

“Because I love my child... Precisely because I love my child...”

Ephesians 6:4

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Ephesians 6:4 (PowerPoint slide)

Preface

As the practical field of the teaching in Ephesians 5:15—“Do not get drunk on wine, but be filled with the Spirit”—the very first place pointed to was the home.

The Word of God for husbands and wives was first given, then for children toward their parents, and this morning, we are given the Word of God for parents toward their children. First comes this word: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.”

To me, this is a word that leaves no room for excuse, not a single breath of rebuttal.

It's as if the Lord God knows.

Of course, He does know.

Because He knows how many of us in the parent generation have lived while provoking our children, I feel that God has given us this Word so timely and so piercing to our hearts: “Why don't you stop provoking your children?”—so direct, so straight to the point.

Part One

Every parent loves their child.

So that their children won't stray from the path, won't head in the wrong direction, won't collapse under hardship, won't suffer great wounds in life—in various ways, always speaking what is right, always doing what they believe is for their child's sake—yet, sometimes their feelings of love become excessive and get caught in self-centered righteousness.

And before they realize it, they become coercive, speak in a domineering tone, which to the children sounds violent, feels like violence.

Or they treat their children impersonally, ignoring their personality:

“You are a child, so just do as I say. You must listen. I'm saying and doing all this for your own good”—causing the children to feel like they're being treated impersonally.

In short, it's disrespectful.

There is no courtesy shown toward the children.

The expression “disrespect” or “lack of manners” isn't something only adults can use toward children; originally, it's something children should also be able to expect from adults.

It should be the adults who first show respect toward the children, and yet we so easily forget to do so while merely demanding children to mind their manners.

Not only to children—we become disrespectful without restraint toward those younger than us, less experienced, or those with lower status or title.

And especially parents—I think there are many times when we are disrespectful toward our children.

And it goes too far.

Perhaps because our worries are too intense, or precisely because we love them so much, it becomes excessive.

If it's just nagging or meddling, that might still be considered cute. But sometimes, it turns rough.

On the other hand, we may become too reserved, too distant.

Feeling like "I was looked down upon," we respond harshly; or out of a desire to avoid being looked down on, we become cold and unkind in self-protection.

Either way, going too far may be more troublesome than falling short.

There's a saying: "Too much is as bad as too little." Perhaps the mistake many parents make isn't doing too little, but doing too much.

Just by being an adult or a parent, we sometimes deliver what is right, say what is right, in such discourteous, disrespectful, domineering, and impersonal ways.

Naturally, it has no effect on the children—they push back.

They close their ears.

They shut the door of their hearts.

We adults may be quick to say, "It's adolescence; they've become unruly," or "Kids these days are different," but perhaps that's not the true cause.

It might be that we adults, we parents, are actually the ones who are the most direct cause of this.

And today's Word clearly tells us so.

God speaks directly to us—us adults, us parents: "Fathers, mothers, adults—do not provoke your children, your own children, to anger."

What I feel more than anything is the divine providence of God: that it was the apostle Paul, a lifelong single man who had no children, whom the Holy Spirit moved to speak these words.

In other words, these words were given to all adults.

This is, I believe, a very important lesson from God to us adults.

I think children understand that we adults speak and act out of concern for them, and that what we say is right.

They all know.

They all know we are saying these things for their sake.

They know it's the right thing.

But they don't listen.

Why is that?

It's because we adults, we parents, have this rather peculiar skill of delivering the right words and good actions in the worst possible way—making the children feel bad.

That's why the children reject it.

And yet, we parents, we adults, don't see it.

We only see that we are saying what's right and doing what's good. "We said it for the children's sake." "We did it out of love." "We love you so much!"—that's all we see.

We fail to realize—refuse to realize, struggle to understand—that our attitudes and behaviors provoke rejection, that we are angering our children.

For me, personally, as a child relating to my mother, this is the most frustrating part.

When my mother says, "Do you know how much I love you? You don't understand—that's why you say such things..." I respond, "No, no, that's not it." But she doesn't get it. Now, my own children think the exact same thing about me. And yet I, as their parent, fail to understand them—just like my mother did with me.

That is why today's Word is not something to just hear and forget. It is God's Word given to me, to us adults, to us parents, living in this very moment.

For 2,000 years since it was spoken, this Word has remained unchanged and essential.

It is God's Word—one that all parents and adults have struggled to obey.

Yet God has never given up and continues to speak it to us.

Why?

Because it is possible.

Because it can be done by being filled with the Spirit.

Because, as we continue to seek God's help and learn to depend on Jesus, surrendering ourselves before God, we begin—little by little—to be able to live it out.

Part Two

There are some crucial words of Scripture that must never be forgotten when speaking of the relationship between father and child, parent and child, adult and child.

These are the words of Malachi chapter 4 and of Luke chapter 1, which records the birth of John the Baptist, the one who came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Let us begin by looking at the book of Malachi.

Malachi 4:5–6 (PowerPoint slide)

“He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.”

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament.

It marks the conclusion of God’s prophetic revelation in the age before Christ.

After this, for four hundred years—until the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the New Testament era—no word of revelation would come from God.

It is precisely with the words of Malachi that the age before Christ, the Old Testament era, comes to a close.

And the final word, the final promise spoken by God in that Old Testament era is this: “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.”

When God’s Word visits people, when the salvation of Christ visits people, the relationship between fathers and children is restored, the parent-child relationship is healed, the relationship between adults and children is renewed, and family relationships are restored to peace and harmony. With such a word, the Old Testament era closes.

From Genesis to Malachi—thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, so thick and written over a span of nearly two thousand years—the final culmination of all God’s revelation concerns human families, human households.

How deeply must God grieve over the collapse of family ties, the severing of parent-child bonds, the distortion of relationships between adults and children? How much pain, sorrow, and heartbreak must He carry over this?

The final word of the grand providence of God, which began with the creation of the heavens and the earth and was recorded throughout the Old Testament, is the restoration of the relationship between father and child.

Of course, the “father” here refers to God the Father, and the “child” refers to us sinners—those who, like the prodigal son, have wandered away from God. This is a prophetic word that points to the restoration of the relationship between God and humanity.

But equally important is this: it also refers to our human relationships between father and child. Ever since humanity became sinful, throughout generations and across time, one of the greatest problems in human life has been “dysfunction in the home.” This is a word that promises healing, restoration, and reconciliation for that very issue.

There is a reason for this.

The word translated as “father” in Japanese is actually plural in the original language—“fathers.” Likewise, the word “child” is also plural—“children.”

And in the New Testament, this is properly translated in plural form as “fathers” and “children,” just as in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 1:13–17 (PowerPoint slide)

The angel, announcing to John the Baptist's parents that their child would be born, said he would be the fulfillment of the prophet Elijah promised at the end of Malachi. He would prepare the way for Christ Jesus and proclaim God's Word. The very promise the angel spoke was the same as in Malachi: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." It was a promise of reconciliation between parents and children, healing of family relationships, and restoration between adults and children.

And in the Gospel of Luke, it is translated, just as in the original language, in plural form: "fathers" and "children."

In short, what the words of Malachi and the promise fulfilled in Luke are telling us is this: The restoration of the relationship between father and child, mother and child, adult and child—is proportionate to the restoration of the adults' and parents' relationship with God, and to the children's relationship with God.

I myself feel I've experienced the grace of these words—in my relationship with my own father. And even now, I'm experiencing it, little by little each day, though often struggling and failing, in my relationship with my own children.

Every time I become stubborn toward my children, every time I act harshly as a parent, God speaks to me and shows me: "You are the one at fault. You are the one who's lacking. You must bend. You must apologize. You are the one who wounded your children."

At first, I always resist that conviction.

I cling to thoughts like: "No, they were being cheeky first. If they apologize first, then I'll forgive them—and I'll apologize just a little bit too." But as I continue reading God's Word, praying, and trying to live as a pastor and a Christian father, I find that I can no longer hold on to such pride.

And though it's embarrassing, I end up having to say, "I'm sorry. Forgive me."

Apologizing doesn't mean everything is resolved. But without apologizing to my children, I myself cannot maintain my relationship with God.

The Word says, "In humility consider others better than yourselves." "Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus." These words press heavily on my heart.

Then today's Word presses on me with love—as though it were leaping out from the pages of Scripture itself:

"Do not provoke your children to anger. I know you speak and act out of love for your children. But what matters is this—if you provoke them to anger, then it all becomes meaningless. Treat them with dignity. Be careful not to go too far. Show courtesy to your children too." It feels as if God speaks this to us tenderly and personally.

Part Three

And one more passage comes to mind as I meditate on today's Word from Ephesians. It is Revelation 3:20.

Revelation 3:20 (PowerPoint slide)

God is the kind of One who knocks at the door because He desires to come in.
If He wants to enter, He could simply enter—He is God, after all.
If He declared, “I am God,” and came into our hearts, could we say anything back to Him?
Could we resist?
Even if He did enter, it would only be a good thing for us.
It is only when we are one with God that we are truly blessed and truly alive.

But God does not force His way in.
He stands at the door and knocks.
Until when?
Until we ourselves open the door to Him.
He says, “If you open the door, I will come in. Until then, I will wait at the door.”

I believe many of you love this verse. I also feel a mixture of regret and warmth when I hear it.
Because in it, I see the thoughtfulness of God. I see His courtesy toward us.
The triune God—God the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—who created all things, teaches us, His creatures, courtesy.
Do you know why?
Because He loves us.
1 Corinthians 13, the chapter of love, says: “Love does not act rudely.”
Even to us, full of sin and without courtesy before God, He expresses His love by not acting rudely—by showing us respect.
It is moving beyond words. So humbling that I don't even know how to respond.

That is why I want to be a believer who never gives up practicing, learning, and living out this Word: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.”

Part Four

However, having listened this far, perhaps there are some among you who now have a question.
“Is that really okay? Don't we have to discipline our children strictly? After all, the Bible says, ‘Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is diligent to discipline them,’ right?” Maybe some of you are thinking that.

Of course, this is also a precious word of God and one that we must take to heart seriously.

Indeed, just as this Scripture suggests, all children are born as sinners, and thus, we cannot expect good things to emerge from them on their own.

Perhaps you have heard of Montessori education or Montessori preschools.

This is an educational method proposed by an Italian woman, Maria Montessori. Rather than the patriarchal, force-fed model of education—an authoritative educational style centered on the convenience of those who teach—she proposed that education should be considered from the standpoint of the learner. “Let us respect the will of the child who receives the education, let them decide for themselves, let them choose”—this was a groundbreaking idea, one that has continued to exert great influence even in our time. That much is certainly true. But when we look at it biblically—what does the Bible say about what it means to be human?—we must not overlook this important theological question.

In other words, humans are born as sinners. Left to themselves, good things will not naturally emerge from within them.

Rather, what emerges is evil.

The Bible teaches: “The human being is not an optimistic existence, but one full of curse and bitterness, with destruction and misery; they do not know the way of peace. And ultimately, there is not even a fragment of the fear of God before their eyes.” That is why Scripture tells us: “God had to come to this earth in human form, and Jesus—God who took the form of a man though He had no sin—had to be crucified as the substitute for our sins.”

The Bible does not fully endorse the educational philosophy of Dr. Montessori, which asserts that “human beings are innately good, and therefore, if we eliminate all forms of oppression, avoid authoritarianism, and place them in a good environment with good conditions, they will naturally blossom beautifully and bear fruits of worth.”

Rather, the Bible teaches that human beings are sinners.

In fact, it is often pointed out that, because Montessori education places great importance on respecting individuality and the self, it can lead to a lack of cooperation and to self-centered behavior. If that is true, then what the Bible says is exactly right.

In short, when adults educate children, it is absolutely necessary to teach them clearly what is good.

To permit anything and everything, to accept everything indiscriminately—this is not what it means to “not provoke your children to anger.”

“Do not provoke your children to anger” is not a rejection of firmness toward children.

Rather, it seems to be pointing out: “Is that really discipline? Could it be that your harshness is just an overreaching and misguided sense of righteousness as a parent, as

an adult? Isn't it perhaps your desire for self-fulfillment or pride that you are trying to realize through your child? And aren't you just hiding behind the word 'discipline' as an excuse, when in reality, all you're doing is provoking your children to anger?"

That is why the words that follow—"but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"—are so important, so central.

I plan to reflect on this Word next week, but in order for us parents and adults to raise our children according to the training and instruction of the Lord, we ourselves must first bow before the Word of the Lord. We must learn, receive, meditate, think, eat, and chew on it—tasting both its sweetness and its bitterness. And with that taste in our mouths, we must kneel and pray to the Lord.

We must not teach and pass on our own image, our own imagined version of Christianity or faith or God, our self-constructed ideas of love or justice. Unless we actually read the Word of God, engage with it, eat it, and come to know what is truly spoken from there, we will not be able to escape the spiral of provoking our children to anger.

Conclusion

We, the parents and grandparents—those of the older generation, the adults—must desire to be ones who are first taught before we teach our children. We must approach God, approach His Word, and worship Him earnestly through prayer.

Without that, we will not be able to teach and raise our children according to today's Word: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

And more than anything, I believe what is being questioned is this: Do we, who are Christian adults, truly desire to raise our children in the training and instruction of the Lord? With that in our hearts, let us humbly come before Him and pray.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Ephesians 6:4