

Christian Families (4) – Fathers (Kisumu Conference 2010) – Ephesians 6:1-4

There were two men who were each hired to look after a field. The first ploughed it very well. He dug the places for the seeds. He bought the best seed and watered it diligently. He trained a dog to guard the field. He dug out every weed he could find from the roots, every day. At last the harvest came, and there was a lot of very good fruit. His master rejoiced with him, and gave him some of the fruits to enjoy himself. The other man was lazy. He ignored the field, mostly. He bought bad seed, and let the weeds grow. He did not water it during the dry season. When the harvest came, the fruit was bad, and there was little of it. His master beat him and sent him away with nothing.

In the story, the owner of the field is God. Those two men were fathers. The seeds were their children. Their care for the field was how they trained their children. The fruit was the results of their labours in their children's lives.

Whose responsibility is it to raise children?

This verse begins with the word “fathers”. Not “mothers”, or even “parents”. When talking about how children are to be raised, the inspired apostle Paul asks who the fathers are, and speaks to them. Many people can share in the work of raising a child. We might have the help of grandparents, neighbours, school-teachers and friends. In the same way, in a factory there may be many workers hired. Some are hired to repair the machines, some are running the machines, some are purchasing the supplies, some are trying to search for customers. But ultimately, there is a manager who must give an answer to the owner for everything. He cannot make excuses and blame his employees. The truth is that fathers have been given complete responsibility for everything in raising children. Of course, if someone else does wrong to our child, then they will bear their blame before God. But it remains true that fathers have total responsibility. They are the ones who must answer for who else they involved, and how they involved them, and what those people decided to do. God has made us leaders of our families, and that means the “buck stops” with us.

We can see in this verse that it is the whole process of raising the child up that we are given responsibility for. Paul speaks of “raising” or “training” them up in the way of the Lord. He is not just thinking of one or two duties here or there – providing them with food, getting them a place in a school. He is looking at the entire process from infancy until maturity. Do we think that children will raise themselves, or that we can give the work to others, or that it means a few simple tasks? Paul tells us it is so much more!

We have been given responsibility, but not total freedom. We are not told to make a choice about how to raise them. We are only the stewards, and not the owners, of our children. Therefore Paul commands us to raise them in one certain way, instead of suggesting different ideas about different ways.

How are children to be raised?

What kind of “raising” are we talking about? Paul calls it the way “of the Lord”. What is the goal when we are raising our children? We aim to see them walking as mature Christians. We want them to know all that God has said, to have learnt to deny themselves, and to obey it all. Really, fathers are like pastors of mini-churches, in their own homes. They want to see their children taught all of God's law and all of God's gospel. They want to see them fruitfully serving God in their callings, finding and using the different gifts that God has given them in life.

Paul uses two particular words to describe this “way of the Lord”. The word “Lord” is reminding us again that the children are not ours; they are his. In heaven, there will not be fathers and mothers or husbands and wives; those relationships are only during this life (Mark 12:25).

The first of the words is “nurture”, or “training”, or “discipline”. These words make us think of a programme. There is a plan, and we are to guide our children in following it. It is a programme of care and guidance, to encourage them in the right way. This is both positive and negative. Positively, they are to be taught the right way, and encouraged to go in it, and shown a good example of the blessings that brings. Negatively, when they go the wrong way, they are to be corrected, and when necessary rebuked and even punished – but all with the desire to bring them back into the right way.

The second word is “admonition” or “instruction”. This emphasises the ideas of teaching, encouragement and guidance. Really both words Paul uses occupy a lot of the same space, but together they help to shine a fuller light on his meaning.

The task, then, is very big. It is not something that will happen if we pay little attention to our children. Of course, most men will spend a lot of time in their duties of bread-winning. This does not take away their responsibility! Practically, they must each day ask their wives about how the children are doing, to give both her and them advice and guidance. A father must make sure that he does not spend more time at work than necessary, remembering that paid work is only one part of his calling. Time must be set apart to spend with your children, to teach them and fellowship with them. Paul calls us to pay attention to detail; it seems that many fathers in Kenya have not yet learnt to pay much attention at all, let alone the details!

What dangers are to be avoided?

Paul tells us not to “provoke [our] children to wrath (anger)”. We are not to cause our children to become angry. This will be unhelpful in training them. Because our children are smaller and weaker than us, they have to bear with how we treat them. If we treat them badly, then we may make them angry. That anger may be stored up until it comes out in open rebellion one day. What things are likely to provoke children to anger and ultimately to rebellion?

- When we do not respect that they have natural limits as children, and demand too much.
- When we give them unnecessary commandments, too hard and too many for them.
- When we rebuke too harshly, too much, or give punishments more severe than was deserved.
- When we multiply the number of rules unreasonably.
- When we make them obey only for the sake of obeying (or our authority) – not because we have shown them that we are asking for something good, useful or right.
- By blaming them unfairly.

We have a Father in heaven who is a model for us. He does not treat us this way. He is gentle, gracious, generous, kind and patient. In the parallel passage, Colossians 3:21, Paul says: “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, in case they should be discouraged.” We do not want to discourage them from following the ways of the Lord, by making it seem an unpleasant, cold, hard way.