

Colossians 3:21: Fathering Well

Gentlemen, this morning I want you to stick with me. I'm going to be intentionally very hard on dads because I think Paul is hard on dads. Some of this is preaching at myself. I've made more than my fair share of mistakes. And I know that I often need to hear very hard things to make substantial changes in my life. You might need those too.

Part of the problem as men we are so pride-filled not only do we not admit our problems, a lot of times we don't even realize when we are the problem. And it takes God shaking our world to wake up to our own issues and change. Maybe for some that's what this is this morning.

Also, there is light at the end of the tunnel. When someone comes to me and says "I've got good news and I've got bad news, which do you want first?" I always take the bad news first. Let's get the problems on the table and deal with them and then we can lighten up a little with some good news. That's basically how I'm approaching this topic this morning. The bad news first - what not to do as dads. Then the good news - what we should be doing. So stick with me and we'll get through this together.

As you know we're in what's called the "family code" section of Colossians where Paul is addressing how we are to live within our families. And here, he touches on fathers.

1) What not to do. **Read 21**

So here we have a direct command to fathers but really it's a prohibition. It's what not to do and then Paul tells us why not to do it. I want to point out a few things about this verse.

First of all, there is some discussion as to whether the verse is addressing fathers specifically or parents together. The word in Greek is πατέρες which does mean "fathers" but it could also mean "parents" and a lot of your translations or study Bibles have a note about that possibility. But most scholars - and myself included - do believe it is talking about fathers. Throughout this section there is an implied authority structure going on and fathers in the ancient world were considered the head of their households. Just like today, the moms probably spent more time with the children, but the buck stopped at fathers.

And I think we really need to consider just how influential fathers are in the lives of their children - for good or for bad. I don't usually like to cite statistics, but I think these are worth noting:

(The Art of Manliness, The Importance of Fathers [According to Science], June 19, 2015): The single biggest factor in a child's financial well being is their father. Homes with no fathers are 4 times more likely to live in poverty.

The single biggest factor in a child's educational success in the future is their father. Children in homes where a father is present are 43% more likely to receive As in school.

People who never have a father are more likely to do jail time, more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, more likely to be sexually active prior to marriage, more likely to be in bad health.

Psychology Today: "There is no question that fathers do play an important part in their children's lives: the majority of studies affirm that an involved father can play a crucial role, particularly in the cognitive behavioral, and general health and well-being areas of a child's life; having a positive male role model helps an adolescent boy develop positive gender-role characteristics; adolescent girls are more likely to form positive opinions of men and are better able to relate to them when parented by an involved father..." (PT, "The Importance of Fathers: Is Father's Day Real?", June 23, 2011)

This is contrary what every LGBT advocate wants to claim. They want to claim gender doesn't matter. Two mommies are just as good as two daddies, or vice versa. Or they want to say a woman who acts like a man is a man. No. Lo, and behold, the best environment to raise a child is where there is a mommy and a daddy.

And this is contrary to what every feminist wants to claim. They want to say women are just as capable as men. The issue is not capability. The issue is male influence. Just as much as mothers are irreplaceable in a child's life, so too fathers are irreplaceable.

So all that to say, the passage lends itself to pointing to fathers and experience backs that up.

The second thing I want to note here is he says to not provoke their children. Do not do this. The word provoke is hard to translate and therefore there are a wide variety of translations. ESV: provoke; NASB: exasperate; NIV: embitter; NLT: aggravate. The idea here is to basically to act in a way that makes your children want to fight. I like the word provoke or aggravate because it gets to that idea of stirring them up to anger. This can be through words, or actions, or lack of words.

And I want to spend a few minutes talking about some of the ways we do this as fathers. This is not an exhaustive list. But these are things I've noticed in my own life and in the lives of others that often just escapes our notice.

1) Constantly critique our children. If you just exude negativity you can provoke children. Critique their body, their abilities, critique their work, what they say, what they do. I think part of the Fall is that many of us are prone to point out the problems with others - even our own family - rather than the good in them. We see all the good in us, but can't seem to find much good in others.

This is the classic problem of pessimists. "I'm not a pessimist, I'm a realist." No, that's the mantra of every pessimist. No optimist ever calls themselves a realist, and no pessimist wants to call themselves a pessimist because they know that it's bad to be a pessimist.

Can I give you a general ratio of encouragement:critique to shoot for? Maybe 20:1. I think if you complimented your children twenty times for every one time you offered correction that would probably be a good starting ratio. Kids, is that fair you think?

Listen, if every time you came up to me telling me how bad I was or how I could have done something better or whatever, I'd probably tune out. Or I might encourage you to find somewhere else to worship. But if you came up to me 20 times after a preaching and encouraged me, and then one weekend you came up and said "Hey Jason, maybe this part of your sermon could have been a little different." I might be more prone to listen. Because you know what you've built up with all those encouragements? Trust. Encouragement builds trust, constant critique builds resentment.

2) Focus only on behavior, not on their heart. For Christians, our primary concern is the heart of our children. Why are they doing what they are doing? What's the motivation behind it. But it is easy to simply focus on what they are doing.

Prov. 20:5: The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.

The reality is that that takes a long time. We don't always have a long time. And not every situation requires that. I happened to be turning in a busy intersection when a friend of mine was walking her children through the crosswalk. The little child decided she was going to take her sweet time to cross the street and the mom was rightly upset. In the middle of the intersection isn't exactly the time to have a heart-to-heart about the deeper issues of street crossing motivation.

Sometimes kids need to simply do what they're told. But that's not always the case. And as parents we have to carve out the time to talk to kids when those kind of situation arise. If we are only behavior-focused they can get discouraged.

3) Never allowing your children to fail. Dad's are usually competitive by nature and don't like to fail. But the reality is that our homes need to be the training ground for our kids. It's really okay if they fail. And not being angry that they fail. If they make a cake that implodes, it'll be okay. Or write a paper that gets an F. Or make a mistake we made 10 years ago even after we've warned them not to.

I was reading an article this last week about a mom who's daughter waited til the last minute to do a project and needed some supplies at the store. The mom asked when the daughter was assigned the project; turns out it was 3 weeks earlier. The mom said "Sorry, we can't make it to the store for those supplies. Hopefully you can work it out anyway." She wasn't angry or bitter. But she was okay with her daughter failing. That's healthy. As Christians we believe in redemption. We believe in second chances, and third and fourth and fifth chances.

James 1:2-4: Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Trials often come in the form of failure. Failing at inconsequential things is really good for kids to learn. Inability to fail is problem and actually doesn't help them in the long run.

Michael Jordan: "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

The pressure to never fail, never lose, never get bad grades, never get hurt - to continually insulate your kids - can provoke them.

4) Don't ever apologize to your kids. If you want to embitter your kids, just be right all the time. Or be right most of the time. Or offer weak apologies where you say you're sorry but justify yourself anyway: "I'm sorry but I" or "I'm sorry if you." Or rarely admit when your kids or wife has a really good idea and certainly don't celebrate it.

I had a boss once who would sort of go in cycles. He'd be happy for a couple of months and then he'd just get worse and worse. And my manger and I would just about get to the point of quitting and then out of nowhere he'd show up with a cake and basically apologize for being a troll for the last month. And it was so gratifying. Because he was being a troll. And just acknowledging that reality was helpful and healing.

5) Don't model spiritual disciplines to your kids, but expect them to do it. Dad if you really want your kids to love Jesus, they need to see that you love Jesus. They need to see you read the Bible. They need to see you pray more than just at dinner time. They need to see you going to church and serving the body of Christ.

There's a satirical Christian website called the Babylon Bee. It's like the Onion for Christians. Usually the fake headline is all you need to read in order to get the joke. One of my favorites is: *After 12 Years Of Quarterly Church Attendance, Parents Shocked By Daughter's Lack Of Faith.*

I've seen this many times in the 20 years I've been a believer. People have a lukewarm, ho-hum faith and then they are shocked - *shocked* - when their kids aren't interested in Jesus or church or the Bible.

Listen, kids aren't stupid. Kids know what we prize. Our devotion and love for Jesus isn't primarily for our kids - it's for us. But if we don't have a devotion to Jesus our kids are going to know that. Our kids know when we love God with **all** of our heart and soul and mind and strength or when we just love God with **half** our heart and soul and mind and strength.

And if you expect your kids to be more godly and devoted to Jesus than you are, not only is that hypocrisy, but it will provoke them as well.

I could spend time on many others. Sin against them, compare them to other kids, yell at them, you're never at home. But you get the idea. And if you're really up to a challenge, you could ask them if there are things you do that provoke them. And get this: actually listen to them in humility.

Now, here's why we don't want to provoke our kids. Paul tells us. **Read 21**

We don't want to do that because it will discourage them. Discourage is really a little weak. It's not because they'll be down or sad. The idea is that they will get to the point where they don't want to do anything. They will

be so embittered because they can't please their dad that they just give up all together. "What's the use of trying? No matter what I do it's wrong."

And dads, no matter how much you try to convince a child that your not provoking them, if your words and your actions continually tell another story the evidence will show itself. They will become discouraged to the point of inaction.

Just imagine having a boss who never seems to like what you do. It seems like even when you put your best effort forward, they always think you always could do better and rarely give you any encouragement. They don't fire you, but you get the sense that if they could trade you out for a better employee with minimum hassle they would.

That's how some children feel. That maybe you don't hate them - you'd die for them - but what they see in your words and actions is a completely different story.

And if you've got a kid who's like that you might just check yourself. Maybe they're not the problem, dad. Maybe you're the problem.

What do you do if this has happened?

First of all, apologize and repent. And realize that just because you've changed doesn't mean they will. When a dad provokes his kids for years and they become discouraged, it has lasting effects. We've all seen the dog who was abused as a puppy. They're skittish until death, aren't they? It might take years or decades of gentleness for a child to overcome constant provocation. Be patient.

Second, we rest that God the Father is a better Father than we'll ever be. Jesus provides healing we often can't.

Matt 12:20: [of Jesus] a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.

We're all going to mess it up at some point. Our parents weren't perfect and neither are we. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for godliness - we should with all our heart. But when we do mess up, we have to entrust that Jesus will show our children the love of God the Father than we can only hope to reflect in part.

So that's what not to do.

2) What do we do as fathers? **Turn to 1 Thess. 2:9-12.** The apostle Paul here is talking about his ministry to the church in Thessalonica. He has fond memories of his time with them. And he is reminding them of how he acted toward them. And he an analogy of a mom and a dad. Here's the motherly aspect. **Read 7-8**

So like a mom, Paul and the missionary team were gentle among these people. And they genuinely loved them. They didn't just want to preach the gospel - though they did do that - they also wanted to share their lives together. They were friends.

But then he switches gears and talks about how he acted as a father toward them. And although this isn't a parenting passage, per se, I think it is extremely instructive to see how Paul views the role of a father. **Read 9-12**

So he views his actions toward this church also as a father. And I think we also get a glimpse into what he sees in the life of a godly father. We had 5 things not to do, here are 4 quick things to do.

1) Show them a good work ethic. **Read 9**

I don't think it's an understatement to say that many kids have no idea what a good work ethic is. Some of that is because they are lazy, some of that is because they don't see it at home. They need to see first hand what

hard work is. And I don't mean dads need to be workaholics - that's a problem, too. But somewhere between laziness and workaholism is a balanced work ethic that brings God glory.

And I'll also say that we shouldn't only show our kids that we work hard, but show them how to work. Take the time to teach them the skills you have. Teach them how to work on stuff or mow or do yard work or house repairs or whatever. Or if you don't know how to do something watch YouTube videos together - that's what we do.

"It was a Jewish custom, emphasized in the teaching of the rabbis, that every boy should learn a trade. This custom does not seem to have arisen from any conviction that a well-rounded life with interests in many directions was highly desirable [they didn't care about renaissance men]...[this was] from sheer economic necessity." (Morris, L. (1991). [*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*](#) (pp. 72-73).

"Rabbi Judah said: He who does not teach his son a craft, teaches him [how to be a gang member]." As the Soncino editor explains, "Having no occupation, he must take to theft" (*Kidd.* 29a cited in *ibid.*).

Teaching your kids how to work takes a lot longer than doing it yourself but the Bible basically views it as an expectation of fathers. It's prepares our kids for life.

2) The gospel should be constantly on our mind and in our mouth. **Read 9**

Notice that there's no distinction between working and proclaiming the gospel. There's no secular/sacred division in Paul's mind. He works while he proclaims. This probably means he was bivocational - he worked a job and pastored this church. But Paul exuded the gospel everywhere he went. We talked last week in Sunday school about how a good work ethic often affords us the opportunity to share the gospel. This is the case when we're at work alone, but it's also the case when we're working with our kids.

Deut. 6:7-9: 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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

If that's what they were supposed to do in the OC, how much more should we be talking with our kids while we work and do things?

3) Our conduct should be blameless at all times. **Read 10**

You know, a lot of times we're on our best behavior around unbelievers because we realize that our actions might influence what they think of the gospel. But sometimes we forget that the same thing is true for our unbelieving children in the home. Our conduct has an influence on what they think true Christianity is.

It's a little hard to know if what Paul means here is that his conduct was pure and therefore these people became believers. Or if after they were believers his conduct continued to be blameless. Grammatically, we don't know for sure. Really, I think Paul's conduct was continually blameless

It's not like Paul was on his best behavior to get people to become Christians and then he let it all hang out. No, I think from start to finish he was pure. And I think in the same way, we should be able to say that our conduct in our homes is holy and righteous and blameless. Whether our kids profess faith in Christ or not, they should see a constant striving to please the Lord in our lives.

4) We need to say the proper things at the proper times. **Read 11-12**

Here's where we see the fatherly aspect of Paul's speech come out. The first two words have a little bit of overlap, so depending upon your translation they might be switched around.

First, as a father, he exhorted each one of them. The idea here is continual encouragement. I think the NIV gets that right. We need to be on our kids' side. They need to be able to come to us so that we can put wind in their sails and they walk away feel better. I'm not talking about filling them up with self-esteem nonsense. But I am talking about boosting people up.

In sports there's something called the home-court advantage, right? When you've got all kinds of fans cheering you on, pushing you to go when you're tired you can do amazing things. The average home court team wins 10% more often. (<https://www.sbnation.com/2011/1/19/1940438/home-field-advantage-sports-stats-data>); (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Utah_Jazz_seasons)

But get this: some home-courts are more advantageous than others. If you're a Boston Celtic, your advantage is only 4% more. That's not much that means the people who are supposedly on your side, aren't doing much for you. But if you're playing for the Utah Jazz, your home court advantage helps you win 20% more games. That's pretty incredible. And can I tell you why that's incredible? The Utah Jazz are horrible. They haven't had a phenomenal season for 20 years. But their fans love them anyway. And when they step out onto a court where their people encourage them, they're almost guaranteed a win.

Dads: no matter who they are, how good or bad at stuff they are, encourage your kids. It does wonders in their lives.

Second, as fathers we are to comfort our kids. **Read 12a**

Again, the words do have some overlap but the idea here seems to be that we lift our kids up when they're down. Dads are bad at this. I'm often bad at this. "Rub some dirt on it kid," "Get up, you're not hurt" - that's the extent of a lot of our comfort. Guys we need to do better. Sometimes our kids are just whining and we need to rebuke them. But sometimes they really do need a pick me up when they're down.

Comforting is the gentle empathy which comes and stays alongside someone as they experience failures and distresses in life. (Anders, Max; Larson, Knute. Holman New Testament Commentary - 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: 9 (Kindle Location 811).

Last, we need to **urge** our kids to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. This is a strong word where there's a lot on the line. Obedience to God is not optional.

And we don't charge them to live a manner worthy of God because we're annoyed when they don't. Or because we'll be embarrassed if they don't. We walk in this manner because God has called us into his Kingdom and we need to act accordingly.

I don't know if you know this or not, but the President of the United States has what's called the Chief of Protocol; the current chief is Sean Lawler. And one of his jobs is to advise the president and heads of state how to act properly in the presence of foreign dignitaries. In some countries certain gestures or words or movements can be offensive. Conversely, there are some things that should be done that might be offensive if you don't. People have to act appropriately before rulers. So the president has an advisor to tell him how to act in new situations.

Dads, that's our job in with our kids in relation to not just some human king, but the King of kings. We charge our children to walk in a manner worthy of the Creator of the universe. This is not legalism, this is not random ridiculous rules for no reason. No, there are some behaviors we need to insist on and others we forbid because God would clearly forbid them.

We don't have to be a jerk about them, we don't have to be mean. Just like the president's advisor we can politely whisper something into their ear for them to understand - but that's part of what we do to train our kids in the presence of the King.

Dads, don't provoke your kids. Love them, encourage them, and train them for the glory of Jesus.

Pray