

Section 4: God's Good Pattern For Parenting (Part Three)

Lesson 11: Parents, Do Not Provoke Your Children To Anger

Introduction

In our last chapter, we began unpacking what will ultimately be four key lessons from Ephesians 6:1-4. In v1-3, we saw the first two of these lessons: *Christian parents are called to (1) raise their children in the church, and to (2) require obedience of their children.* That leaves two more lessons to go, and we will devote a full chapter to each one. But first, let us fix our eyes on the specific text of holy Scripture from which our remaining lessons are drawn:

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

The two remaining lessons we will focus on are not difficult to see. They come right from the surface of the text. As we mentioned, we will cover the first of these in this chapter, and the second in the next. But here are the two lessons in brief:

3. Do Not Provoke Your Children To Anger (v4a)

4. Raise Your Children In the Discipline & Instruction of the Lord (v4b)

3. Do Not Provoke Your Children To Anger (v4a)

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...” (Ephesians 6:4a).

There have been a handful of times when I have been on backpacking trips during which we had to ascend a very rocky mountain face. I don't mean 'rocky' in the sense of one solid rock. I mean rocky in the sense of a steep portion of the mountain, usually above the tree-line, that is completely covered in all sorts of rocks ranging from the size of a man's fist to the size of a man's body. Places like these are called “*scree slopes*,” and there are certain rules that must be followed when attempting to navigate this kind of terrain.

For starters, you do not ascend in a straight line—that is, with one climber directly above another. This is because it is inevitable that some of the smaller scree will become dislodged as you travel. And when it does, it could easily pelt the hiker beneath you. But secondly, and far more importantly, you must be very careful not to dislodge any boulders during your ascent. This means that no matter how tired you become, or worn down you feel, you must resist the urge to let your fatigue lead you to rest your weight upon the boulders around you. This can be especially hard to resist when you are hiking at elevation beneath the sweltering heat of the sun. The air is thinner, dehydration sets in with far greater speed, and fatigue from the climb only grows with every step. But no matter how worn down you feel, you must not break this rule. Why? Because if your weight is significant enough to shift the stability of that boulder and thereby set it in motion, there is only one outcome: Gravity's unrelenting force will pull that boulder down the face of the mountain with increasing momentum, and a wake of destruction will be left in its path. Thus, a universal rule for hiking scree slopes could be said like this: “*Do not provoke the boulders to motion.*”

Perhaps you can already see the connection I intend to make. In the same way that hiking a scree slope must be undertaken with special care and precautions—especially when you are worn down and tired from the journey—so the endeavor to faithfully raise our children requires the same. Just as a hiker must earnestly endeavor *not to provoke the boulders to motion* lest they tumble down the mountain with a terrible and destructive force, so, as parents, we must take great care not to “*provoke our children to anger*,” lest we ourselves become, in part, culpable for setting our children upon a destructive course of life.

As we consider this holy command which God has given to parents, we will first define what it means to “*provoke a child to anger*.” Then, we will consider some of the most prevalent ways parents are inclined to violate this prohibition from the Lord.

What Does It Mean To Provoke a Child To Anger?

To provoke a child to anger is to behave toward our children, or around our children, in any ways which fan into flame their rebellion toward God and man. We can do this dreadful thing by either ***omission*** or ***commission*** in our parental duties. That is, we can provoke our children to anger by *failing to do what we should do as parents* (*omission*), or by *doing those things which we should not do as parents* (*commission*).

Provoking Our Children By Omission:

Provoking our children to anger by *omission* might look like failing to give our children the love, nurture, attention, discipline, care, encouragement, affection, protection, or support which God has called us to give. There can be times when these things are, for one reason or another, providentially out of our control. Those cases should not be considered a failure of the parents. But when these things are lacking due to our own negligence, we are guilty of provoking our children to anger. That is, we are guilty of promoting their rebellion toward God and man by our own disobedience to God's calling on our lives as parents.

Provoking Our Children By Commission:

Provoking our children to anger by *commission* happens when, either *toward* their children or simply *around* their children, parents engage in behaviors which promote wickedness, bring shame or harm to the child, or subject the child to situations and influences which are destructive to the child's well-being. When these things are present in the life of the family due to our own conduct, or our failure to protect our children from the conduct of others, we stand guilty of provoking our children to anger. That is, we are guilty of promoting their rebellion toward God and man by our own disobedience to God's calling on our lives as parents.

As we mentioned, there are many ways that this can happen in our parenting, and we will examine several of those shortly. But before we shift our focus, there are two important things for us to consider about the call to faithful parenting. These can be organized under the two broad headings of "*Finances*" and "*Temperament*".

1. Finances | Unless a parent is being neglectful of basic needs, the call "*not to provoke your children anger*" has ***nothing*** to do with finances.

Whether you are wealthy, or just getting by, has nothing to do with being a faithful parent. We tend to think that being a good parent primarily means providing our children with lots of the world's goods. But that is false. While earthly provision is certainly *an aspect* of faithful parenting (I Tim. 5:8)—and even a very important one—it is completely unbiblical to think that a family's financial position has any direct bearing on their success as parents. Buying your children nice things does not mean that you are *not* provoking them to anger. Likewise, not being able to buy your children the latest and greatest things does not mean that you *are* provoking them to anger. In God's incredible wisdom, the things our children need most from us are things that cannot be purchased by money. They are things which are just as available to the poor man as to the rich. Our children need our time, our attention, our love, our care, our protection, our instruction, our support, and more. These are things which are not determined by the amount of money we make, but rather by our willingness (or unwillingness) to put our own selfishness to death in the name of faithfully loving our children.

2. Temperament | Parents need to know, and know well, their child's unique temperament.

Generally speaking, one of the most important things a parent can do to avoid *provoking their children to anger* is to understand their child's unique temperament. There are some things which, if any parent does them, (or fails to do them), their children will surely be *provoked to anger* (i.e. abuse, neglect, etc.). But there are other things which are much harder to pin down, and must be handled with more nuance. This is because "*not provoking your children to anger*" is ultimately more of *a principle to be carefully applied*, than *a specific set of behaviors to be avoided*. While there are certainly some things which are universally unhelpful and agitating to a child's heart, there are a great many other things which will have different effects based on the unique

temperament of the individual child. It is the duty of every parent to know their children well enough to know not only *what they need from us*, but *how best they need us to provide those things to them*.

This applies to all aspects of the life of the family ranging from sleep patterns, to involvement in sports teams, or the amount of sugar a child can handle, etc. But for the sake of attempting to illustrate the principle in view, let me offer the following example. Some children *need* to hear their father's deep, strong voice address them when they are out of line. The strength and sternness (not harshness) of his tone is a grace to them that ignites an awareness in their heart that a line has been crossed and correction needs to be made. But there are other children who, for various reasons, will not be helped by a stern, strong voice. Instead, they may need their father to address the same issues and reach the same corrective ends, but with a more patient and gentle tone that handles the heart of his child with greater sensitivity and care. As I mentioned, this applies to all sorts of aspects of parenting life, but the point is this: *Our children all need the same essential things from their parents (love, discipline, provision, protection, care, etc.), but they do not all need them in the exact same way*. A parent who applies a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to their children runs a serious risk of provoking their child to anger by failing to carefully understand the unique temperament and needs of their child. Too much gentleness for a child who needs firmness will be unhelpful and leave that child unrestrained from their pride and folly. But too much firmness for a child who needs gentleness can break the spirit and instill all sorts of insecurities and anxieties into the heart.

The point is, we need to seek to understand the hearts of our children so that as we apply God's Word to their lives, and raise them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, we do so in ways that are best suited to the uniqueness of their hearts. This practice is actually very similar to the sentiment expressed by the Apostle Paul in I Thessalonians 5:14 when he said, *"And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."* In these verses we learn that while the principles and truths of God's Word do not change in the least, nevertheless, the way they are applied should be carefully considered based on the unique situation and needs of the person we are striving to care for. Parents should do the same with their children. But let's now turn our attention to some of the specific ways that parents can be inclined to violate God's prohibition given in Ephesians 6:4a.

What Are the Most Prevalent Ways Parents Tend To Provoke Their Children To Anger?

It is rather startling to realize, but the list of ways that parents might provoke their children to anger could be nearly endless. We could never identify every potential pitfall to avoid. This is exactly why we have said that the call for parents *"not to provoke their children to anger"* is best understood as *a principle to be carefully applied*, rather than *a specific set of behaviors to be avoided*. Even still, it will be beneficial for us to actually name and describe some of the *most prevalent* ways that we are all prone to fall short in this category. As we consider each one in brief, I invite you to join me in praying for God to give us humble and teachable hearts that are willing to recognize if any of these practices have found their way into our own parenting. Moreover, let's ask God to change our hearts and our practices wherever the ways we have been relating to our children are out of step with our heavenly Father's own wisdom and grace.

Controlling / Micromanaging / Smothering

Every loving parent desires to protect their children from harm. But sometimes we can take that loving impulse too far by attempting to control or micromanage the environment and outcome of all the details of our children's lives. We can try to protect them *from harm* in ways that, sadly, end up *doing harm*. When a child is being *smothered*, rather than appropriately protected, or *controlled* rather than wisely guarded, it is likely that seeds of resentment will begin to take root in their heart. Moreover, too much shielding from the world causes our children to be underprepared to actually serve Christ in the world when the day of their adulthood comes. Our parenting cannot proceed from fear, it must proceed from faith. And this means that our focus will be on preparing our children to wisely face the temptations and dangers of the world, not to anxiously hide from them.

Unrealistic Expectations (Especially Developmentally)

Sometimes as parents we can act a lot like Nebuchadnezzar. Do you remember in Daniel 2 when the king not only wanted his enchanters and magicians to tell him what his dream *meant*, but even to tell him what his dream *was* to begin with, (Dan. 2:5-6, 8-9)? After multiple threats, “*the Chaldeans answered the king and said, ‘There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand...’*” (Dan. 2:10). And do you know what? They were right. The Lord was able to do this by his omniscient wisdom and almighty power, but they were not. We all know as we read the story that it was wrong for Nebuchadnezzar to expect mere men to be able to do the impossible, and to threaten them with punishment if they did not succeed. But have you ever realized how frequently we do this very thing with our children? We rightly get angry at Nebuchadnezzar’s unrealistic expectations, but as Nathan once said to David, “*Thou art the man!*” (II Sam. 12:7). When we expect our children to be developmentally able to behave in ways that are not yet within their maturity or capacity, and when we threaten punishments for them not achieving our unrealistic demands, how are we any different than the tyrant of Babylon so long ago? It should not be any great mystery to us when our children’s hearts are provoked to anger by such unrealistic expectations. It is right for us to expect our children to behave in age-appropriate ways and to consequence them when they do not. But it is wrong for us to expect our children to behave like adults when, by God’s providential ordering of the world, they are presently still children.

Using Our Children As Props For Our Own Ego (Performative Childhood / Performative Religion)

When parents use their child’s behavior or performance as a mechanism by which to prove their own value, or secure their own identity, a pressure is placed on that child that is crushing to their spirit—even if, at first, the added attention seems to charm their heart. This is because the true authenticity of the relationship gets hollowed out by the selfish motives of the parent(s). That is to say, the reason ‘*why*’ the parents are doing the things they are doing is no longer truly for the child’s good, or for the child’s best interests, but rather for the propping up of the parent’s own ego. Sadly, in such cases, the child is being *used*, rather than *loved*. And although it can take time for the child to discover the difference, the day of that discovery will eventually come, and with it, much sorrow. Moreover, what happens when the child fails to perform in the eyes of others in the ways that their parents desired? What happens when the child’s behavior no longer makes mommy or daddy look pious, prudent, prim, or popular in the perception of those whose approval the parents idolatrously crave? Suddenly the house of cards will come crumbling down. And often, when it does, the child is made to feel ashamed, and as if they are a disappointment to their family. Not because the child has actually done anything wrong, necessarily, but simply because they failed to prop up the fragile egos of their parents. This must be avoided at all costs.

There is no aspect of life in which this dreadful practice is more destructive than when it comes to matters of faith. Teaching our children to engage in *performative religion*, or to ‘*act Christian*’ in order to make us appear pious, is a practice which yields untold devastation upon the heart. But we will cover that matter more carefully at the close of this chapter.

Absence / Workaholic

Some people say, “*It’s not the quantity of time that you spend with your children, it’s the quality.*” I genuinely understand the sentiment behind that popular statement, but, in reality, it’s actually both. *Quantity* will not matter without *quality*, and *quality* will make little difference without sufficient *quantity*. The point is, parents cannot be absent—whether physically, emotionally, or both—and expect things to go well at home. The father (and/or mother) who meets the needs of his family through hard work, but spends so much time *at work* and *away from his family*, and/or *remains distracted by work* and *emotionally unavailable* even when he is home, is in real danger of provoking anger in the hearts of his children. Even if a man’s hard work provides many earthly comforts and delights for his family, this imbalance will ultimately provoke the hearts of our children to anger because there is no earthly substitute for the unique role which God has assigned to the mother and father in the home. As the proverb says, “*Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it,*” (Prov. 15:16). If we would guard our children’s hearts from anger, we must spend an appropriate amount of time together with them, enjoying them, listening to their heart, and sharing in happy communion with one another as a family.

Harshness / Critical / Lack of Tenderness / Lack of Approval

If our goal is to avoid *“provoking our children to anger”* then we would do well to carefully guard our tongues as parents. It is not without good reason that the proverbs teach us that *“a harsh word stirs up anger,”* (Prov. 15:1). Harshness can happen in both *what we say* (i.e. mean, cutting, or critical words), or simply in *how we say it* (i.e. sharp and impatient tones, loud and angry voices). Content matters, but so does our delivery. Thus, parents must not give *“full vent to their anger”* lest they be guilty of conducting themselves in a way that the Word of God calls, *“foolish,”* (Prov. 29:11). Moreover, the parent who is reactive and *“rash”* in their communication will undoubtedly inflict deep wounds upon the hearts of their children: *“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing,”* (Proverbs. 12:18). At all times we must treat our words (and actions!) with care, realizing that they can either be used for great blessing or for great harm. For *“death and life are in the power of the tongue,”* (Prov. 18:21). Our children need correction, but they do not need harshness. Our children need addressed in their sin, but they do not need us to use our tongues like weapons.

Moreover, just as surely as *“a harsh words stirs up anger,”* so *“a gentle word”* is powerful too, (Prov. 15:1). It can cool the temper and soften the heart; it can bind a wound and give fresh strength to the weary. Words of affirmation and gestures of tenderness do much good to the hearts of our children—far more good than most parents realize. I do not have a specific Bible verse by which to authoritatively anchor this conviction, but it is my firm belief that parents should seek to have a *dramatically disproportionate ratio* between their words of encouragement and their words of correction. Their children should hear things like *“I love you,” “I am proud of you,” “well done,” “you are really good at that,” “you make so so happy,” “I love being your daddy,”* etc. at least ten times for every one correction. This will build up the child’s spirit and reinforce their confidence of our love for them, so that when the time comes that a word of correction is needed, the heart will be tender and receptive. But if we fail to encourage our children well, and instead, mistreat them with harshness, we should not be surprised when their hearts grow cold and closed toward us. For who would leave themselves open to repeated wounds? It is only natural to shield yourself from those who persistently inflict harm.

Failure To Protect Our Children (From Exposure To Inappropriate Material, Situations, or People)

Earlier we considered how being *overprotective* can provoke our children to anger. But the same thing can happen when we are *underprotective* as well. That is, when we expose our children, or allow them to be exposed, to people, situations, ideas, movies, music, etc. which are harmful to their well-being. It is our obligation to protect not only the bodies of our children, but also the hearts and minds of our children from things and people which would do them harm. And when we are neglectful of this as parents our children have a right to feel *“angry”* toward us because we have failed to fulfill an essential part of our God-given duty. Our children’s hearts, minds, and bodies are precious, vulnerable, and deeply impressionable. Children are not yet able to defend themselves, or even to know from what they should defend themselves. That is our responsibility as parents. And it continues to be our responsibility at various age-appropriate levels until they reach adulthood at which time they will assume the full responsibility for their own actions. As parents, we must not introduce our children to concepts for which they are not yet ready, nor allow them to be exposed to images, interactions, passions, worldviews, etc. for which they do not yet have the requisite maturity.

Inconsistency / Changing the Goal Posts

Imagine for a moment that a manager had clearly laid out a set of requirements for you. They identified what was expected of you, how to achieve those expectations, and made it clear that they would be following up to see if you have fulfilled what was required. So, you begin to work hard to satisfy those expectations and achieve those goals. You are giving it your best effort because you want to please your manager and be a good employee. But then, all of a sudden, after weeks of effort, your manager shows up and tells you that none of your effort matters because the expectations and goals have changed. So they proceed to give you new expectations and requirements and, once again, tell you they will be following up. So, you muster the strength to dig back in and try hard to meet those goals a second time. Then, a few weeks later, the same thing happens again. What would happen in your heart? What would happen to your motivation and desire to please your manager?

The same thing happens in our children's hearts when we are inconsistent with them. Most children who are being raised with love, want to please their parents. But anyone who is expending effort only to have that effort go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unrewarded is going to begin to feel unmotivated. Moreover, they may even begin to feel some level of anger because every time they try to do a good job, someone keeps moving the goal posts so that the child never really knows what a bullseye even looks like. Some of this is unavoidable as parents because we don't have full control over all the unfolding events of our lives. But even in a changing and shifting world, parents have the responsibility to provide an atmosphere of stability, predictability, and consistency for our children. This consistency will not only calm their spirit and stabilize their development, but it will motivate them to pursue the things their parents expect of them because they will have confidence that their effort will not be vain. In short, *inconsistency and instability create an atmosphere of frustration that stifles motivation.*

Failure To Listen To Our Children

Another way that children's hearts are often "*provoked to anger*" is by a failure of their parents to *listen*. It is certainly part of every parents responsibility to *'tell'* their children things. We do not parent by democratic vote, nor should we. But when we are always *'telling'* our children what they did wrong and why we think they did it, without stopping to listen to them express their own thoughts, they will begin to feel unrecognized, unknown, and unheard. Almost all parents need to acknowledge our strong tendency to overestimate our ability to rightly discern the motives and intentions of our children. If we are always *'telling'* our children why they did what they did, and especially if our *'telling'* is incorrect (as it will certainly sometimes be), the child will feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and as if their voice doesn't matter. That sort of crushing of the spirit never leads to flourishing in children. Instead, it often leads to depression, reclusion, and anger.

As our children age and begin to develop the ability to express their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas, parents must progressively shift from always *'telling'* their children things, to *asking their children thoughtful questions and then listening well to their answers*. Not only will this help the child develop the ability to understand and articulate their own inner life, but it will also help them know that *'we hear them'* and care deeply about the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and desires that they have as a precious member of the family. Parents should never abdicate their authority to their children by letting the child's thoughts and feelings control the decision-making. But neither should they rule over their children with a presumptuous mind, heavy hand, and closed ear. As the proverbs once again remind us, "*If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame,*" (Prov. 18:13).

Making Children Feel Like a Burden

Another pitfall common to parents is to inadvertently slip into a way of thinking and of ordering daily life that makes our children feel like a burden. That is, we think, speak, prioritize, and act as if all of the other stuff of life is what really matters and that the needs of our children are, more or less, in the way of us getting those things done. Fathers tend to do this with their work lives by always telling their children that they will have to wait, instead of telling their work that it will have to wait. Mothers tend to do this with their to-do lists, getting so caught up in 'getting it all done' and 'staying on top of it' that they lose sight of why they wanted to get those things done in the first place—which was to create an atmosphere of God-honoring love for their children. Whatever the case may be, it is easy for us to get our priorities garbled as parents. But this is not a small blunder. If we are not careful, over time this pattern of behavior in the home will communicate to our children's hearts that they are *'in the way'* of what really matters to us, and *'in the way'* of what is most important in our ordering of priorities. When a child becomes convinced that they are no longer a *delight* in their parent's lives, but rather a mere *duty*, or even a *burdensome and undesired detraction*, we should not be surprised when anger, resentment, and self-loathing well up in the child's heart.

Conclusion: Provoking Our Children To Anger By Religious Hypocrisy

I have intentionally saved this potential hazard for last, because it is one which presents a special danger to Christian parents that I do not want you to take lightly, or ever forget. Hypocrisy is when we pretend to be one thing in the sight of others, but are another thing behind closed doors. This can take place in many forms—all of which have the propensity to stoke anger in our children’s hearts. But the particular form of hypocrisy that I want to emphasize is that of *religious hypocrisy*—that is professing faith in Christ with our lips, but denying that faith in the patterns and practices of our life. Humanly speaking, there is nothing which will turn the hearts of our children away from Christ, his Word, his Church, and most of all, his gospel, more than for them to become convinced by the hypocrisy of their parents that Christianity is nothing but an empty charade; a play-act that you perform whenever other people are watching. And nothing will give our children this impression more than watching their parents pretend to be Christians in public, but live contrary to Christ behind closed doors. Or, to put it another way, for their parents to get dressed up in religion on Sundays, but to go around in the scandalous garb of the world Monday through Saturday.

Dear parents, we will all fall short of living out our faith as fully and zealously as we long to. But let it never be said of us—*especially in the eyes of our children*—that our faith appeared to them as *an insincere thing*. Even in your shortcomings as a Christian, let your children see the sincerity of your faith by inviting them into your repentance for those failures. When you make decisions that you later realize did not honor Christ, or commit actions which fail to express the truth and love of God, tell your children that you acknowledge your mistake and desire for God to help you cease to repeat it. Tell your children that you desire to repent of such things, to rest in the gospel of God’s promised mercy, and to strive by the help of the indwelling Spirit to continue on in your earnest pursuit of the holiness which brings glory to God. Let them know that even though your love for Christ fails to rise to the heights of devotion that it should, nevertheless, it is a true love for which you would gladly forsake all else.

If our children persistently see hypocrisy in our profession of faith as parents, rebellion toward God and man will most assuredly be fanned into flame in their hearts. And though it may be hard to hear, in that case, we will have ourselves to blame—at least in part—for stoking that dreadful fire. Therefore, in holy humility, let every parent be warned by God’s exhortation to us in Ephesians 6:4a, “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.*” Let us take seriously the exhortations of this verse. Not only the call to “*bring our children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,*” as we will consider in the next chapter, but also, and with fervent devotion, the divine charge to do all in our power never to “*provoke our children to anger,*” but rather to promote a genuine and undying love for Christ in their hearts.

No matter how weary we become, or worn down we feel, we must resist the urge to let our fatigue lead us to lean our weight upon the ‘boulders’ as we traverse the rugged road of parenthood. In all things, our aim should be to parent our children in such a way that we are able to say to them what the Apostle Paul could say to the church at Philippi:

“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you,” (Phil. 4:9).