

BEING A FATHER GOD'S WAY

Where Have All the Fathers Gone?

Men are masters of the art of delegation. Give them a task, and they can quickly assign just the right person to do it. A simple phone call? Let the office assistant make the connection. Household chore? One of the kids can get it done. Something in men gravitates toward a well-ordered corporate structure.

Yes, delegation is a wonderful thing, but what about abdication? What if we assign away our own responsibilities? Another word for that is abandonment, and that is largely the sad state of Christian fatherhood today. Fathers are meant to nurture and admonish their children in the Lord Jesus, but many delegating dads have abdicated that lofty seat of authority. Let Mom or

the school or the church staff have the job. If all else fails, there is always the television set. Thus, we look up and down the pews and see wives, mothers, and single women in our churches – but few men. To offer a different spin to the Peter, Paul, and Mary song:¹ Where have all the fathers gone?

Paul on Parenting

In Ephesians 6:4, the Apostle Paul tells us where those fathers should be: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” This exhortation is repeated in Colossians,² so we know it is particularly important. Fathers are to spend plenty of time with their children, training and instructing them. This time with their children simply cannot be delegated.

Just the same, modern men have tried to do so. In an age of career advancement and unprecedented leisure time, the daily task of fathering has struck too many men as unglamorous. They have left their work to others,

¹ Pete Seeger, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” (1955).

² Colossians 3:21 (NIV).

and with these results: rising rates of suicide among minors, criminal activity and violence, drug abuse, and homosexuality. We have produced a floundering, confused, and self-destructive generation. This is no melodramatic overstatement, but the conclusion of any number of objective studies. There is no substitute for the work of the father in the home.

Authority: Abused versus Absent

So Paul, in Holy Scripture, pleads for fathers to rightfully give their children that time, and these words to the Ephesians were written in a context that would provide a striking contrast to the first-century world of Roman culture. The Roman father was an autocrat. He could order his children around as if they were cattle. The laws backed his ability to sell them as slaves if he so chose. He could even apply the death penalty in cases of extreme discipline.

Against that troubling backdrop, Paul presents a strikingly different parental perspective. He offers a radical suggestion that would cause first-century fathers to shine in a dark time, and it does the same in the twenty-first century. In our own world, the

problem is not so much the abuse of authority as the absence of it.

Some throw up their hands in surrender. How can anyone know how to be a father without good models? “I can’t be a good father, because, you see, I never had one myself.” Or, “I need guidance to be a father in this modern world, but who has time to take a course or read a book?” Paul puts the lie to these excuses. The beauty of this principle is that no earthly model is necessary, whether from experience or curriculum. We could be surrounded with the most derelict of fathering role models, and we could still excel. For our model is God the Father Himself, as Paul established earlier, in Ephesians 3:14. Everyone shares a perfect heavenly Father, so everyone can be a good earthly one. Let’s discover how we are to set out doing that.

Exasperation that Embitters

Paul begins with a negative command: Do not exasperate your children.³ In other words, do not embitter or

³ Ephesians 6:4.

provoke them. So far, so good; how many would admit to setting out each morning to provoke their children? But just the same, we do so without ever intending it. The heat of a million moments produces friction in many forms. The patterns of provocation intertwine; they grow as complex as the relationships themselves. Finally, father and child are mutually exasperated. Where did we go wrong?

Granted, laying down biblical principles will not keep everyone happy and hearty each moment of every day. As a matter of fact, the precepts of Christian parenting will provoke arguments and friction of their own. That's okay. We stand by the ways of truth even if we lose points in the home popularity game. Some exasperation simply comes with the territory.

But that is not the real problem, is it? We are more concerned with the frustration of our children that comes not from our wisest moments, but from those unwise things we say and do in our weaker moments. What is it that truly frustrates our children? What drives them to slowly smolder during their wonder years until they wonder if we love them?

Eight Exasperators

I can list eight sure-fire ways to exasperate my own children. Perhaps you have been there, too.

1. We exasperate them by failing to allow them to be themselves: children. We make demands or offer comments that fail to take into consideration their inexperience and immaturity. Sure, they can be silly. We can quickly point out all their fallacies because we are older and see the flaws, but they have a right to be children and to learn for themselves. To constantly draw attention to their immaturity is to slowly crush their spirits, undermine their confidence, and extinguish that lovely light that we call childlike. Let children have a childhood.
2. We exasperate them by treating them harshly and cruelly. Children are fragile. Whether physically or mentally, we can be overly forceful with them. A man may take pride in not being physically abusive, but what about verbal and emotional abuse? The tongue creates deeper wounds than the hand.
3. We exasperate by ridiculing them before others, particularly their peers. When our children's friends

are guests in our homes, perhaps we make a string of little remarks that seem inconsequential to us, but young ears hear them loud and clear. Young hearts store them, and exasperation builds.

4. We exasperate them by displaying favoritism and making unhelpful comparisons. All children are not the same. Qualities, abilities, and appearances are not the same. We exasperate our children when we play them against each other: “Why can’t you clean your plate like your brother?” or “Why don’t you apply yourself at school like your sister?”
5. We exasperate with our failure to express approval. Even in the little things, we sometimes withhold our blessings. It is all too easy. Perhaps we are absorbed in some television show, and our children bring us their drawings, craving a little credit and affirmation. “That’s fine, that’s lovely,” we mumble as we try to move them from our line of vision. We care about our children, but at that moment they certainly do not feel it.
6. We exasperate them with the arbitrary exercise of discipline. Inconsistency breeds confusion in our children, who need to know exactly where they stand. Too often we issue discipline by mood swing, so that

one moment this behavior means early bedtime, and the next moment it is easily overlooked. We fail to realize we are arbitrary and capricious.

7. We exasperate them by neglecting them and treating them as intruders. They perceive that they are preempting our real concerns; they are somehow holding us back from what we would like to be doing. How must they feel to be treated as the chains that clamp us down? They are the most precious treasure in our arms, not the albatross around our necks.
8. Finally, we exasperate them by pushing them toward our goals rather than their own. If we are not careful, we'll confuse the two. How many of us drag our children to the little league field to introduce them to their destiny? Do we hear our own voices from the grandstand? We overlay our personal agendas without nurturing our children's desires.

Such are the ways we exasperate our children, but this list is not exhaustive: there are many others. We exasperate through smothering them with overprotection, by holding them in the nest. We can protect, yet provoke. We exasperate them by making our love conditional. We