

Podcast 232 Fathers and Kids part 3

We have been talking about dads, and I would like to review a little bit. I think there are three levels of parenting. The first one is we parent in response to how we were parented. If we were parented negatively, we try to do better. If we were parented positively, we try to emulate. Level one parenting is legitimate, and natural.

Then, there's the second one, which is following the commands, which are based on, "Love your neighbor as yourself." We want to parent our children like we would like to have been parented if we were in their shoes. This is similar to level one parenting and we're also following scripture. When I consider God's commands to parents I think of Deuteronomy. I think of verses in Proverbs and in the Psalms. There are a lot of passages in the Old Testament and Jesus says that the whole law and the prophets were based on two commandments, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. So that's my second level.

Then, what we're also trying to also consider in addition to the first two levels is how to love our children as Jesus has loved us based on John 15:9 and the new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." In this level I find myself consciously asking, "How has Jesus loved me?" So that's where we're going today, and we're going to reflect on a few passages. Then, we're going to consider again how Jesus has loved us and try to emulate him as a dad and as a mom. Amen?

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for your word, and thank you for our experiences. Thank you for our upbringing. Thank you for our parents that you gave us or didn't give us because we know that sovereignly, you're able, even in hard situations, to impact us and to weave things together into such a way that it works together ultimately for our good and hopefully, for our children's good as well. So help me to teach well, and help Scott to be a good cohost, and pop in just when he needs to, and say what he needs to. Let us be vessels of your spirit today as you talk to all of us, where we are in our journey. Give us at least one thing we can take away and chew on today. In Jesus' name, amen.

As a dad, I have kept a keen eye out for verses in the Bible that have to do with fathering. I've talked lots about Deuteronomy 6:7, "Teach your children diligently." I've talked about Psalm 78. There are several passages in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, I'm focusing on Scriptures that have to do with family. Here are two big ones. The first is found in Ephesians chapter 6. The first four verses are addressed to children. Chapter 5:22-33 focuses on marriage, followed by four verses talking to children. Same thing in Colossians chapter 3. We have marriage verses, and then we have children verses.

This is one of the few, what I would call, positive verses in the New Testament for dads, and you'll see what I mean as I read them. In the American Standard version, which is the translation that I've read for several decades, says, "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord." I like it because it says, "Nurture them," and I take that to mean to win their heart and make them know that they're loved and accepted, and that I am glad they're a part of our family.

Then, it says chastening and admonition of the Lord, which I take to mean discipline, and instruction, or boundaries and parameters. They need to learn what's right, and what's wrong. There is a balance between the loving nurturing heart, and the chastening and admonition. If we just have chastening and admonition, that's out of balance. If we just give them lollipops and tell them they're wonderful all day, then that's out of balance.

The ESV, which is the translation I read predominantly now, reads, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Now, there's two new words. Instead of nurture, chastening, admonition, now we have discipline and instruction. So I thought, "I'm going to go to the Amplified Version and see what I can find there."

Ephesians 6:4 with the Amplified, which expands on each of the words. It amplifies them so that we can get a better sense of the verse. "Fathers, do not irritate and provoke your children to anger." Okay. That's very similar to the other ones, but we have a new word there, irritate. Don't push their buttons. Another version says, "Do not exasperate them to resentment." That's a different thought. That's something that I can chew on. What does it mean to exasperate my children and cause them to be resentful? Then, on the positive side, it says, "But rear them tenderly in the training and discipline, in the counsel and admonition of the Lord."

When I read all three of those, it paints a more accurate picture of what I am to do as a parent. When I just read one or two words, I have my own way of reading those words, and my own baggage that I bring to the table. The more I chew on it, and expand and amplify it, the better feel for it I receive. I want to focus on not irritating, not provoking, not exasperating them to anger, to resentment, to discouragement. On the other side, I want to rear them tenderly in the training, discipline, instruction, counsel, admonition of the Lord. So I have some parameters there. I have some guidelines to go by, and I think about these verses a lot. I have wondered, "What is it that exasperates children? What provokes, irritates, or exasperates kids to be resentful and discouraged?"

My conclusion is that what triggers this response in kids is when their parent's talk and walk don't match. I also find that exasperating. That kind of behavior also exasperated and provoked Jesus to anger. The Pharisees said one thing, and then

they did another. Jesus was all over them about that, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." (Luke 12:1)

Your children live with you 24/7, and they listen to you. If your walk and talk don't measure up, it is exasperating. Because of this awareness, I've tried to make a habit of asking their forgiveness when my walk doesn't match my talk. Because continual hypocrisy discourages children.

Another thing that I found, as a result of a survey I conducted at a family camp. When I was speaking with the kids, with the parents' permission, I gave them a little questionnaire. I asked them what kind of things discourage them. More than one child wrote, "They never tell me exactly what they expect."

Think about that. I'm going to illustrate expectations with two different homes and two different families I lived with when I was in seminary. I was a boarder with Elizabeth Elliott during my second year of school. When I moved into her home, she gave me a written list of expectations. All beautifully typewritten, on a half sheet of paper. I can still envision it, and wish I could find it, which stated her expectations for me. Of course, I'm 22 or 23 years old and carnal. I was not thrilled with this document. I thought to myself, "What is this? It felt like a concentration camp?" It came across to me like the law. By the way, I had a wonderful experience living an boarding in her home.

The next two years I lived with another family. It was closer to the seminary, and the rent was free. They were interested in having someone home when they were gone. I was their first boarder and they never gave me their clear expectations. You know what was interesting? I always wondered how I was doing. I mean, we still communicate to this day. We send Christmas cards and I love these people. I pray for them. I pray for their children. Looking back I can see that it was easier to live at Elizabeth Elliott's house because I knew where I stood all the time because I had the clear expectations spelled right out for me. I also was living with a woman whose walk matched her talk. She was extremely disciplined. She was loving, but she didn't preach something and then not practice it. It was a testimony to her faith to live at her house and observe her conduct. Meals were on time exactly when she said they would be. I'm the one that's usually running in late, asking for forgiveness and stuff, but she was consistent.

At the second home, there was a little bit of a strain all the time wondering if they liked the way I came in at night. I wondered if they liked where I parked my car. Because expectations were never spelled out there was always an uncertainty. When I think of Jesus, I think he has spelled out in His word what His expectations for us are very clearly, and He lived them beautifully. His walk and his talk matched. He was the word made flesh. Acts 1:1 says, "all that Jesus began to do and to teach." There was no difference in what He did and what He taught. But for all of us who are naturally

human, we're going to make mistakes, and I think if we can clear up our expectations and communicate them to the children everyone will be better off.

If our children are walking around on eggshells wondering, "Today, I get rebuked for doing this, and then tomorrow they let it slide, what is the clear expectation? I think that for all of us, the clearer we can make things for our kids, the better we're going to be able to avoid exasperating them, irritating them, and causing resentment.

The second family that I lived with were wonderfully gracious, and like I said, we're lifelong friends. But as I look back, it was easier to live at the house where things were clearly explained and consistently put into practice.

Colossians builds on that concept a little differently. It says, "Do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." The Amplified version for the Colossians 3:21 verse says, "Do not provoke, or irritate, or fret your children. Do not be hard on them or harass them, lest they become discouraged, and sullen, morose, and feel inferior, and frustrated. Do not break their spirit."

The Amplified version of Colossians 3:21 gives us more to chew on. Our children shouldn't feel inferior. They shouldn't feel frustrated. We don't want to break their spirit. We don't want to irritate them. When I first read this, I thought, "Oh boy, how can I apply that verse?" Then I also thought, "Wow, I have a lot of influence as a dad." There's a lot here to process. As a dad I have the potential to provoke, discourage, make my kids feel inferior and frustrated. However I want to use the authority that God gave me to build up my kids, not to make them feel provoked or discouraged."

That's one reason we're having this episode is to recognize we have a lot to consider. Sometimes the best thing to do is to ask your children questions some night. Take a nap ahead of time. Make sure you've eaten and have had your devotions, and then ask, "Can you guys just give me some feedback? I'm doing the best I know here, but if you can help me, I would like to know ways that I encourage you and ways that I discourage you. If you want to think about it, if you want to write me a note, any kind of communication would be wonderful." When we are humble and safe we can learn a lot from our children. We're not going to know what frustrates our children and what blesses them unless we can have a chance to talk to them and hear from them.

I'm going to close this section of the podcast with another story. I've shared this before. It's not a fun one for me to share, but in 1998, my wife sat me down. This was probably one of her first mama bear moments. She said, "Steve, I think you have a problem with anger." Now, the fact that she rarely confronted me on things like that, made me know this was serious stuff. The reason mama bear is stepping up to the plate is because she's seeing my anger have an impact on our kids.

My first thought was, "I can handle this. I'll work this out myself." I tried, and for a couple months, I did a little bit better, but I recognized I really wasn't making a serious dent in it, and her words helped me to confront myself and to look myself in the mirror. I thought, "She's right. I do have a problem with anger." I did what I thought I was supposed to do according to scripture. 1 John says, "Confess your sins one to another." I attended a church leaders meeting with other elders in the church and said, "I'd like to ask for prayer because I believe I have a problem with anger." I wanted them to pray for me, which they did.

Surprisingly, a couple of the men took me aside and says, "Nah, I don't think you do." Anyway, I knew I did. Then I read a book on anger. I listened to a talk about the spirit of anger. Through that process, I began to realize that there's a lot in the Bible about anger and there's a lot about the spirit of anger and how that can not only affect your family, but it can also be passed on. Your children can catch that same angry spirit from you. The thought that someday I might go over to my kids' house and see them barking at their children was discouraging and sobering.

After trying the strategies in this book, I also attended a seminar on how to manage anger. I was working at this problem the best I knew how. I finally knelt by my bed and cried out to God, and something in me changed. God gave me a different heart.

I then went to my first son during a long trip to look at colleges. He was 18. We were on the road for several hours, and I said, "You know Isaac, I'd like to ask you a question. I believe that I have been guilty of being angry and having an anger issue, and I want to ask you to forgive me. Whenever I ask you to forgive me, you're very quick to forgive me because I'm your dad, you're my son, and we love each other. But this time, I'd like you to think about a little bit and maybe see if you could remember times when I was angry and experiences we've had in the past." He remembered several times, and we talked them through, and he forgave me. It was a real breakthrough.

A few months later, I took my second son out and I confessed to him and acknowledged that I had this problem, and I think it really helped our relationship. Several years later, we were at a homeschool conference. Ethan used to do a talk called "Homeschooling: How I Survived It," and at the end, he and I would field questions. At that conference, I had three of my sons with me, and we all stepped on the podium to field their questions.

I stepped aside from the mic, and people would ask my sons, "Did you miss having a prom?" and things like that. But one lady said, "I have a question for Isaac" because he was attending seminary nearby. That's why he was there that day. She said, "What was it about your parents' faith that made you want to follow Jesus?" Boy, everything just stopped for me. I had one foot on the podium and one foot on the steps to the podium. I remember it was like in the movies. Everything in the room got

dark, and I could only see Isaac at the podium. I thought, "What is my son going to say?" It dawned on me then, this is the million dollar question. This is what every parent wants to know.

He didn't even hesitate. He said, "It was my father coming to me and asking my forgiveness that made me sense the depth of his commitment to Christ." Up to that point, my anger issue had been the low point in my life. And on this amazing occasion I saw how God had redeemed it. He turned it around and worked it together for good. It ended up helping my son and his faith walk. So that was a real special day. I never got over that experience.

May God help us all to not provoke our children and not discourage our kids, but to be open with them and to talk to them, and to find out what are the things that provoke them, and what are the things that encourage them. May God help us discover how can we build them up and what are things that we do that tear them down. Let's use the authority that God has given us to be part of the solution, and not a part of the problem.

Let's pray.

Father, help us as dads and moms. You're aware of our ministry, you might say, or what we're conveying to our family. Help us to be open. Help us to learn. Help us to be aware. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear what you're saying to us so that we can be saved from being discouraging and exasperating, and show us ways that we can train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord in a way that encourages them and helps them in their walk with you in Jesus' name, and deliver us from overwhelming thoughts of condemnation. Help us to just make things right with our kids and with you, and press on. In Jesus' name, amen.