

# *St. Augustine's* Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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Home Improvement

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The Text: Ephesians 6:1-4

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 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

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Being a parent isn't easy. Ask anyone who has tried it. And it's a tough job from the very start. Take the example of this young father-to-be, in the days before a husband was permitted to be by his wife's side. He spent the evening pacing the halls of the hospital while his wife was in labor. He was tied up in knots of fear and anxiety, his face was flushed and his forehead was covered with perspiration. Finally, at 4:00 a.m. a nurse opened the door to the waiting room and said, "Congratulations, sir. You have a little girl."

The man heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Thank God it's a girl. She'll never have to go through the awful agony I've experienced tonight!"

Being a father is tough — and yes being a mother is tougher still. Then again being a child has enough challenges of its own as every new born exclaims when entering into the world. The Bible gives us plenty of advice on how to interact in this most complex life forming of relationships. A good example can be found in Ephesians 6:4. In just a few simple words Paul gives us a powerful parenting principle.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

This morning, as we continue to consider the Christian household, let's take some time to better understand what Paul is writing here at the beginning of Ephesians chapter 6. Not only is this parenting principle conveyed to us, but there is also a principle of how children are to relate to their parents as well.

So let's turn now to the text at hand and look at verses 1 – 3:

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 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

Paul gives three reasons why children are to obey their parents. There is a progression and development in his reasoning. They are to obey their parents because it is:

1. Natural
2. According to the Law of God
3. An expression of the grace-filled life.

Before we look at the progression let us be reminded about the meaning of the word "obey". It is literally, the Greek word "stand under." It means "to be under another's authority," and it is used in many places in the Scriptures as a military term. It is the same word that would apply to a soldier in obeying his orders. To put it very practically and plainly, it says to children, "Do what your parents say."

Through out the scripture obedience is a repeated theme. There is a verse in Psalm 32.9 that says: "Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you." The home is to be the training ground where children learn obedience. As they then enter into adulthood they can hopefully live out this verse from the psalm because obedience to God has been nurtured as a virtue, cultivated in the home.

Paul then gives three reasons why children are to obey their parents. First off he says "Obey your parents because it is right." In other words is, it is part of the natural order of things. Just as he did in discussing marriage, where Paul explicitly goes back to Genesis, he implies the same here when talking about obedience.

Paul in addressing spouses is in effect saying, I am only asking you to do what is foundational, what is natural, what has existed from the very beginning as regards man and woman, husband and wife'. And now, he tells us that, with regard to this question of children, the principle is there at the beginning, it has always been so, it is a part of the order of nature. It is a part of the basic rule of life.

Is not this something that operates even among the animals? In the animal world, the mother cares for the young offspring that has just been born, looks after it, feeds it, protects it. Not only that, she teaches it how to do various things - she teaches a little bird how to use its wings, a little animal how to walk and to stumble and to struggle along. This is the order of nature. The young creature in its weakness and ignorance needs the protection and the guidance and the help and the instruction which is given by the parent. So, says the Apostle, 'Obey your parents ... for this is right'. Christians are not divorced from a natural order found everywhere in creation.

But there is a second and more theologically motivated reason as well. It is stated by Paul like this: "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

Notice that Paul is quoting the fifth commandment. But in between the first and second part of the quotation there is a parenthesis. This is Paul's interpretation of the commandment. He understands that the commandment for children to obey parents is the first commandment with a promise. I think this means that as we move into the series of commandments that deal with interpersonal relationships that this one ranks first in importance. Paul is perhaps underscoring its importance because when there is a breakdown in home life it will then find expression in the larger society where adultery, murder, theft, false witness and covetousness will ensue. But when children are learning to obey their parents, as taught in the fifth commandment, then their interaction in the world will be more prone to orderly conduct.

This is what I believe Paul means by this parenthesis which is then further supported by verse 3. To say that it may go well for you and you may live long in the land is not a guarantee that obedience means that you will live to a ripe old age and have a trouble free life.

It simply means that glad obedience, willing obedience, is a boon to the children who obey. But sullen, reluctant, rebellious obedience

injures you, and can even drastically shorten your life. There is no joke about this.

This is not mere superstition. Sullen obedience is really resentment and bitterness, and there is nothing more destructive in a human heart than resentment or bitterness. It does not injure the one you are bitter against; it injures you, it tears you up inside. It can cause serious physical disturbances.

Would you not agree that a bitter and resentful heart can produce cause ulcers and loss of appetite, upset digestion, impair the use of the mind, make the skin break out in hives and blisters, and cause many other kinds of serious physical disturbances? That is why the Word of God promises that honor to father and mother will actually mean a lengthening of life and will certainly make the life we do live much more enjoyable. This, therefore, is highlighting a very real problem. Is it not possible that some of teenage emotional disturbances and physical problems come from an attitude of rebellion toward a parent?

Furthermore, rebellion slams the door to learning. As long as we are rebellious against something, we cannot learn anything from that situation. If we fight everything, we learn nothing. Therefore we act in ignorance. When we have rebellion in our hearts we do the most senseless things, and make the most atrocious blunders. We do things that we would never do if we were in possession of our full faculties.<sup>1</sup>

Paul tells us therefore that obedience is not only natural and in accordance with the law, it is also an expression of a grace filled life. This is stated right at the beginning of the chapter when he says: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" Whenever Paul uses the phrase "in the Lord" or "in Christ" it is always important. The Christian finds their deepest sense of identity in Christ and so for children to show obedience is an expression of living under grace.

Did not Jesus himself embody this attitude while in the world? Although said with an economy of words Luke tells us that when Jesus was twelve years old "he went down with Mary and Joseph and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them....And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray C. Stedman: PARENTS AND CHILDREN at: <http://www.raystedman.org/ephesians/0132.html>

Do you see how Jesus in his own life embodied the very commandment Paul has expressed here. A home where children have the opportunity, in an environment of love, to cultivate obedience is a setting where they can grow in wisdom and stature. Of course this will be fraught with challenges, worry and misunderstandings along the way. Remember that in the verses just before these Jesus had been missing for three days while the family was returning from a trip to Jerusalem.

What we want to underscore is that in three verses Paul is able to lay down a principle that we pray our children will cultivate because obedience is:

1. Natural
2. According to the Law of God
3. An expression of the grace-filled life.

But in order for such an environment to be shaped within the home there is a responsibility that both parents have, but in a particular way it is a calling placed on fathers.

It has been pointed out that this word translated *Fathers* could well be translated *Parents* because it includes both the father and the mother. It is also true that the emphasis is laid largely upon the father, for it is his responsibility as to what the children become. That is sobering, is it not, fathers? But it is true. Mothers may enforce policy but it is the father's task to set it, and to see that his children are raised properly. There is nothing that is more dishonoring to the spirit of Christianity than the attitude adopted by many fathers: "It is my job to make the living; her job is to raise the children." Not in the Word of God! In the Bible, the ultimate responsibility for what a home becomes is the father's. Study carefully the Book of Proverbs and you will see how clearly this is laid out there. So the word is addressed to fathers: 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

That is the way a father subjects himself to his children -- by deliberately avoiding the things which make a child rebel, that "Provoke them not to anger." The word for *anger* here is not the common word which describes irritation or temporary upset, for obviously in any home even proper discipline can sometimes make a child angry. Children are not mature, they do not always react as they ought, and even necessary discipline will make a child angry. This

word is not saying anything against that. The word used here means "anger which results in a rebellion." It is the word from which we get our English word *paroxysm*. (Mean a convulsion, or outburst) These means therefore "Fathers, do not provoke your children to the place where they completely lose control and break out against authority." That is the word to the parents. What causes this?

There are two things which cause rebellion in children, two things which provoke a child ultimately to rebel against his parents: Indulgence and harshness. These two things are the negative of the two things he instructs the father to do: "Bring them up in the discipline and the instruction (or the exhortation) of the Lord."

Fathers can sometime be tyrants in the family. Children have to toe the mark and often have very little contact with their parents in a loving relationship. Consequently there is a breaking out against this. There are also homes where the fathers, and yes mothers, can swing to the extreme of indulgence. Children are given everything and are left to raise themselves.

But notice that the word says, "Fathers...bring your children up." Do not let them bring you up. Lack of discipline will make a child insecure, miserable, and self-centered. That is what we call "a spoiled child" -- one who grows up to expect to have his way in everything and who rides rough-shod over the feelings of everyone else. A lack of proper discipline, more than anything else, will create insecurity in a child. The child without discipline feels unwanted and terribly unhappy. The limits which parents set for their children are like walls. I know that walls can sometimes be prisons, frustrating us, but that is usually the extreme. Walls are much more frequently beneficial to us, and we often long for them because they are symbols of safety. Who does not feel more secure at home at night because of the walls which are there. Disciplinary limits are like that to a child.

The other extreme which provokes a child to revolt is harshness -- harsh, demanding discipline which is never accompanied with love, concern, or understanding. Rigid, military discipline which says, "Do this, or this, or else," will inevitably drive a child to revolt as he comes to adolescence. I read of a father who ordered his family about like a sergeant major. He had been in the military, and he tried to run his household that way. He assembled the family every morning, lined them all up, the wife and the children, and gave them their orders for the day. One day when he had them lined up, he said to them, "Now,

any questions?" One of his sons raised his hand. The father said, "What is it?" The boy said, "How can I get out of this outfit?"

That is certainly the first question any child will ask as he comes to maturity, if that is the kind of regime under which he lives.

Opposed to this the apostle puts two things -- discipline and instruction (or exhortation) in the Lord. The word for instruction is really "putting in mind" in the Lord. As the child grows older, physical discipline is to be replaced by exhortation, by understanding -- helping a child to see what lies behind the restrictions, and always showing concern and love. It does not mean a total relaxing of limits, but it means a different way of enforcing them. So here are seven pointers for parents, and especially fathers.

1. Provide an emotional climate in the home
2. Provide a setting that builds personal relationships with children
3. Provide a place of warm welcome and acceptance.
4. This means spending time with your children so that they know you and you know them.
5. Be a good example -- convictions conveyed by a life,
6. Admit that we make mistakes
7. Show that the grace of God is at work in us as parents

By so doing mothers and particularly fathers, will be able to apply to their lives the principle laid down by Paul that exhorts: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord".

Now I imagine some of you are thinking, Jonathan as I think back over my life I was not raised in a home where I was parented like this. Or you may be thinking, my children are now adults and if I am honest I did not apply this parenting, fathering principle to the raising of my children. Because of this perhaps there is an opportunity for you now to prayerfully reflect on your early life. Maybe the Holy Spirit would want the space to move in your life to help bring healing to early and traumatic childhood memories. Perhaps there is the need for you to admit to God your willful disobedience during your teen years. Maybe, just maybe if your parents are still alive and it is safe to do this, you need to ask them their forgiveness for behaviour that was rebellious. Even though adults now, the way we were shaped as children follows us into adulthood. And while the past cannot be changed, and can be forgiven and healed.

Likewise, if you have been convicted by the Holy Spirit as you have listened to this teaching that there are ways you were either an indulgent or harsh parent, this can also be confessed to the Lord. If possible it would be good to talk with your children about this too and ask them for their forgiveness.

And for those of you who are in the thick of parenting as you have little ones at home, I pray that what we have learned this morning will help you to apply to your home one these principles, which when put into practice, will help to provide a home that is an expression of these verses from Psalm 127:

If GOD doesn't build the house, the builders only build shacks  
If GOD doesn't guard the city,  
the night watchman might as well nap.  
It's useless to rise early and go to bed late,  
and work your worried fingers to the bone.  
Don't you know he enjoys  
giving rest to those he loves?

Don't you see that children are GOD's best gift?  
the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?  
Like a warrior's fistful of arrows  
are the children of a vigorous youth.  
Oh, how blessed are you parents,  
with your quivers full of children!  
Your enemies don't stand a chance against you;  
you'll sweep them right off your doorstep.

I entitled this sermon "Home Improvement" because when the words at the beginning of Ephesians six are heeded our home life will indeed improve because we are allowing God to build this most important of relationships between children and mothers and between children and fathers.