

Colossians: The Family Part 2

Colossians 3:20-21

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on September 10, 2023

A Warning

He began his life with all of the classic troubles and disadvantages. His mother was a powerfully built, dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. She had been married three times, and her second husband divorced her because she beat him up regularly. The father of the child was her third husband; he died of a heart attack a few months before the child's birth. This meant the mother had to work long hours from the boy's earliest childhood.

She gave him no affection, no love, no discipline, and no training during those early years. He was not even allowed to call her at work. Other children ignored him. He was alone most of the time. He was completely rejected from his earliest childhood. When he was thirteen years old, a school counselor commented that he probably didn't even know the meaning of the word love. During his teen years, girls had nothing to do with him and he fought constantly with other boys.

Even though he had a high IQ, he failed school, dropping out during his junior year of high school. Seeking acceptance, he joined the Marines. Despite a proclivity for marksmanship with a rifle, all of the same issues that dogged him his entire life followed him into the Marine barracks. He was mocked and ridiculed. He fought back and was resistant to authority. This led to a court martial and dishonorable discharge. As a man in his early twenties, he was scrawny, alone, balding, and felt worthless.

He lived abroad but was rejected there too. While there, he married a girl and brought her back to the States. Soon, she developed the same contempt for him that everyone else felt. They had two kids, and she would constantly insult him, and the marriage crumbled. She demanded more and more that he simply could not provide. She would bully him and even beat him up. On one occasion, she locked him in the bathroom as punishment. Eventually, she forced him to leave.

He was never able to make it on his own. He begged her to take him back and she refused. Finally, he fell to his knees and wept bitterly.

He determined at that moment that he would no longer beg for approval. Nobody wanted him. Nobody had ever wanted him.

The next day, he was different. He got up, went to the garage and got down a rifle he had hidden. He carried it with him to his new job at a book storage building. And from a window on the third floor of that building, just before noon on November 22, 1963, he sent two bullets crashing into the head of President Kennedy.¹

Lee Harvey Oswald was a rejected, unloved, bullied, beaten, a failure, took the life of the man who embodied success, youth, family affection and wealth. Everything Oswald lacked. His story stands out because his miserable experience in life is paralleled by thousands upon thousands who have known the same or even greater lack of affection, discipline, and training. Paul writes about how families can experience the fullness of God. How children can experience the fullness of God. How parents can.

A quick warning for all of our friends in fourth and fifth grade through high school and even college. This could be a rough one for you this morning. Just a heads up. I invite you to Colossians 3:20-21 this morning. (read text)

Instructions for Children

This short text provides a bare outline of what brings fullness to parent/child relationships. And we observe, like we did with his teaching to wives previously, this teaching wonderfully elevated the position of children in the culture of that day. Under a section of the Roman law entitled *Patria Potestas*, “The Power of the Father,” the father could do anything he wanted with his children. He could sell them, turn them into slaves, use them to pay off debts, even take their lives. But here, as with husbands and wives, both children and parents were presented as under God. The dominant example was the loving fatherhood of God. And a loving father disciplines his children.

Discipline is indispensable if we are to have Christ’s fullness in the home. A lack of this in homes is a borderline injustice to children. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:7-8).

¹ James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell Press, 1974), pp.9-11.

There are benefits of being a child of God. These benefits are also evidence that a person belongs to God. God's discipline is evidence that someone is a child of God. It is the same with human fathers and mothers.

The absence of discipline in a home means that parenthood is not being practiced. God is constantly proving the faithfulness of his Fatherhood in our lives by his discipline. When discipline is absent, or when it is weak and inconsistent discipline, this shows a lack of love. Discipline is a key to child-parent fullness.

Psychiatrists are finding more evidence that discipline is actually the great ingredient for fullness of life in the home. Dr. Stanley Coopersmith is the associate professor of psychology at the University of California. He surveyed almost two thousand middle-class boys and their families, beginning in the pre-adolescent period and following them through to young manhood. After determining which of the boys had the healthiest sense of self-esteem, he then compared the homes and childhood influences with those of the boys having lower self-esteem. He found three important characteristics that differentiated them:

1. The boys with high esteem were clearly more loved and appreciated at home than were the low-esteem boys. The parental love was deep and genuine, not empty displays of words. The boys knew their parents were proud of them. The boys knew their parents were interested in their lives. This built up their self-worth.
2. The group with high esteem came from homes where parents had been significantly stricter in their approach to discipline. By contrast, parents of the group with low esteem had created insecurity and dependence by their permissive attitudes. Further, the most successful and independent young men during the latter period of the study were found to have come from homes that demanded the strictest accountability and responsibility. As was predicted in the hypothesis, the family ties remained the strongest in the homes in which discipline and self-control had been a way of life.
3. The homes of the group with high esteem were also characterized by fairness and authenticity. Once those boundaries were established for behavior, there was freedom for individual personalities to grow and develop. The boys could express themselves without fear of being made fun of or ridiculed, and the overall atmosphere was marked by acceptance and emotional security.²

² James Dobson. *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell Press, 1974), p. 82-83.

Discipline and obedience cannot be separated if a person wants to experience the fullness that God desires for them in the home.

Paul's command for children to "obey" is significant for a few reasons. First, it is a different word than the one used in verse 18, where wives are told to "submit" to their husbands. The word Paul used in 18 suggests a voluntary submission, a choice; here in verse 20, the command is more absolute. Another reason this word is significant is that it technically consists of two words ("listen" and "under") and can be read literally, "listen under your parents," or "actually listen to your parents and do what they say!"

As a parent, how often have you ever heard yourself asking your children, "Are you listening to me?" "Did you hear what I just said?" "Do you ever listen?" "Hey, listen to me right now!" Obedience begins with listening. And this extends into all of our position as a child of God. That obedience also begins with listening to both the Word and Spirit of God.

Implicit in this also is not just hearing but doing. It reminds us of the exhortation in James 1:22, "but be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Obedience begins with listening but then extends into correct and appropriate actions according to the instruction. Children are all too often like the little boy who was told by his teacher to go sit in the corner. On his way to the corner he protested, "I am sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside!" Just like a heart obedience is called for God's children, the Scripture also call for a child's heart obedience to parents.

It is important to note here that Paul defines the categories in which children are to be obedient. "In everything" (v.20). Are there any exceptions? Of course. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). We are never to go against the Holy Spirit or the Scripture to obey anyone. And we must not sin or do anything irrational or harmful to us or anyone else in carrying out parental obedience. This command from Paul does not give a cruel or harsh parent carte blanche. But these cases aside, the Scripture before us says that obedience "pleases the Lord" (v.20).

The parallel passage in Ephesians 6:1-3 similarly says, "this is right," and then goes on to say, "Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.'"

We have a simple and powerful command here to all children to truly, from the heart, obey their parents. Ignoring or neglecting this command sets those who do up for sorrow. But if the command is obeyed, it brings fullness.

Instructions to Parents

The other part of the command here reads: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won’t become discouraged.” Imagine trying to train or “break” a horse so that it can be ridden. Rather than the progressive use of a halter, bit, blanket, and saddle, let’s say the cowboy just takes a 2x4 and knocks the animal to its knees. It is said that a horse can be tamed this way but at great cost. They say this method produces a spiritless animal. It may be obedient, but it also will not ever be the type or quality of horse that it could have been.

There are children whose spirits have been broken. They are obedient but something is missing. They have, to use Paul’s words in verse 21, lost heart or become discouraged. They withdraw. They retreat inside themselves. Or perhaps they rebel when they are big enough. Either way, painful results.

Paul provides teaching and guidance to parents who want to avoid this trap: “Fathers, do not provoke your children.” Notice the advice is primarily to “fathers,” the reason being that this would have been typically more of the father’s issue or sin.³

The husband was naturally away from the children more than the mother and was less in touch with what was happening. This made the fathers more prone to bad judgments and unwise direction. The specific sense of the Greek word is to irritate one’s children either by nagging or deriding them – insulting them or putting them down.⁴ The parallel in Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger” and has the same idea of irritating them through perpetual faultfinding.

Millions of children, even those in Christian homes, experience a constant downpour of criticism. John Newton, the great preacher and hymn writer, who experienced a wretched life before turning to Christ,

³ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), p.229.

⁴ Humphrey House., ed., *Gerrard Manley Hopkins, The Notebooks and Papers* (New York: Oxford, 1937), p.304-305.

said, “I know that my father loved me – but he did not seem to wish me to see it.”⁵ Parents, fathers, mothers: discipline is to be given, but so is encouragement. Obedience is to be nurtured by love and praise. We must never be the cause of our children losing heart.

Another kind of parent who exasperates a child is the one given to irritability or grouchiness. Most people maintain a calm demeanor at work because they have to. But at home, it is a different story. Only the Lord God knows how many children have lost heart because their parents have hard days. Parents have to be aware of the pressures that push in on us so that we are not releasing that steam at home. It is an unhappy, sinful cycle and what it ultimately costs our kids is too high.

We also must guard against unstable inconsistency. We don’t want our children to think that nothing they do is ever right. It is like a horse rider both digging in their heels and pulling back at the reins. Parents must work at consistency. Of course, this doesn’t mean that parents are not allowed to change course or change their minds. That will happen. But be certain that the reasons for the change doesn’t mask selfishness or laziness on the part of the parents.

Perhaps the most exasperating thing a parent can do is to keep their children at a distance. Growing up, I heard that fathers only spent, on average, thirty-seven seconds with their children a day. While we know that is not accurate now, and possibly then – it was something used by a state politician during a campaign – we know that there is still a lack of parental involvement and investment in many homes. Few things are more disheartening. It builds resentment. Kids feel disconnected from parents and yet these rules and guidelines are handed down, as if from Mount Olympus. There is no substitute for spending time with your children. And when you do spend time with them, be present with them, fully engaged.

If we want to have all of the fullness that God wants us to experience in our families, we must discipline our children. To ignore that causes harm toward our own children through unloving indifference or cruel permissiveness or harsh and overly strict punishment. And at the same time our discipline must be given with encouragement. Parents must be patient and not irritable. Strict yes. Overly strict, unreasonably strict? No.

⁵ Alexander Maclaren, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, *The Expositor’s Bible* (New York, NY: A.C. Armstrong, 1903), p.352.

Parents must look for ways to say yes as well as no. Parents must be stable in our direction. Parents must spend time with their children, listening to them and loving them.

And children must listen to their parents and obey them from their hearts.

All of this pleases the Lord and makes it possible to experience the fullness of God in our homes.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

BEGINNING TODAY: First Kids Worship at 10:30AM. This is an extension of our children's church ministry for children pre-K through 3rd grade. Check in the children's area. See Pastor Jason for more details.

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY: MONDAYS at 6:30PM at Pastor Craig's Home. Beginning September 25th. All men of all ages are invited. See Pastor Craig for details.

Children's Ministry Trip to Orr's Farm. October 7th. Pumpkin patch and other fun things. 10AM to noon. See Pastor Jason for details.

Wednesday Morning Bible Study at 10:30AM. Our study continues in Mark.

FBC Kids Wednesday Nights. 6-7:30PM See Pastor Jason for details!

LIGHT THE NIGHT: October 31. It is time to start preparing for Light the Night. If you are interested in hosting a Light the Night location at your home, please see Pastor Craig. Next Sunday, we will begin collecting candy donations. We also need 50-60 empty gallon sized milk jugs. Your help with this is greatly appreciated!

CATALYST FELLOWSHIP: Friday Sept. 15, 6:30PM at Pastor Craig's. Catalyst is a new ministry in the church geared towards young and emerging adults. It is focused on ministering to and equipping people in their 20's. It will be a time of fellowship together over a meal. Bring a side or dessert to share. If you have questions, see Pastor Craig.

Silver Wings Pizza Fellowship: Shirley's Pizza Party, Wednesday Sept. 27th at noon in 101. Cost is by donation. You provide your own water, soda, or tea. This honors the memory of Shirley Parsons who passed away in 2018.)