

Parents and Children

by Ray C. Stedman

In our series in Ephesians we are coming to another of the great relationships of life, that of parents and children. It is rather obvious that in our present world something has gone drastically wrong with this relationship. This is a day when juvenile delinquency and juvenile crime is skyrocketing to heights never before known. A conscientious policeman, not long ago, told me how heartsick he was to find that some of the most brutal crimes in his area were being committed by children – not teenagers, children! – children of ten years of age or even eight, and this is becoming more and more frequent.

We all are familiar with the teenage riots and outbreaks which are a daily occurrence in our nation these days. Revolt and rebellion seem almost to have become the symbols of youth in our age. Even in Red China, youth riots are now flaming through the streets.

A lady told me this week that she had cashed a money order for fifty dollars at the Post Office in Redwood City, and was walking home in broad daylight with the money in her purse, when, only a few doors from her house, a young man ran up, grabbed her purse, and ran off down the street.

These things are happening everywhere.

Perhaps the most distressing thing about this whole matter of juvenile crime and delinquency is the indifference or helplessness of parents. Everywhere parents wring their hands, and cry plaintively, "I can't do anything with him (or her)." There seems to be abject despair on the part of parents to do anything about this situation. They look to the police and other law enforcement agencies to take over the responsibility of raising their children. There is an utter breakdown, apparent on every side, in this major relationship between parents and children.

What has gone wrong? Why is it that our nation is experiencing this terrible tempest in this regard? There is no question but that we are reaping the whirlwind which was sowed in the '20s and '30s of this century by the winds of permissiveness which blew across the homes and through the classrooms of our nation. Many of us remember that the philosophies of John Dewey, and others of the school of permissiveness, captured the thoughts of educators and the minds of parents throughout this land. We were taught that children were to be allowed to grow up to 'express themselves,' that all discipline is wrong, that it keeps them from developing properly and fully. As a result, there grew up a whole generation of young people who never learned to obey, never learned to yield their will to the authority of another. This present revolt against authority is the direct result of that kind of sowing to the wind.

We shall never have relief from this until we hear again the great words of the Apostle Paul in the Scriptures in respect to the answer to all conflict. In Ephesians 5, the apostle put his finger precisely on the solution to these overwhelming problems of conflict between various groups, so prevalent in our age. He said it all in one sentence:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. {Eph 5:21 RSV}

Then he went on, as we have been seeing, to apply this to various relationships. We have already examined the matter of husbands and wives and the whole realm of marriage conflict. Now we come to the problem of the relationship of parents and children.

The apostle's first word is addressed to the children:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.” {Eph 6:1-3 RSV}

Notice, this is not a simple exhortation to children to obey, much as you might find in a pamphlet or booklet on parent-child relationships written from a secular point of view. It is not simply “Children, obey your parents.” It is “Children, obey your parents *in the Lord.*” The key to the whole command is “*in the Lord.*” As we saw in regard to the wife, who is to submit herself to her husband as unto the Lord, so it is with the child to the parent. Children are to obey their parents, for Christ’s sake.

That is the point he makes. They are to obey, not because this is what their parents want, so much as because this is what the Lord Jesus wants. This is their responsibility to Christ. They cannot possibly fulfill their desire to belong to him, and to reflect his life, unless they are willing to obey their parents. This is the ground upon which the apostle puts it.

This word *obey* 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. It means to follow orders. To put it very practically and plainly, it says to children, “Do what your parents say.”

Now this is a most important matter, for all through the Word of God you find exhortations to parents to teach their children to be obedient, and to children to be responsive to that teaching and to obey their parents.

We read earlier from the book of Proverbs a lengthy section in that regard. Proverbs is probably the most helpful book on child-raising ever written. Its whole theme is this: A child must learn the most important lesson of all, to be an obedient child. This is much more important than simply accomplishing the immediate wish of the parent, whatever it may be. It is obedience that is the issue.

There is a wise family in this congregation who teach their children obedience in a rather unusual fashion. They want the child to learn that the im-

portant thing is not merely to do what the parent asks, as if that specific thing were the issue, but, rather, that obedience is the important thing. If either parent says to the child, “Do so-and-so,” and the child delays, procrastinates, or refuses, the parent does not repeat the request, “Now I told you to do such-and-such.” He or she says, rather, “Do what daddy (or mother) says,” so as to convey the clear impression to the child that the important thing is not the specific request they made, but the issue of obedience to a parent. This has taught the children of that particular family that the great and overwhelming thing is to be an obedient child.

With this word of Paul’s goes a reason. The Scriptures never give us exhortations like this without a reason. Many children are completely familiar with this verse – oh, how familiar! They have had it dinned into them any time anything goes wrong at home. They are constantly reminded, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord.” But it is very seldom their attention is called to the reason for this. Paul adds a reason immediately: “Obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”

Now, what does that mean? Do not take that lightly. I think there is oftentimes a tendency, on the part of young people, particularly, to read that and to slough it off as though it meant, “Obey your parents because this is the way we all act, this is just the way we do it,” or, “We’ve done it for years and there’s no reason to change; therefore, obey your parents.” But it does not mean that. This is not merely an appeal to custom. This is not saying that the traditional thing to do in our Christian heritage is to obey our parents. It means, rather, that this is in accord with a fundamental reality, this is one of the basic laws of life. If you do this, everything will turn out right; if you refuse to do it everything will go wrong, because it is a violation of one of the fundamental laws of living.

If you want proof of the claim that violation of this will make everything go wrong, read your daily newspapers. They are Exhibit A! The reason we are suffering from this tremendous epidemic of delinquency, revolt, and rebellion is because a generation has been taught that they need not obey, that there is nothing important connected with obedience. But the apostle puts his finger directly on this, and says, “This is the supreme thing, it is the right thing, it is in accordance with reality.” It’s the only way to make your home run right.

Now, in Verses 2 and 3, the apostle moves on to press deeper into this subject. He says the same thing again, but he goes behind the actions to the attitudes. He says it is not only important to obey, but to obey in such a way as to honor your father and your mother. The attitude of obedience is exceedingly important. We know, of course, that it is possible to obey with a heart seething with disobedience and hatred. It is possible to obey with any icy coldness which is perfectly correct in its action, and perfectly wrong in its attitude. It is possible to give obedience with a deceptive compliance that looks like willingness, but inwardly one is waiting for an opportunity to revolt or to break over the lines.

We all remember the story of the little boy whose mother wanted him to sit down but he wouldn't sit down. Finally she took hold of him and sat him down in the chair. He looked up at her with defiance in his eyes, and said, "You may make me sit down outside, but I'm still standing up inside!"

That kind of obedience is not obedience at all because, as the apostle brings out, it is dishonoring to the father or mother. It is dishonoring because it depersonalizes the parent. It treats the parent as a thing, an obstacle, certainly not as a person from whom life has come, and also love and concern and care. It is to ignore every generous gift of parental love and to treat them as though they were nothing but an obstacle in the way. That is why the first commandment with a promise, as the apostle reminds us, was the commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother," {Exod 20:12a KJV}. The promise that was linked to it was this: "... that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth," {cf, Exod 20:12b}. That means that obedience is not merely to be in action only, but in attitude as well. It requires one to obey cheerfully, not sullenly or with pouting or with sarcasm. All is to be done before the Lord, who knows the heart, who reads the inward mind and the attitude. If a child who loves the Lord Jesus is set to live the Christian life, this is the first area it will show – in a willing, glad obedience to his parents.

Now, what does this promise mean? – "that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth." Does that sound as though it is mere superstition or something which has come to us as tradition from the past? No, God's word is never shallow. It always has some very real substance to

it. 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.

Modern doctors and psychologists agree that a bitter and resentful heart produces acne, causes ulcers and loss of appetite, upsets digestion, impairs the use of the mind, causes allergic reactions such as asthma or fainting spells, makes the skin break out in hives and blisters, and causes 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. Much of teenage emotional disturbances and physical problems come from an attitude of rebellion toward a parent.

Furthermore, rebellion slams the door to learning. I learned this as a youngster, and, as an adult, I have often seen it in my own experience and that of others. 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.

This could be demonstrated in a thousand ways. All you need to do is to watch a mob in action, or a riot in progress, and to see how absolutely senseless are the things a mob does. The vandalism in Watts is a good example – the burning down of whole areas of a city, the depriving of individuals of their possessions, their food, and even of their liberty, all in the name of an attempt to correct an evil. This is mob violence. It reflects what happens in an individual heart as well when the heart is filled with rebellion. You close the door to any possibility of learning anything, and you act out of an emotional surge that results in senseless activity.

It is, therefore, absolutely essential that children learn to obey their parents willingly. Nothing is more important.

I pointed out earlier this morning to our high school young people that this problem does not end at graduation from high school. We do not move beyond the need to render obedience to authority. It follows us all our life. Adults are as much under authority as children are. If obedience has not been learned as children it is very likely that it will not be learned as adults. This is another reason for the outbreak of violence, disobedience and rebellion against all forms of authority sweeping across our land today.

This is, therefore, one of the most important sections of Scripture.

This issue is dealt with frequently and widely throughout the whole of Scripture because it is so vital. It strikes right to the very heart of one of the most important relationships of life, which touches every aspect of human thinking. It is extremely important, then, that children, especially Christian children, understand how necessary it is that they willingly and gladly obey their parents.

But subjection is always a two-way street. The Word of God never says to one party only in these relationships, "Subject yourself to the other." It says, "Subject yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ." Therefore, if it is true that children are to subject themselves to their parents by obeying them, it is equally true that parents are to subject themselves to their children. How? Paul goes on to show us in Verse 4:

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. {Eph 6:4 RSV}

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. So the word is addressed to fathers: "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. "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*. "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." The opposites of these are indulgence and harshness. Those are the things which provoke a child to wrath.

During the last century the father was often a tyrant in his family. Children had to toe the mark and often had very little contact with their parents in a loving relationship. Consequently there was a breaking out against this. In our day it is the other way around. We have swung to the extreme of indulgence. We give our children everything and let them have their own way, let them raise themselves.

But notice that the word says, "Fathers ... bring your children up." Do not let them bring you up. Once, in a church in which I was speaking, I saw that the subject of the young people's meeting in the evening was "What's Wrong With Our Parents?" That indicated the difficulty those children were having in raising their parents. But the word is not, "Children, bring up your parents," but, "Parents, bring up your children," and do so by avoiding harshness and indulgence, for either one

will produce the same results – rebellion and an outbreak of violence.

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 roughshod over the feelings of everyone else. This is created, in our day, by a spirit of indulgence on the part of parents who allow their children to make decisions which no child is capable of making. Parents must learn that they need to make decisions for their child for quite a while in his life, and only gradually help him to learn to make those decisions as he is able to do so. In the early years of childhood parents must make almost all the decisions. One of the terribly tragic things about life today is the degree to which many parents let children make decisions they are totally incapable of making.

I was in a home not long ago with a Christian father and his little three-year-old daughter. The little girl was watching the television set. She had turned on a murder mystery, or something similarly unsavory. The father saw what she was watching and, whether it was because I was there or not, something made him feel that this was an improper diet for his child. He stood at the set, and said to her, “Now, dear, you don’t want to watch this, do you?” She nodded her head, “Sure!” He said, “But I don’t think this is good for you. Don’t you think you’d better turn it off?” “No.” “Well,” he said, “you ought to turn it off. This is not the kind of thing you should watch.” But she shook her head again indicating she wanted to watch it. He stood there for three or four minutes, pleading with her, and, since she would not give her consent, he finally let her watch the program.

A three-year-old child is totally incapable of making that kind of moral decision. Though it need not have been made with harshness, the decision should have been made with firmness that the child was not to watch that program. It was no wonder that I observed that the child was a bundle of frustrations, striking out against everyone, for she had no security. 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.

Some time ago, the *Saturday Evening Post* had a story of a stepfather who was trying to win the acceptance and approval of his new stepson by indulging him, buying him everything he wanted. But he was getting nowhere. Finally, they went out on a hike together and came to a place where a waterfall came down over a cliff and spread out in a big pool at its foot. Suddenly the father noticed the son’s blue cap floating in the middle of the pool. Without hesitation he dived in and tried to find the boy. He made several dives, and at last, unavailing, he flung himself exhausted on the bank. Just then he heard a noise and there was the boy standing behind a tree. He said to him, “Did you throw your cap in the pool?” The boy said, “Yes, I did.” The father said, “What did you do that for?” The boy answered, “I wanted to see what would happen.” The stepfather said, “Well, you’re going to find out right now,” and he spanked him as few boys have ever been spanked. On the way home in the car, he suddenly found hot little fingers gripping his hand, and choked voice saying, “I’m sorry, I’m awful sorry, but I didn’t know whether you really liked me, because you never spanked me like the other children’s fathers do.”

It is an imperative necessity that children find discipline, for it is the mark of love. As the apostle tells us in Hebrews, no father ever had a son but that he chastened him because he loved him. God’s chastening is that to us, a sign of love. It is the same 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 remember hearing of a father who ordered his family about like a martinet. 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 little boy 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. I know a father who has five children. One by one, as they have come to adolescence he has driven them away. They had to leave home, and had no other alternative. Finally, with the last one, the wife left too, driven out by a harsh, unbending rigidity which would not allow any expression of love or understanding.

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. Discipline, and 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.

I can point you to nothing better in this respect than the very excellent summary by Howard Hendricks entitled *Pointers For Parents*. The seven pointers he gives are excellent:

1. Provide an emotional climate in the home – an atmosphere that builds our personal relationships with them – a place of warm welcome and acceptance.

That means spending time with your children until they know you and you know them.

2. Be a good example – convictions conveyed by a life, admitting that we make mistakes but showing that the grace of God is at work in us.

There is nothing more important than this. How can we possibly convince our children that material things are not the most important things in life if they only see us saving money in order to buy a new television set or a new automobile, and never see us saving to help in the extension of the Lord’s work or to invest in some cause for Christ’s sake. How do we ever expect them to think the Lord can be in them a “present help in time of trouble” if, in every crisis in our home, they find us reacting with bitterness and resentment or sharpness toward those who injure us. How can we ever show them that there is a greater way of handling things than

force, that love is more powerful than enmity, if we do not practice it ourselves.

3. Allow gradual emancipation from the apron strings of parental authority. Begin early to feed them responsibility – evaluate the results and adjust according to their ability to handle it.

I once asked our high school young people, “What are the areas which create the most resentment toward your parents?” The one thing that was most widely experienced was this: “They don’t let us take a chance. They don’t let us make mistakes.” Most Christian parents have this attitude. We think we are there to keep them from making mistakes. We are not. We are there to help them make mistakes early enough that they can learn from them while they are still not too serious. If we keep them from making mistakes until they get into adolescence, then the ones they make will ruin them. A parent’s job is to help his children have an opportunity to make mistakes and thus learn.

4. Provide counsel in an informal setting. Spend time to build a relationship which makes our counsel acceptable.
5. Set limits. Build in some restrictions. But discipline demands a context. You have no right to discipline unless you have also given them time and interest.

This is a parent’s task – to set limits – and it is one which, as I have already suggested, builds security in a child. He wants to have some limits. He desperately needs them, but the limits are to be made with understanding.

6. Apply the law of natural consequences as they grow up. Discuss pros and cons, let them decide – then let them live with the results. (Alternative: we make all the decisions for them so they lose the ability to make decisions. Or – they decide wrongly, then we bail them out.)

This is again a further elucidation of the need for gradual emancipation from apron strings. Let them make some mistakes, let them see what the results are, but early enough that they are not the kind which will damage them all their life.

7. Surround them with a fortress of prayer, trusting the Spirit of God to do for them what he did for you!

This is most important, for prayer is a mighty force to keep children true and honest and open. Keep communication lines clear, so that our children may grow up to be an honor to our homes and an honor to Jesus Christ, and so that they may experience what we so desperately want them to experience: the beauty and glory of womanhood, and the freshness, strength, and vitality of manhood, so that they may be men and women as God intended them to be.

This is what we are called to, as parents.

May God help us to do so in the light of the truth.

Prayer:

Our Father, forgive us for the many times we have blundered and stumbled along in darkness and ignorance, with the light shining right above our heads. Lord, teaches us to look to thee. Teach us to remember your great promise: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Make us, who have made so many mistakes already, aware of them, and ware that whenever we start walking with you, grace and blessing will result. You are the God of the future, and the God of the present, but also the God of the past as well. You can change those mistakes into opportunities for advancement in our children's lives, as well as in ours. Thank you for this. In Christ's name, Amen.