

Introduction

Last week, Abraham helped us get our minds around the first aspect of this verse. Hopefully you remember that you, as fathers, are called to nurture your children in a gospel-driven way. And part of nurturing your children in a gospel-driven way involves not provoking them to anger. This week, what we’re going to do is round out the verse and explore the second half. If provoking my kids to anger is what I *shouldn’t* do, what *should* I do? And Paul gives you the answer here in the text: bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This will be the object of our study this morning.

First of all, we’re going to look at the command of Ephesians 6:4 in context and see, just like we did last week, that you fathers must nurture your children in a gospel-driven way. Secondly, we’re going to look at the command of Ephesians 6:4 in practice and see that you fathers must nurture your children through discipline and instruction.

The Command in Context

Let’s start with the first of these points, looking at this command: “bring them up”. What does this mean? How are we to understand it? Well, I think we can get some insight into this command by considering the context that surrounds it—both the immediate context of this particular section of Ephesians and the larger context of the book of Ephesians as a whole.

Immediate context. There are at least four clues from the immediate context relating to the meaning of this phrase “bring them up”:

1. Contrasted with provoking. We need to understand this command as being contrasted against all the negative things that Abraham warned against last week. To bring up your children is to declare war on your flesh which is naturally so good at provoking them to anger.
2. Defined by tenderness. An alternative translation of this text might be, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but nourish them—nurture them, shepherd them, develop them, tenderly care for them in the same way that Jesus cares for his church.” This isn’t cold and mechanical. It’s laden with warmth and love and compassion. (See Eph. 5:29)
3. Included in framework of self-denial. We must understand this command as being a manifestation of a father’s submission and self-denial.
4. Differentiated from culture. When Paul calls fathers to nurture their children, he’s calling dads to swim against the stream. This is a radical command.

Larger context. Now, let’s see what we can learn about this command from the larger context of Ephesians. I want to walk you through the book and point out how this command to nurture your children is the rooted in your own personal experience of the gospel.

1. Result of a father’s sonship (1:5). You are a son before you are a father. This informs how you think about your role in your family.
2. Result of a father’s identity as God’s workmanship (2:10). You were created to obey commands like this one.

3. Result of a father's exposure to God's love (3:18-19). You know love that surpasses knowledge. This exposure to the love of God transforms the way you love your family.
4. Result of a father's new life (4:17-24). Your old self delights in provoking children to anger. Your new self delights in caring for them.
5. Result of a father's responsibility to imitate God (5:1). Your own fathering will only be acceptable insofar as it reflects God's own fatherhood.
6. Result of a father's fullness (5:18). Spirit-filled fathers are utterly unique.

Your ability to obey this command is directly tied to your personal experience of the gospel. You must be gospel-driven. What fuels you as a father devoted to the nurture of your children is God's devotion to you, as evidenced through the fact that he redeemed you out of bondage to sin at the cost of his own Son and purchased you for himself. That's the gospel, and that's what drives you in how you lead and love your children. Fathers, nurture your children in a gospel-driven way.

The Command in Practice

But that's not all. God gives you some additional instructions. Fathers, nurture your children in a gospel-driven way, and do so through discipline and instruction. That's the second point. What does gospel-driven nurture look like? Well, apparently it looks like this: discipline and instruction.

Discipline. There is a tendency to think that compassionate nurture and faithful discipline are somehow mutually exclusive of one another. We tend to think that the biblical parent is the parent who finds the right balance between discipline on the one hand and love on the other hand. But that's not how Scripture sees it. Tedd Tripp makes the point, "Rather than being something to balance love, discipline is the deepest expression of love." This is the reality depicted by Proverbs 13:24.

God's own discipline of us is described as an expression of his love (Heb. 12:6). And the benefits of discipline for our children clearly reveal that it is loving to extend this means of grace to our kids (Prov. 6:23; 19:18; 22:15). To deprive our kids of discipline is to hate them.

But a few words are in order as to the nature of gospel-centered discipline. In a world where kids are abandoned, beaten, and abused, we need to make use of discipline appropriately. And in order to do this, I propose that there are three things we need to know:

1. Know your children's problem. They are natural-born sinners. If what you're trying to do in the discipline of your kids is get them to "be good", then you miss the point. What they need is not to "be good". What they need, is to embrace Jesus Christ, who was good on their behalf.
2. Know your children's potential. They are eternal souls. They're not lab rats; they're divine image-bearers. The implication here is that discipline must be respectful, corrective, and restorative.
3. Know your children's need. They must believe the gospel. If our kids are naturally sinful, and if they are eternal souls who stand on the brink of either heaven or hell, then our discipline must drive our kids to the cross.

Dads, if you're going to be faithful in nurturing your children in a gospel-driven way, then please do not deprive them of your discipline. Don't set your heart on putting them to death.

Instruction. But the thing about discipline is that it's not enough. It has to be coupled with instruction. Discipline without instruction is discouraging, and instruction without discipline is ineffective. Both go together. Both are mentioned here in our text.

I am absolutely convinced that as Paul wrote these words, he had in his mind Deuteronomy 6. This text is foundational in outlining the ways in which fathers are to take responsibility of the instruction of their children. Let's consider a few principles that we see here in this Old Testament passage:

1. Soak in God's Word. We see this in verse 6: these words should be on your heart. Fathers are to internalize them, own them, delight in them. You can't teach others what you yourself don't know.
2. Teach your children God's Word. In all kinds of settings, at all kinds of times, you must be committed to the diligent, disciplined teaching of Scripture to your children.
3. Surround your family with God's Word. It goes beyond teaching to creating an environment that is dominated by the presence of God's Word. Fathers need to see to it that their families are havens of Scriptural truth.

In this Deuteronomy passage, it's been pointed out that there is both a formal and an informal element at work here. Teach them when you sit at home—formal—and when you are walking by the way—informal. In other words, you should be capitalizing on informal, teachable moments, but those informal, teachable moments should supplement a structured, regular, disciplined time of learning. The Puritans called this “family worship”. A contemporary writer uses the term “faith talks”. Maybe you're more comfortable just calling it “family devotions”. But whatever you call it, you need to do it.

To bring all this together, then, I think we can conclude by saying that you fathers must nurture your children, in light of your own personal experience of the gospel, through the faithful exercise of discipline and instruction. Consider these take aways:

- Fathers and husbands: Embrace God's call on your life, and look to the gospel for grace, direction, and hope.
- Mothers and wives: Submit to your husband, encourage him, and support him in his responsibility.
- Children: Give thanks to God for your dad and pray for him often.
- Kossuth family: Surround the dads in our church with encouragement, prayer, exhortation, and help.