have, the apostle had not personally visited Colossae but his lengthy ministry in nearby Ephesus a few years before³ had laid the foundation for a thriving Christian community in Colossae. This congregation functioned in a region where Jewish settlements were extensive and enjoyed significant political influence. During this two plus year imprisonment of the apostle three letters were written to Christians in the same general area of modern western Turkey. Ephesians was a cover letter for both Colossians and Philemon. All three were carried to Ephesus and Colossae along with other churches in the region⁴ to be read to the congregations. Their intent was to strengthen the congregations and provide instruction on Christian living and ministry.

One of the repeated topics in all three letters touched on family life.⁵ Concern for stable families was great in the ancient world. This was true in Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish cultures, even though each had their own perspective on what constituted a stable family and how to achieve it. Much discussion on this topic can be found in ancient literature. Much of the discussion was driven by the lack of stability in families, and by a realization that stable families were absolutely essential for a stable society.

Modern western society on both sides of the Atlantic is facing many of the same issues today that plagued ancient society. To be sure, our problems have in large part emerged because of different causes and are driven by very different dynamics than in ancient Mediterranean society. But the problems are similar and are producing many of the same consequences: rising crime, deteriorating human relationships, loss of respect for others and for authority etc. Just as the early church sought to address these issues, we Christians today need to speak out against the problems of our day. Apostolic Christianity sought from within the congregation to build strong, stable Christian families. We desperately need to do the same thing in our day.

Today gives the opportunity to stress the importance of family, as well as to gain some insights into the nature of a Christian family from God's Word. Our text makes two core points. These I want to stress today with you. Children have a responsibility to parents, especially to their father. Then parents, especially the father, has an equally important responsibility to the children. At the core of both obligations is respect and proper treatment of one another -- something sorely missing in today's family. We can learn much from Paul's word to the Colossian believers.

¹GNT: 3.20 Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα, τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ. 3.21 Οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμώσιν.

²Cf. Acts 24 - 25 for details.

³Cf. Acts 19:1-41 for details of this ministry.

⁴These included Laodicea and Hieropolis, which were located near Colossae. Perhaps others were included as well.

⁵Note the Haustafeln materials in Eph. 5:22-6:9 as well as in Col. 3:18-4:1. The entire letter of Philemon revolves around the family issue of slave-master relationships. Note that 'family' in the ancient world typically revolved around three sets of relationships with the dominating male leader of the family: wife/husband; children/father; slave/master. The latter set, of course, is not relevant to modern society. Particularly within the Jewish / Christian traditions, and mostly elsewhere in the ancient world, 'family' meant a husband and wife with children. Slaves, present in the more affluent levels of society, were also considered an integral part of the 'family.' A formal wedding ceremony of some sort was considered the official starting point of establishing a family.

BODY

I. We must teach our children obedience, v. 20.

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα, τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ.

These brief words are packed full of profound insight and implication for us today. In verse 20, Paul gives an admonition and supports it with a reason.

Admonition: “Children, obey your parents in everything” (Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα).

Children. Who is Paul addressing with the term ‘children’? The Greek term Τὰ τέκνα covers a broad scope of reference. More than age, the term stresses source. We are children rather than parents. In the parallel text of Eph. 6:1, Paul also used the same term.⁶

What is the significance of this particular term? The idea seems then to cover children of all ages, and not just youngsters. This would have been equally true in both Jewish and Greco-Roman circles. Children are always to show proper attitudes toward their parents all of their life. Thus Paul addresses children who would have been present in the congregations when this letter was read to the assembled group. This included grown children and youngsters as well.

This is an important point for our day. All of us are children; most of us have parents who are still living. The apostle admonishes us then to consistently show proper attitudes and actions toward them. To be sure, in the ancient world there was a difference from our world. In Roman culture, the children were completely under the authority and control of their father as long as he lived via the *patria potestas* principle incorporated into Roman law and tradition.⁷ Among ancient Jews, the situation was somewhat different. When the son reached his thirtieth birthday, he became an ‘adult’ and this meant freedom to launch out on his own in relative freedom from the authority of his father.⁸ But with both cultures, continued respect and treatment of the father -- and mother -- was considered critically important.

In our western world, we legally become independent of parental authority somewhere between eighteen and twenty years of age. One of the ongoing issues of family life both in Europe and in North America is strife between children and parents.⁹ Typically it begins in earnest in the early teen years and sometimes continues over a life time. Clearly this is wrong and destructive, to the individuals, to the family, and to society. A culture cannot survive long if such tension comes to dominant family life. The spill over impact onto society in general will be disastrous. And we are experiencing that today.



Obey. Now that we have a better idea of whom Paul is addressing, what did he say? In a single word he admonished ὑπακούετε. The Greek verb stresses obedience to parents. Such is to be ongoing and complete. It is the same word that he will give to the slaves in the household in 3:22. But it is a different word than he issued to the wife in 3:18, where he said ὑποτάσσεσθε τοῖς ἀνδράσιν. The wife is to show respect to her husband; the children and slaves go deeper with obedience. Also, note something important here. Children are to obey parents, not just their father: ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν. With the wife and the slave the dominating male is the object of commitment, but to the children it is both mother and father.

One of the interpretive issues relates to *the connection of this to the fifth commandment* in the Decalogue.¹⁰ This comes into the picture in large part because of the parallel in Eph. 6:1-3,¹¹ where Paul evokes this commandment as a basis for the same admonition to children. Is there a difference between honoring (τίμα) parents and obeying (ὑπακούετε) them? Most commentators argue correctly that little, if any difference, between the two emphases existed in ancient understanding, although in our world honor is an attitude of respect leading to positive actions toward parents, while obeying is respecting their authority over our life.

The heart of Paul’s word to children is to do what parents tell you to do. Within the context of the Jew-

⁶GNT: 6.1 Τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν ὑμῶν [ἐν κυρίῳ]· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστιν δίκαιον.

⁷This gave the father literally the power of life and death over all family members as long as he lived. Thus a disobedient and/or disrespectful child could be put to death for their attitude and actions.

⁸The Torah in the Old Testament prescribed execution for a disrespectful child; cf. Exodus 21:15, (NRSV): “Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death.”

⁹For poetic examples of the disastrous impact of family strife, see Family Friends Poems online.

¹⁰Cf. Exodus 20:12 (NRSV): “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

Deut. 5:16 (NRSV): “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

¹¹Eph. 6:1-3 (NRSV): “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 ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’”

ish heritage of these words, obedience flows out of respect for them and acceptance of their authority over our life. In other words, “Kids, do what your parents tell you to do!” And do it with respect of and honor toward them.

How far should this obedience go? Here two qualifications on the obedience are present in Col. 3:20 and in Eph. 6:1. First, there seems to be a ‘blank check’ statement with the words “in everything” (κατὰ πάντα). Taken literally, and out of the larger context of the New Testament teaching, this would imply an unconditional obligation of children to do whatever their parents say no matter what it is. But, this larger context of the New Testament along with the subsequent motivation statement in verse 20 put boundaries on this obligation. This is particularly evident in Eph. 6:1 where the phrase ἐν κυρίῳ is attached directly to the admonition. Obedience is within the context of Christian principles. Parental demands contrary to the teachings of Christ are not binding upon children!

Parents, you have special obligation here. You are only allowed by God to demand obedience from your children that is within the boundaries of Christian commitment. You cannot and must not demand your kids do things contrary to Christ! God will hold you particularly accountable on the Day of Judgment for such sinful actions.

Additionally, let me speak to parents of small children for a moment. Obedience to you as the parent must be taught and instilled into your children. They won’t come by it naturally. You must insist on them obeying your instructions. This takes a lot of time and effort -- and follow up. When you bring a child into this world, you put on your shoulders in inescapable obligation to raise these kids up in the proper way. Critical to that training is to instill in them the ability to respect you and to obey you. This won’t be achieved by shouting at them all the time. So many parents simply yell at their kids to do something and then ignore them. There’s no follow up. Such is horrible parenting! And leads to disaster. Also, dads, don’t you dare turn over discipline of your kids to your wife. Parenting is a shared duty and both the good and bad aspects must be equally shared by father and mother.

Reason: “for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord” (τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ).

The second part of verse twenty provides the motivation for the admonition. The wording of the New Revised Standard Version is not the best translation. It de-emphasizes the religious nature of the responsibility. To be sure the wording of the original Greek expression is a bit strange even in ancient Greek. One would have expected something like “this is well pleasing to the Lord,” rather than “this is well pleasing in the Lord.” The adjective εὐάρεστόν denotes something acceptable or bringing pleasure to another. Inside the New Testament, the ‘other person’ is virtually always God in the ten times the adjective is used.

The point of the statement is that children obeying their parents is both consistent with commitment to Christ and is something that brings God pleasure. The reason Paul knew that God was pleased with the parental obedience of children is because of what He told Moses in the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, as Eph. 6:1-3 makes very clear. Children -- all ages here today -- know that when you show honor and respect of your parents by doing what they tell you God is pleased with you and will acknowledge this.

Parents, one of your responsibilities is to train up your children to love God and to want to please Him in their lives. Teaching them parental obedience is one of the ways of accomplishing this. Both reward for compliance and punishment for disobedience are a part of the picture here. To be sure, the Old Testament Law provided extreme punishment for disobedience, as Exod. 21:15, 17 illustrate:

15 Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. 16 Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. 17 Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.

But the principle of discipline remains vitally important. Discipline and reward are essential parts of parenting. The “in the Lord” expression as foundational also underscores the context of all this: love for Christ and love for one another. In our Christian commitment we relate to our kids and to our parents in a way that pleases our God. God help us as children to always treat our parents honorably.

II. We must treat our children properly, v. 21.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμώσιν.

Unlike similar discussions in the non-Christian ancient world that seldom spoke of father’s obligations to children, early Christian obligation was a ‘two-way’ street with responsibilities of both children and parents. We must never forget this in our day, for it remains a ‘two-way’ street for us as Christian parents.

Admonition: “Fathers, do not provoke your children” (Οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν).

Paul expressed the responsibility of fathers to their children in the context of tendencies in his day. In the Greco-Roman culture of most of his readers at Colossae, the stern discipline by the father of his children

is deeply entrenched into society. Loving his children was optional and not common by the father. Laying heavy expectation on them, particularly the boys, was typical and then imposing extreme discipline for failure to measure up was the norm. Roman society in general was of the mind that education was 'beaten' into the heads of kids. Unbelievable punishments were imposed on the sons especially. Roman beatings by teachers, slave supervisors of children, and fathers were very common and normative. The modern idea of 'child abuse' was virtually non-existent in the ancient world. A child-killer was someone who illegitimately took the life of another man's child, not his own -- this was entirely within the framework of Roman legality. Jewish traditions were not as extreme as the Roman patterns, but against modern standards they were also harsh and stern. Severe whipping of children was not only permitted but expected, especially in certain situations of disobedience by the children. The local Jewish council could impose heavy penalty on the father, if he failed to take 'appropriate' disciplinary measures for the disobedience of his children, and especially of his sons. As the above quoted law from Exodus twenty-one illustrates, capital punishment on disobedient children was prescribed in the Law. To be sure, the Jewish literature of the ancient world doesn't record many instances of this law being imposed. But the local council, the Sanhedrin, did have the authority to sentence a disobedient child to death by stoning, if they so chose.

It is against this backdrop that Paul's words here must be understood. Thus to his first readers, these words were revolutionary. "The very idea that I have divinely imposed restraints on me when I go to discipline my children!" Custom and the Law of God require discipline.

But Paul states very bluntly that fathers "are not to provoke" (μη ἐρεθίζετε) their children with their punishment and discipline. What does Paul mean? The parallel in Eph. 6:4 goes a similar direction (NRSV): "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."¹² Two different verbs are used, ἐρεθίζετε and παροργίζετε, but with little difference in meaning. The point of both is the idea of 'over discipline' that 'breaks the spirit' of the kid. Excessive beating of children, and especially of slaves, was a topic of discussion in the ancient world. It's not that we make them mad through our disciplining of them. That's normal. Parenting is not a popularity contest! This is not what Paul is talking about.

Instead, he is getting at the idea of such excessive discipline that we demoralize our children and make them fearful to doing anything. Keep up such levels of discipline on a kid and eventually he will turn bad in the very way you were trying to prevent.

Alternative: "or they may lose heart" (ἵνα μη ἀθυμώσιν).

The 'breaking of their spirit' is alluded to in this last statement of verse twenty one. Literally, the expression means 'lest they loose their fire.' That is, their will to live and to try new things will be gone. They turn into robots of compliance to our every demand. But with such levels of discipline we do our kids a huge disfavor because we make them forever dependent on us or some other authority figure. They will have little desire to succeed for themselves in life.

The proposed alternative in Eph. 6:4 approaches the issue from a slightly different angle: "but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." How can we avoid excessive discipline that is destructive to our children? By listening to popular child psychology in our day? Heavens no! Most of this is nonsense. Far better, concentrate on bringing up your children in the ways of God. With such focus there will come the proper love and respect for your kids. Also in God's Word you will find the direction and guidelines for healthy, spiritually productive parenting.

CONCLUSION

Today, we dedicate little Dasha to the Lord. Her parents, who have a deep love for God, bring her to the Lord's house with the pledge to raise her in the ways of God. May God bless Ojeifo and Sarah as they keep this promised to God. And may God move all of us to renewed determine to be good children and good parents that honor God in our treatment of one another.

¹²Compare Col: 3:21 with Eph. 6:4:

Col. 3:21: Οἱ πατέρες, μη ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μη ἀθυμώσιν.

Eph. 6:4: Καὶ οἱ πατέρες, μη παροργίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφετε αὐτὰ ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ κυρίου.

