

# **FATHERHOOD: RESPONSIBILITY AND PRIVILEGE**

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(1886-1952)**

ONE of the saddest and most tragic features of our twentieth century<sup>1</sup> "civilization" is the awful prevalence of disobedience on the part of children to their parents during the days of childhood and their lack of reverence and respect when they grow up. This is evidenced in many ways and is general, alas, even in the families of professing Christians. In his extensive travels during the past thirty years, the writer has sojourned in a great many homes. The piety and beauty of some of them remain as sacred and fragrant memories, but others of them have left the most painful impressions. Children who are self-willed or spoiled not only bring themselves into perpetual unhappiness but also inflict discomfort upon all who come into contact with them. [They] augur,<sup>2</sup> by their conduct, evil things for the days to come.

In the vast majority of cases, the children are not nearly so much to be blamed as the parents. Failure to honor father<sup>3</sup> and mother, wherever it is found, is in large measure due to parental departure from the Scriptural pattern. Nowadays the father thinks that he has fulfilled his obligations by providing food and raiment for his children, and by acting occasionally as a kind of moral policeman.

Too often, the mother is content to be a domestic drudge,<sup>4</sup> making herself the slave of her children instead of training them to be useful. She performs many a task that her daughters should do in order to allow them freedom for the frivolities of a giddy set.<sup>5</sup> The consequence has been that

the home, which ought to be—for its orderliness, its sanctity,<sup>6</sup> and its reign of love—a miniature heaven on earth, has degenerated into “a filling station for the day and a parking place for the night,” as someone has tersely expressed it.

Before outlining the duties of *fathers* toward their children, let it be pointed out that they cannot properly discipline their children unless they have first learned to govern themselves. How can they expect to subdue self-will in their little ones and check the rise of an angry temper if their own passions are allowed free reign?

The character of *fathers* is to a very large degree reproduced in their offspring: “And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image” (Gen 5:3). The *father*...must be in subjection to God if he would lawfully expect obedience from his little ones. This principle is enforced in Scripture again and again: “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Rom 2:21).

Of the bishop, that is, elder or pastor, it is written that he must be “One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” (1Ti 3:5-6). And if a *father* knows not how to rule his own spirit (Pro 25:28), how shall he care for his offspring? God has entrusted to *fathers* a most solemn charge, and yet a most precious privilege.

It is not too much to say that in their hands are deposited the hope and blessing, or else the curse and plague, of the next generation. Their families are the nurseries of both Church and State, and according to the

cultivating of them *now* will be their fruitfulness hereafter. Oh, how prayerfully and carefully should you who are parents discharge your trust!

Most assuredly, God will require an account of the children from your hands; for they are His and only lent to your care and keeping. The task assigned you is no easy one, especially in these superlatively<sup>7</sup> evil days. Nevertheless, if trustfully and earnestly sought, the grace of God will be found sufficient in this responsibility as in others. The Scriptures supply us with rules to go by, with promises to lay hold of, and, we may add, with fearful warnings lest we treat the matter lightly.

**Instruct Your Children.** We have space to mention but four of the principal duties devolving<sup>8</sup> on *fathers*. First, it is your duty to instruct your children. "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deu 6:6-7). This work is far too important to allocate to others: parents, and not Sabbath School<sup>9</sup> teachers, are divinely required to educate their little ones. Nor is this to be an occasional or sporadic<sup>10</sup> thing, but one that is to have constant attention. The glorious character of God, the requirements of His holy Law, the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the wondrous gift of His Son, and the fearful doom that is the certain portion of all who despise and reject Him are to be brought repeatedly before the minds of your little ones. "They are too young to understand such things" is the devil's argument to deter you from discharging your duty.

"And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). It is to be noted

that the “fathers” are here specifically addressed, and this for two reasons: (1) because they are the heads of their families and their government is especially committed to them; and (2) because they are prone to transfer this duty to their wives. This instruction is to be given by reading to them the Holy Scriptures and enlarging upon those things most agreeable to their age. This should be followed by catechizing<sup>11</sup> them.

A continued discourse to the young is not nearly as effective as when it is diversified by questions and answers. If they know they will be questioned on what you read, they will listen more closely; and the formulating of answers teaches them to think for themselves. Such a method is also found to make the memory more retentive,<sup>12</sup> for answering definite questions fixes more specific ideas in the mind. Observe how often Christ asked His disciples questions.

**Be a Good Example.** Second, good instruction is to be accompanied by good example. The teaching that issues only from the lips is not at all likely to sink any deeper than the ears. Children are particularly quick to detect inconsistencies and to despise hypocrisy.<sup>13</sup> It is at this point that parents need to be most on their faces before God, *daily* seeking from Him that grace that they so sorely need and that He alone can supply. What care you need to take, lest you say or do anything before your children that would tend to corrupt their minds or be of evil consequence for them to follow! How you need to be constantly on your guard against anything that might render you mean and contemptible in the eyes of those who should respect and revere you! The *father* is not only to instruct his children in the ways of holiness but is himself to walk before them in those ways and show by his practice and demeanor<sup>14</sup> what a pleasant and profitable thing it is to be regulated by the Divine Law.

In a Christian home, the supreme aim should be household piety—the honoring of God at all times. Everything else must be subordinated to this high purpose. In the matter of family life, neither husband nor wife can throw on the other all the responsibility for the religious character of the home. The mother is most certainly required to supplement the efforts of the father, for the children enjoy far more of her company than they do of his. If there is a tendency in fathers to be too strict and severe, mothers are prone to be too lax and lenient; and they need to be much on their guard against anything that would weaken their husband's authority.

When he has forbidden a thing, she must not give her consent to it. It is striking to note that the exhortation of Ephesians 6:4 is preceded by instruction to "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18), while the parallel exhortation in Colossians 3:21 is preceded by the exhortation to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (5:16), showing that parents cannot possibly discharge their duties unless they are filled with the Spirit and the Word.

**Discipline Your Children.** Third, instruction and example is to be enforced by correction and discipline. This means, first of all, the exercise of authority—the proper reign of Law. Of "the father of the faithful," God said, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Gen 18:19). Ponder this carefully, Christian fathers. Abraham did more than proffer<sup>15</sup> good advice: he enforced law and order in his household. The rules he administered had for their design the keeping of "the way of the Lord"—that which was right in His sight. And this duty was performed by the patriarch in order that the blessing of God might rest on his family. No family can be properly brought up without household laws, which include reward and punishment; and these are especially important in early

childhood, when as yet moral character is unformed and moral motives are not understood or appreciated. Rules should be simple, clear, reasonable, and inflexible like the Ten Commandments—a few great moral rules, instead of a multitude of petty restrictions.

One way of needlessly provoking children to wrath is to hamper them with a thousand trifling restrictions and minute regulations that are capricious<sup>16</sup> and are due to a fastidious<sup>17</sup> temper in the parent. It is of vital importance for the child's future good that he or she should be brought into subjection at an early age. An untrained child means a lawless adult. Our prisons are crowded with those who were allowed to have their own way during their minority. The least offense of a child against the rulers of the home ought not to pass without due correction; for if he finds leniency in one direction or toward one offense, he will expect the same toward others. And then disobedience will become more frequent until the parent has no control save that of brute force.

The teaching of Scripture is crystal clear on this point. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Pro 22:15; *cf.* 23:13-14). Therefore, God has said, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes<sup>18</sup>" (Pro 13:24). And again, "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying" (Pro 19:18). Let not a foolish fondness stay thee. Certainly God loves His children with a much deeper parental affection than you can love yours, yet He tells us, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (Rev 3:19; *cf.* Heb. 12:6). "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Pro 29:15). Such severity must be used in his early years, before age and obstinacy<sup>19</sup> have hardened the child against the fear and smart of correction. Spare the rod,

and you spoil the child; use it not on him, and you lay up one for your own back.

It should hardly need pointing out that the above Scriptures are by no means teaching that a reign of terror is to mark the home life. Children can be governed and chastened in such a way that they lose not their respect and affection for their *father*. Beware of souring their temper by unreasonable demands or provoking their wrath by striking them to vent your own rage. The *father* is to punish a disobedient child not because he is angry, but because it is right—because God requires it, and the welfare of the child demands it. Never make a threat that you have no intention of executing nor a promise you do not mean to perform. Remember that for your children to be well informed is good, but for them to be well controlled is better.

Pay close attention to the unconscious influences of a child's surroundings. Study how to make your home attractive, not by introducing carnal and worldly things, but by noble ideals, by inculcating<sup>20</sup> a spirit of unselfishness, by genial<sup>21</sup> and happy fellowship. Separate the little ones from evil associates. Watch carefully the periodicals and books that come into your home, the occasional guests that sit at your table, and the companionships that your children form. Parents often carelessly let others have free access to their children who undermine parental authority, overturn parental ideals, and sow seeds of frivolity and iniquity before they are aware. Never let your child spend a night among strangers. So train your children that your girls will be useful and helpful members of their generation and your boys industrious and self-supporting.

**Pray for Your Children.** Fourth, the last and most important duty, respecting both the temporal and spiritual good of your children, is fervent supplication to God for them. Without this, all the rest will be ineffectual. Means are unavailing unless the Lord blesses them. The “throne of grace” (Heb 4:16) is to be earnestly implored that your efforts to bring up your children for God may be crowned with success. True, there must be a humble submission to His sovereign will, a bowing before the truth of election. On the other hand, it is the privilege of faith to lay hold of the divine promises and to remember that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (Jam 5:16). Of holy Job, it is recorded concerning his sons and daughters that he “rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all” (Job 1:5). A prayerful atmosphere should pervade the home and be breathed by all who share it.

From *Studies in the Scriptures*.

- 1 The same sadly applies to our 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 2 **augur** – predict; become a sign that something is about to happen.
- 3 EDITOR’S NOTE: Several articles in this issue are addressed to both parents—fathers and mothers. To emphasize the father’s role, *parent* is sometimes replaced with *father* in italics.
- 4 **drudge** – person made to do hard, dull work; slave.
- 5 **frivolities...giddy set** – silly behaviors of foolish people, incapable of serious thought.
- 6 **sanctity** – holiness.
- 7 **superlatively** – in the highest degree.
- 8 **devolving** – passing down.
- 9 **Sabbath School** – Sunday School.
- 10 **sporadic** – happening only occasionally.
- 11 **catechizing** – instructing in the Christian faith by means of question and answer.
- 12 **retentive** – able to store facts and remember things easily.
- 13 See FGB 193, *Hypocrisy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY. 14 **demeanor** – way a person looks or behaves toward other people 15 **proffer** – offer for acceptance.
- 16 **capricious** – guided by whim or fancy, not settled judgment.
- 17 **fastidious** – difficult to please.
- 18 **betimes** – speedily; diligently.
- 19 **obstinacy** – stubbornness.
- 20 **inculcating** – teaching or impressing upon the mind by frequent instruction or repetition.
- 21 **genial** – friendly; cheerful.



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