

The Christian Father

Men have received a lot of bad press in recent years. Almost every Monday night movie features a wife-abusing or child-molesting male. Those movies seem to imply that every man is a rat! That unspoken message is wrong. Many men today are good men who live up to their responsibilities to their wives, to their children, and to their communities.

Still, too many men are not meeting their responsibilities. I read in a newspaper column about "Deadbeat Dads" (divorced fathers who are not helping to support their children). Twenty-three million children are affected negatively by their irresponsibility!

Even fathers in intact families may not be doing all they can and should for their children. Average American fathers are said to give each of their children less than one minute of undivided attention per day! I doubt that these statistics give a true picture of Christian fathers. Nevertheless, even Christian men may have to be encouraged to meet their responsibilities as fathers. What are the father's responsibilities?

SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE FOR HIS CHILDREN

In 1 Corinthians 4:14-16, Paul wrote,

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you, therefore, be imitators of me.

His words suggest, as logic dictates, that a father should set a good example for his children and expect them to follow that example.

Being a good example is probably the most crucial thing that a father can do for his children. The father is to teach his children what is right. Above all, he must *do* what is right, because his children will probably follow what he does more than what he says. Children should develop good attitudes toward the home, the church, and the government. How are they to learn those good attitudes? The truth is, "Attitudes are more readily caught than taught." Children will probably absorb the father's attitudes, whether or not he verbally teaches those attitudes. He must exhibit the good attitudes he wants his children to have.

David was a "man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22), who stumbled, who sinned, and who was forgiven. He lusted after and committed adultery with Bathsheba, then had her husband murdered. What happened to his children? Amnon lusted after his sister, raped her, and then drove her away, shamed. Absalom killed Amnon. While David may not have been to blame, it may be significant that the sins of lust and murder recurred in the lives of David's sons.

In our day, social workers tell us that boys who grow up in homes where the father abuses the mother are likely to become wife abusers themselves. Even stranger is the fact that children who are abused by their parents are likely

to become child abusers themselves. Children are likely to think that their parents' behavior is "normal," even admirable, and to reproduce that behavior when they become adults, no matter how perverted the behavior may be in reality. Consequently, the old saying is good advice: "The best thing you can do for your children is to love their mother." That may also be the best thing a father can do for society, and the best guarantee that his children—in particular his sons—will grow up having good attitudes toward others, especially toward those of the opposite sex.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF HIS CHILDREN

First Timothy 5:8 says, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." In its context, this passage is not primarily referring to providing for one's immediate family, but it can be applied to that responsibility.

Just as the husband has the responsibility to meet the needs of his wife, so he has the responsibility to meet the various needs of his children. What are those needs?

Children have physical needs. They require food, clothes, and shelter. The Christian father should do his best to provide these necessities.

In some societies, however, the Christian man must stop and ask at some point, "Just how much do my children need?" How many toys, how many clothes? Too often, dreams become desires, desires become wants, and wants become "needs." Should a father keep on buying his children all these things?

Providing what the family needs does not require a father to buy everything that everyone else has. Giving children everything they want or everything their friends have is not even good for them. The Christian father should not teach his children the same lesson that society as a whole is teaching them: to be materialistic.

Children have additional needs that parents—and maybe fathers especially—should meet:

Children have intellectual and social needs. Proper education is necessary for children to survive and succeed in today's world. They must learn how to get along with others. They should

learn social customs, or "manners." Sometimes, children of otherwise good parents are never "socialized"—never trained to relate properly to others in society.

Children have emotional and psychological needs. For instance, they should understand that they are worth something. Then they can experience a sense of self-esteem or self-fulfillment. That, in turn, means that, most of all, children must know that they are loved, accepted, and respected—even when they have not done well, even when they have not succeeded. For a parent to reject a child because he makes a mistake in a game or because he brings home bad grades from school is almost criminal. Even when a child misbehaves and must be punished, parents must make sure that the child understands that they still love him and accept him as a person. I suspect that the failure of children to find unconditional love and acceptance in their own families is what causes them to seek love, acceptance, and respect in a gang.

Children also have what we may term "growing-up needs." They grow up so that they can someday be on their own. In many societies children grow up and, in a sense, grow away from their parents. They must, if they are to have homes of their own and function on their own. The parents' job is to facilitate their children's transition from being dependent on them to being (to a great degree) independent in the world.

Rather than helping to meet this need, parents often seem to want to keep their children from growing up. The parents' job is to make themselves unnecessary. If children are taught to function independently, they will grow up to call their parents blessed.

Children have spiritual needs. These, of course, are their most important needs. God wants them to develop faith in Him and to respect the Bible. That brings us to the third requirement.

BRINGING UP HIS CHILDREN IN THE DISCIPLINE AND INSTRUCTION OF THE LORD

Ephesians 6:4 says, "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." This is the "other side of the coin" to children's obedience to their parents. Children are taught to obey their parents "for this is right," and this

command is reinforced with a quotation of the fifth commandment in the law of Moses (Ephesians 6:1–3). Parents are not, therefore, given authority over their children without also being given instructions as to how they exercise that authority.

Let us notice three truths from verse 4.

First, Paul gave responsibility to “fathers.” This does not mean that mothers have no responsibility, but it does mean that fathers have the primary responsibility to see that their children are reared properly. This is just the opposite of the practice we sometimes see: Mothers take the major responsibility of teaching their children the Bible, taking them to church, and making sure they behave correctly.

Second, fathers are required *not* to do something: “. . . do not provoke your children to anger; . . .” (NASB; RSV). The KJV is similar: “. . . provoke not your children to wrath.” In the language of the NIV, fathers are told not to “exasperate” their children. The New English Bible says, “You fathers . . . must not goad your children to resentment, . . .” The Phillips translation has “Fathers, don’t overcorrect your children or make it difficult for them to obey the commandment.”¹ How might a father “provoke [his] children to anger”? By being too critical, too harsh, too strict, too demanding, or by being unfair.

I have heard that children of permissive parents often go astray. Studies also seem to show that parents who are too strict experience many of the same problems with their children. The ideal seems to be somewhere in the middle, between being too lenient and being too strict.

Third, fathers are told to do something: They are to “bring [their children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (NASB; RSV). Various translations can provide additional insights into this command. The KJV says to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” The NIV has “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” The New English Bible rendering is “give them the instruction, and correction, which belong to a Christian upbringing.” Phillips says, “Bring

¹See also Colossians 3:21: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart.”

them up with Christian teaching in Christian discipline.” In any phrasing, this verse gives the Christian father two related responsibilities.

(1) The Christian father must bring up his children in the instruction of the Lord. (See also 1 Thessalonians 2:10–12.) Parents are to teach their children what is right. That teaching involves—but must not be limited to—taking children to church services and Bible school. Children are to be taught at home. The father is to help in this teaching!

When should he teach? Deuteronomy 6:4–9 helps to answer that question:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Under the Law, the Israelite father was to teach his child anywhere he could, anytime he could, whenever an opportune moment presented itself. In fact, the Israelite father was to teach God’s law to his child *all* the time. The Law was to permeate the conversations and relationship between the father and the child, and was to be the dominant theme of their daily lives. Should not the Christian father, who follows the same God according to a better covenant, strive to do something comparable?

(2) The Christian father must bring up his children in the discipline of the Lord. Discipline means more than punishment. It means, as one version suggests, training. Parents should never be satisfied merely to lay out before their children what God wants them to be. They should do whatever they can—whatever is necessary—to see that their children live like that! How does one teach a child to ride a bicycle or to fish? Not just by reading a book to him about it! He goes with him and practices with him. Only by practicing the skill will the child learn and master it. In a similar way, the father should help, encourage, and lead his children to prac-

tice the skill of godly living; that is how they will master the skill of righteousness. That is what we mean by training.

However, Ephesians 6:4 also includes what we think of first when we say “discipline.” The Bible is clear that children are to be disciplined—or punished—when they are disobedient. They must be required to do what is right and be corrected when they do wrong. What kind of punishment is used is not as important as the fact that reasonable discipline occurs! Eli was punished because his sons were evil and he “restrained them not.” We should be sure that, when necessary, we “restrain” our children.

After the father has done the best he can, his children must still determine whether or not their lives will be dedicated to the Lord. The father should try to “train up [his children] in the way [they] should go” as Proverbs 22:6 says, but this proverb is not a guarantee that well-taught children will always follow the right path.

BEING PRESENT FOR THEIR CHILDREN

The Christian father ought to be there when his children need him. He should be around; he should be available. He ought to spend time with his children. Why? A father cannot fulfill his other responsibilities when he is not there.

Probably, the biggest cause of the problems our society is experiencing is the failure of the home. Crime, drug abuse, and violence all stem from failures in the home. The biggest cause of the problems in the home is the fact that so many fathers are absent.

So many homes are one-parent, fatherless homes! Statistics say that almost half of the children in the U.S. will spend at least part of their childhood in a home without a father!

Children need a father; the father should be present!

A home can have a father and still not have a father who is there! He may work long hours or have two jobs. His recreation may keep him away from home for hours or days at a time. Perhaps, even when he is home, he simply does not want to be bothered with the children; so, as far as they are concerned, he might as well not be home.

In this busy world, how can the father be with his children more? In many cases, it will be difficult. If his job gives him no time with his family, perhaps he should look for another job!

CONCLUSION

Suppose the Christian father tries to put all of these suggestions into practice. What will be the consequences? If he determines to live as a good example before his children, does his best to provide for their needs and to rear them in the instruction and discipline of the Lord, and spends time with his children, then he may have to make major changes in the way he lives!

Is it worth it? Think about your own child. God gave you that little baby, put him or her into your hands, and entrusted that soul to your care. To a great extent, that baby’s future—and even his or her eternal destiny—is up to you. What a great responsibility! What a great opportunity! Surely, the Christian man will be willing to make the changes necessary to accept such a great challenge! ◆

“Children have more need of models
than of critics.”
Joseph Joubert