

WHY FATHERS NEED TO BE SPIRIT-FILLED

Ephesians 6:4

Ephesians 6:4 is contextually connected to **Ephesians 5:18** that says: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” This divine command calls every believer to live out his or her faith by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. And **Ephesians 5:21** gives one of the essential characteristics of the Spirit-filled life: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The Greek word “submitting” was a military term that described a soldier lining up under the authority of his commanding officer. The use of this term here carries two important implications. First of all, it reminds us that God is a God of order. You cannot get over what God has put under you until you get under what God has put over you, because God is a God of order. Likewise, it affirms the fact that godly order requires there to be leaders and followers.

Notice that **Ephesians 5:21** directs every person in the church to submit to every other person in the church. It is a call to mutual submission. But while we must submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, we cannot all submit to one another in the same way. That would be chaos, not order. Therefore, after the call to mutual submission in **Ephesians 5:21**, the following verse explain how this submission is to be carried out in three relationships that were typical to ancient Roman homes. **Ephesians 5:22-33** orders mutual submission among wives and husbands. **Ephesians 6:1-4** orders mutual submission among children and fathers. And **Ephesians 6:5-9** orders mutual submission among slaves and masters.

Our text is a part of these so-called household codes Paul gives for Christian family life. Verse 4 says: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This short verse succinctly states the will of God for parents in general and fathers in particular. But before I get to the exposition of this verse, let me repeat the opening statement of this sermon: **Ephesians 6:4** is contextually connected to **Ephesians 5:18**. Our text states God’s ultimate desire for every father. But not every father can accomplish what this text commands. Specifically, fathers who are not saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone cannot do what this text commands. Sure, non-Christians can be moral and loving and protective fathers. But they cannot obey this verse. In fact, just because you are a Christian does not mean you can do what this verse commands. A father’s obedience to **Ephesians 6:4** is dependent upon his obedience to **Ephesians 5:18**: “be filled with the Spirit.”

Mark it down: Fathers must be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to lead their families in a manner that is pleasing to God. JOHN WILMOT, THE EARL OF ROCHESTER, is noted for having said: “Before I was married I had three theories about raising children. Now I have three children and no theories.” I am sure that many parents can sympathize with that statement. Good family relationships between sinful parents and sinful children do not develop naturally, automatically, or inevitably. They require much effort and patience and love. Most of all, they require the sovereign empowerment of God the Holy Spirit. I repeat: Fathers must be filled with the Spirit in order to lead their families in a manner that is pleasing to God.

And **Ephesians 6:4** outlines three fundamental reasons why fathers need to be filled with the Spirit.

I. FATHERS HAVE BEEN PLACED IN A SPECIAL ROLE.

In order to properly understand this verse, it is important that you embrace the fact that this verse is directly addressed to fathers. **Ephesians 6:1** mentions to parents in general. Then verse 2 distinguishes between fathers and mothers. And the noun translated “father” in verse 2 is the same term used here in verse 4. It can be used to refer to parents in general in some cases. But the context here demands that it be read here as a specific reference to fathers.

Now, the fact that this verse speaks directly to fathers is not meant to ignore or belittle or disqualify the vital role that mothers play in bringing up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. In fact, the New Testament clearly and consistently teaches that the nurturing of children is one of the primary roles God has given to women. And in most instances, mothers are the ones who spend the most time with the children, who directly care for their daily needs, who actively lead in their development, who administer discipline, and who give spiritual direction to them. So the question begs to be asked: Why does this verse only address fathers?

Let me offer two answers to that question. First, it could be that Paul directly addressed fathers in this verse because fathers, more than mothers, needed and need direction concerning these matters. But if that is the case, it is the lesser reason. The major reason why Paul directly addresses fathers here is because fathers are directly responsible for leading the home. Most definitely, in addressing the fathers, Paul is also addressing the mothers. The alternative would be that fathers must bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, while mothers can bring up their children any way they please. That is a ridiculous notion. Likewise, we must be sensitive to the fact that we live in a day and time where many children are being raised by single mothers, because some irresponsible man chose to be a mere sperm donor, rather than a real father. So the significance of the mother’s role in the life of children is undeniable. But that does not give us the right to simply replace the word “fathers” here with the word “parents.” Or to expand it to read “fathers and mothers.” The Holy Spirit intentionally moved Paul to directly address fathers for a specific reason. Here it is: What both mothers and fathers do, fathers are responsible for.

Ephesians 6:4 is an affirmation of male headship in the home. And I make no apologies for this biblical ordering of the home, where the father is the head of the home and the mother is the heart of the home. JOHN BLANCHARD said it well: “A home with no head is a disaster, one with two heads is a monstrosity.” So God has given husbands and fathers the special role of head of the home. On one hand, that means the fathers have been given divine authority over what happens in the home. He is in charge of the household. He leads the family. He governs his wife and children. On the other hand, the fact that fathers have been given divine authority over the home

means that he is under divine accountability for what happens in the home. So as a father assert his rights as the head of the home, he must be ready to accept his responsibility before God for what happens in the home. This is why fathers need to be filled with the Spirit. Fathers have been given a special role in the home.

II. FATHERS MUST PRACTICE SELF-RESTRAINT.

Fathers are given two commands in this verse – one is a restriction and the other is a requirement. The verse begins with a prohibition: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” The verb “provoke” means to anger rouse to wrath or to exasperate. And it is in a grammatical emphasis that forbids an action that is already in progress. So Paul is not just saying, “Do not provoke your children to anger.” He is saying, “Stop provoking your children to anger.” He assumes that there are fathers in the church who are provoking their children to anger and he says to them, “Stop it!” This was a radical and revolutionary statement to make to people who lived in ancient pagan strongholds like Ephesus.

By the Roman law of PATRIA POTESTAS, a father had absolute power over his children for as long as they lived. At birth, the infant would be placed as the father’s feet to determine its fate. If the father picked up the child, it was accepted into his home. But if he walked away, the child was disposed of by slavery or by death. Fathers could disinherit his children at any point. Fathers determined who their children married and could later pull them out of those marriages, if he desired. Fathers could even execute the death penalty on his children. Father literally had the power of life and death over their children. Yet Paul says to the fathers in the church at Ephesus, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” In so doing, Paul was saying that fathers do not have absolute authority over their children. We are accountable to God for how we treat our children.

And note the text refers to how fathers treat their “children,” not just their sons. That is important because the ancient Near East was a man’s world that arbitrarily preferred boys to girls. But Paul teaches here the counter-cultural Christian principle that – not only do fathers have to answer to God for how they treat their children – fathers must treat both boys and girls with integrity, dignity, and equality. So fathers need to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that they can practice self-restraint and not provoke their children to anger.

What does it mean to provoke your children to anger?

Let me say up front that Paul is not saying that Fathers should never make their children angry. The fact is that there will be times when you anger your children. There will be times when you will cross their wills. There will be times when you will deny their desires. That is just the way it is. So Paul is not saying that you should never make your children angry. He is saying that you should not make your children angry intentionally, unnecessarily, or arbitrarily. Because this verse confronts the prevailing views of a father’s authority in the ancient world, it is best

to read this prohibition as a statement about how we discipline our children. I believe God is saying here that we should be careful not to discipline our children in a way that would make them bitter or resentful or exasperated. That is, we must not be guilty of failure to discipline, unjust discipline, inconsistent discipline, unexplained discipline, or excessive discipline.

We as fathers must practice self-restraint, self-discipline, and self-control in disciplining our children. Indeed, it will cost you a lot to obey this prohibition. But it will cost you even more if you do not obey it. The cost of provoking your children to anger is published in the parallel to our text. **Colossians 3:21** says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” The word “discouraged” means to be broken in spirit. It is to be discouraged, disheartened, or dispirited. The point is that if you constantly discipline your children in a way that embitters them, they may get to a point where they just give up trying to please you. They may stop caring about your rules, guidance, and expectations. They may begin to intentionally rebel against your leadership. If you do not show restraint toward your children, it very well may lead them to a point where they cast restraint toward you.

And here is the worst part of it all. God has given fathers spiritual authority over their children so that we might bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And if we provoke them to anger, discourage them, and cause them to lose respect for authority figures, they will almost inevitably grow up with no regard or reverence for the Lord. And that is exactly what is happening to a generation of children. And I believe that the cause of the problem – FATHERS – is the only solution to the problem. If this generation is going to be won to Christ, I believe it must start with Christian fathers who guard against allowing themselves or their wives or anyone else in the family to provoke their children to anger. We must practice self-restraint by the power of the Holy Spirit.

III. FATHERS POSSESS A SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY.

The first part of this verse is a divine prohibition against verbal, physical, and sexual abuse against children. But the second part of the verse gives positive instruction for how fathers should raise their children. And it does not give any worldly-minded, sociologically driven, behavior oriented, self-esteem building, politically correct parenting techniques. Instead, Paul confronts fathers with their God-given responsibilities to their children. Rather than a list of detailed techniques, Paul lays down one spiritual principle for how fathers should raise their children: “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Notice two aspects of this principle.

A. FATHERS HAVE A PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

There are two imperatives in this verse. The first prohibits fathers from provoking their children to anger. The other command is stated in three words: “bring them up.” The typical temptation is to focus your attention on the phrase “in

the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” But those words are only meant to tell us the sphere in which the command is to be obeyed. The command itself is this: “bring them up.” There is a whole sermon in this command. But the simple point is this: Fathers have a personal responsibility to their children. Think about it. To command fathers to bring up their children is a condemnation of absentee fathers, deadbeat dads, and “he-just-my-baby’s-daddy” type of guys. God does not expect mothers or schools or churches or governments or any other person or group to bear the load of raising children. God directly commands fathers to bring up their children. I repeat: Fathers have a personal responsibility to bring up their children.

The verb translated “bring them up” means to nourish or nurture to maturity. It is only used twice in the New Testament, and both references are in Ephesians. It is used here in **Ephesians 6:4**. And it is used in **Ephesians 5:29** where Paul says: “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.” When you put these two verses together, the implications on Christian fatherhood are staggering. First of all, in **Ephesians 5:29** Paul speaks of nurturing and nourishment in terms of how a man takes care of his own body. He does not hate his own flesh. And the fact that he loves his body is found in the fact that he nourishes it. This also speaks to the father’s responsibility to care for his children’s physical needs. Just as a man loves his own flesh by nourishing it, a father should show his love for his children by making sure they have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over their heads.

1 Timothy 5:8 says, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” There are men behind bars today for committing heinous crimes. Yet they are unashamed and unrepentant. If you ask them about their crimes, they would say, “Look, I had to do what I had to do to take care of my kids.” Think about that. If an unsaved man will instinctively do what he has to do to take care of his kids, we should not believe the testimony of a man who claims to be saved, but will not take care of his kids. He has denied the faith. Not only should he be viewed as an unbeliever, the Bible says he should be viewed as something worse.

Let me show you something else.

In **Ephesians 5:29** Paul use the Greek word translated “bring them up” in an illustration of how a man nourishes his own flesh. But that illustration is directly meant to make appoint about how a man should treat his wife. Ephesians 5:28 says: “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.” Then verse 29 says, “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it...” I know that men often become fathers without being married to the mother of their children. And men who are married with children often go through divorces. The church has to be sensitive to these realities. But at the same time, we must not avoid the fact that in these household codes, the relationship between wives and husbands is discussed before the relationship between children and fathers is discussed. That is intentional. God’s standard is that children be born to a man and woman who have entered into the

covenant of holy matrimony. And I submit to that you – apart from a father’s personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ – the single most important foundation for successful parenting is a healthy, Christ-centered marriage. Brothers, if you are married, love your children by letting them see that you love your wife. And if you are not married to your children’s mother, do all that you can to make sure your children see that you are respectful toward their mother.

Let me say one more thing in regard to the father’s personal responsibility to his children. Notice that **Ephesians 5:29** connects nourishing and cherishing. That connection has led scholars to view the verb translated “bring them up” as also carrying the implication of gentleness toward your children. In fact, JOHN CALVIN translates “bring them up” with the words: “let them be kindly cherished.” That is, fathers should not just nurture their children physically; they should also nurture them emotionally. Children are like fragile flowers that can be easily crushed by their parents or nurtured to blossom beyond expectation. And paternal encouragement and affection makes a big difference. Men are never more true men than when they are tender with their children, whether holding a baby in their arms, loving on their grade-schooler, or hugging their teenager or adult children. MARTIN LUTHER said it well: “Spare the rod and spoil the child – that is true; but beside the rod keep an apple to give him when he has done well.”

B. FATHERS HAVE A PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CHILDREN.

Every father is a pastor. Fathers are the pastors of their families. That is why **1 Timothy 3:4** says that when a man is being considered for spiritual leadership, the church should examine how well he leads his own household. Every father is a pastor who has been divinely called to nurture his children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN wrote: “The very heart of Christian nurture is this: to bring the heart of the child to the heart of his Savior.” That is the father’s spiritual responsibility. What, you change diapers? That’s nice. You go to ballgames? That’s good. You sent your children to college? That’s great. But those things must not be treated as the parental goals for Christian fathers. **Proverbs 22:6** says: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” We must bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The word “discipline” refers to the process of training, nurture, or chastisement. It is used in **Hebrews 12:5** and **7-8** to refer to how God the Father chastises, disciplines, or trains his children that we might learn to obey him. It is also used in **2 Timothy 3:16** where Paul declares: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” That is the job of fathers. We are to give our children instruction in righteousness. We are to train our children the same way Paul directs Timothy to train the church at Ephesus: with the word of God. We must read, study, believe, obey, teach, defend, and apply the Bible as fathers, so that our children may be trained in the way and will and word of God.

Verse 4 says we are to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The word “discipline” focuses on parental actions that shape children’s behavior. But the word “instruction” focuses on parental words that shape children’s beliefs. The Greek term literally means, “to put into the mind.” It is used three times in the New Testament. It is used in **1 Corinthians 10:11**, which says, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction...” The point is that the stories of the Old Testament were written to put certain things in your mind for you to think about when you are tempted to go astray. The term is also used in **Titus 3:10**, where Paul says, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.” And Paul uses it here in **Ephesians 6:4** to say that we should not only discipline our children’s behavior; we should also discipline their beliefs. Do not let your children make up their own minds about life. Children need to be trained, not just in the facts of life, but also in the ways of life. If you have discipline without instruction, you will produce a child who knows how to be a hypocrite that acts a certain way when others are watching. So you should keep putting the word of God on their minds, so that God can keep working on their hearts when you cannot work on their behalfs.

Let me say one more thing in closing.

Parenting is about the perpetual process of losing control over your children. You only have them for a limited amount of time. And one day they will no longer be under your control. So while they are under your control, we are to train and admonish them in the Lord, so that they will continue to submit to his authority when they are no longer obligated to submitted to our authority. I believe that is the significance of the phrase “in the Lord” that evens this verse. We are to bring up our children with the Lord’s discipline and the Lord’s instruction. There will come a point when we have done all we can do. And we must leave our children in the hands of the Lord.

Let me bottom-line that for you: Your children’s eternal destiny is in the hands of God, not in your hands. In the sovereignty of God, children can grow up in a godly, Christian environment and yet reject the faith of their parents. Or children can grow up in an ungodly, non-Christian environment and yet trust Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and live to his glory. And you cannot predict, determined, or alter your children’s ultimate destiny before God. But you can influence your children’s spiritual destiny by your attitudes, choices, words, behavior, discipline, instruction, and prayers. Don’t give up on your children. God’s amazing grace, sparing mercy, and unfailing love can turn their lives around. And God wants to use you to make the difference.

A certain young man made it clear to his father what he wanted for his high school graduation gift: a new car. His father took him to the car dealership and he identified the car that he wanted. It was used and needed a little work. But to this young man it might as well had been a top of the line model right off the assembly line. The last gift he received after his graduation was from his father. It was a Bible. The young man

was crushed. And he was angry that his father would go so far as to take him to a car dealership and pick out a car, only to give him such a cheap gift. The boy angrily left home and refused to speak to his father for some time. Then he received the news that his father had become low sick. He went to his father's bedside and they reconciled. When he asked if there was something he could do, his father asked him again to take the Bible that had ruptured their relationship. He took it to appease his father. But he could not believe his father would make this Bible an issue again. When he father died, he was asked to read the scripture at the funeral. As he thumped through that Bible to find an appropriate scripture, he found a card from his father. Inside was a note from his father and a check for the amount of the car he wanted. The note said: "Son, I love you. And I am very proud of you. Here is the money for the car you desire. Enjoy it. But always remember that no gift can be more special than the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.