

The Role of Dads How to Prepare for Parenting & Process Your Upbringing

Key Text: Ephesians 6:4

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Introduction

At first glance, it may seem odd that we are recommending for you to key in on what Paul says to dads in Ephesians 6:4. You're likely either in college or you're a unmarried adult. Maybe you want to have kids one day but that seems so far away, and you don't even have any marriage prospects right now! So why spend your time thinking about Paul's parenting instructions here? I can think of at least three compelling reasons why you should.

1. First, a text like this will help you *prepare* to help serve parents right now. As you learn what Paul's instructions are for them, you can come up alongside them and encourage them in it, even if you don't have kids. You can learn how to pray for them by learning what the Lord expects of them. And you can offer help that will be in line with what God tells parents, even though you're not the actual parent.
2. Second, a text like this will help you *prepare* to be a parent later on in your life, if it's something you desire. If you have aspirations to one day be a mother or father, it's very good to actually learn what is required of you from Scripture. What does it mean to actually be a parent? What expectations will be placed upon you from Christ? Getting this instruction ahead of time, rather than while you're a parent, is very wise and will benefit you incredibly. And, as you'll see at the end, there are ways you can even be preparing now to be a faithful parent later. A text like this isn't a completely comprehensive treatment of parenting, but it's a great start.
3. Third, knowing what God expects of parents helps keep you away from the extremes. What extremes? On the one hand, some people treat parenting very cavalierly. They want to have kids because they think they're cute or because they want to be fulfilled in family life. Kids are definitely cute, and family life is a joy, but these folks are tempted to trivialize the task of parenting. Parenting is hard work—rewarding to be sure—but it's hard. And getting a taste of what Paul says to parents helps these kinds of folks avoid the extreme of taking parenting too lightly. But there's another extreme that happens, especially in young married couples who are sensitive to the responsibility. They tend to react in fear to the responsibility or to overcomplicate the parenting process. They may delay children year after year because they're too afraid of the tasks involved and think they won't be able to fulfill it faithfully. They don't think they could possibly bear the weight of being a parent, because it seems like too much. A text like this will help them

dial in what God actually expects of them and will help them see that they don't have to be perfect to be a *faithful* parent.

4. Finally, this text will not only help you prepare, but it will help you *process* your own upbringing. Every single one of you at one point have had a father. He was either largely faithful or largely unfaithful in what Paul says here. And, as you'll see, parents have a lot of influence in the lives of their children. I've spoken to many in the college years who are dealing with difficult family situations and *didn't* have parents like what we see in this text. How should you process that? How do you handle the pain? How do you interact now that you're becoming an adult? What are some of the pitfalls you're tempted toward? So, at the end of this article, I want to try to help you process through your upbringing in light of what we see in this text.

In our passage before us, Paul's going to give some very simple, yet challenging instructions for Christian parents. He's concerned that the parents—and fathers in particular—realize they have an incredible opportunity before them to influence the next generation. But, as with every opportunity, if they miss it, there will be consequences. Their own sin will affect their children, and Paul wants them to avoid the devastating effects. So, he lays out some guidelines for these parents.

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

From these instructions, we can draw out at least three parenting principles. These principles will help us have a framework for parenting and will help us process our own upbringing. The first principle is taken from something about this verse that's a little puzzling, at least at first. Notice that Paul doesn't address both parents, at least not here in this verse. He only gives instructions to the dads. Isn't that interesting? Now, some have argued that this word for fathers can be used in context to refer to both parents, kind of like the collective word 'man' can refer to both genders. But I don't think that's what Paul is doing here. He just used the word for parents back in 6:1. Now he switches to 'fathers,' because, I think, he's singling out dads in particular in these instructions. But why? I think Paul is reminding us, and dads in particular, that fathers bear primary responsibility for the home.

Principle 1: Dads bear primary responsibility for the home (6:4).

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...

Now, before we really start unpacking this, let me clarify what Paul's isn't saying. He's not saying mothers aren't involved or that they bear no responsibility in the home. In fact, mothers are *very* involved, typically *more* involved in the life of the children than dad, and they have significant responsibility in the home.

There is no doubt Paul would affirm this. Just a few verses ago, children were commanded to obey both *parents*, not just dads (6:1), and honor *both* father and mother (6:2). If the child is to obey and honor his mother, it means the mother is involved in his upbringing. The mother is instructing and disciplining, and encouraging, and in it all, she is to be obeyed.

If we were to go outside of Ephesians to Paul's other letters, we'd see that Paul clearly puts faithfully raising children as one of the primary tasks of a mother. She, too, is called to "bring up children" (cf. 1 Tim. 5:10) as well as "manage her home" (5:14). In other words, it's not *just* the dad's job. It's very clearly the mother's job, too, and she often does *most of it*, according to Scripture.

So, why are only fathers addressed here? Paul wants to underscore that fathers bear primary responsibility for the household, and in particular for the spiritual growth of his kids. Just a few verses before these, Paul explained how the man as *husband* has an incredible responsibility to lead in loving and caring for his wife (5:25-33). And here we see that the man as *father* has another weight: the development of his children spiritually.

As the head of the household, dads have so much influence, and often he doesn't recognize it. Yet it's there, and he's *always influencing*—for good or for evil. Even the passive father is influencing, isn't he? It's just not toward zealous devotion to Christ. Dads are tasked by God to set the tone of the home, to set the pace for the family. They are created to be out in front, to be leading everyone toward *knowing, trusting, and obeying* Christ.

This initial principle convicts us as fathers, and would-be fathers. Paul won't allow us to think, "Ah, kids are a woman's job. My wife spends all day with them, way more than me, so she will take care of teaching them about Christ, of disciplining them, etc. I'm not that great with kids anyway. I support the family in my work. My job, my role, is the breadwinner." Paul won't let us fall prey to that kind of passivity when it comes to our kids. Would-be fathers take note. You don't get to just tote around the 'head of household' title, like a pompous king, expecting everyone to obey you. To be the lead comes with a burden. It comes with a responsibility to be invested in the life of your children. That's because, as the one who bears primary responsibility for our family, will give an account to the One who gave us the responsibility.

But what does it look like for dads to bear this kind of responsibility in a way that honors Christ? Paul's going to get to that in the back half of this verse. But before he does, he tells Dads what they should avoid doing: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." This brings us to our second parenting principle.

Principle 2: Dad's will be tempted to provoke their kids (6:4).

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...

What does 'provoke to anger' mean?

It means dads can parent in such a way that tempts the kids to become angry, to sin. In the OT, this was what Israel did to the Lord by her persistent idolatry over time: she provoked him to anger. But here, Paul's saying dads can do this by their sinful parenting over time. They can act and speak in ways that tempt their children toward resentment, toward anger, toward embitterment, and toward discouragement. It's so sad to see a child who has lost heart because of the provocation of a parent.

Now, this isn't to say, and I don't think Paul would say, that a dad is the *fundamental cause* of the child's anger. Believe it or not, those cute little children are actually very sinful all by themselves. They don't necessarily need any sinful provocation to become angry. Just cross their will, and you'll get an exhibition. And if you've been provoked by your parent, you've got to know that, in an ultimate sense, you are fundamentally responsible not for their provocation, but for your response to it. You may've been poked, but you chose to respond the way you did. But what's so helpful for us here is that Paul is acknowledging what we often feel. Parents, and dads specifically, can add fuel to an already burning fire and cause it to burn even hotter. Parents can and sadly often do provoke their children to anger.

And that's a weighty thing, isn't it? As a parent, it's a sobering reality that I can do things that make it much more difficult for my own kids to be obedient, to obey what Paul commanded them back in 6:1-3. I can act in ways, and speak in ways, that tempt my children to resent me...and not just me, but the resent the Lord, all by how I parent them. To say it differently, we parents can be guilty of causing our children, our little ones, to stumble. That's a sobering thought that needs to catch the attention of every parent, or would-be parent.

How does this happen?

So, it begs the question, then: how does this happen? That's easy: sin in the parent! We provoke our kids when we are selfish, proud, and ignoring what God has called us to. It happens when we're more driven by our own pleasures and selfish desires than what is best for our children, and most glorifying to God.

What does it look like in real time?

I know I'm often slow to connect the dots, so here are a few sadly common ways this happens in even the Christian home:¹

1. **Hypocrisy** – When you experience hypocrisy, doesn't that tempt you to be sinfully angry? The boss who doesn't live by the exacting rules he holds his employees to. The politician

¹ This list is modified from Lou Priolo, *The Heart of Anger: Practical Help for the Prevention and Cure of Anger in Children* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1997), 29–51; John MacArthur, *What the Bible Says About Parenting: God's Plan for Raising Your Child*, The Bible for Life (Nashville, Tenn: Word Pub, 2000), 134–146.

who locks his state down with mandates then breaks them the next day. This is hard outside the home, and it's very tempting inside it. Dad's often don't practice what they preach. And this is so easy and subtle. The other day, I found myself getting angry at one of my children for getting angry. And it took me a while to see it. Now, will even a *faithful dad* sin against his child, and fail to live up to the standards of Christ? Yes. But hypocrisy sets in when his sin goes unacknowledged. When he ignores it. When his wrongdoing is never or rarely admitted, when forgiveness isn't asked for in humility. This kind of hypocrisy will *quickly* tempt a child to anger and exasperation.

2. **Sinful Speech** – Any form of speech that's forbidden in Scripture, over time, will prove to be an incredible temptation for a child to resent their parent. When a dad tears down by constant scolding, when he finds fault with every little thing, when it's impossible to please him, when he seldom praises or encourages, or worse, mocks and insults his kids...you can be sure that it will have repercussions in the family. Sinful speech is another incredible temptation for children to become angry, resentful, and embittered.
3. **Sinful Discipline** – As we will see, disciplining your child toward godliness is very good and appropriate. But, obviously, wrong, sinful approaches to discipline will also provoke a child. If the parent disciplines when they are angry, flying off the handle, dragging the kid or throwing him around, this will obviously prove to be a very alluring temptation for the child. Even being inconsistent in discipline—one day they get a spanking for whining, then the next few days it goes unnoticed—will often provoke a child, because they don't know what to expect and perceive that they're being treated unfairly. And of course, being excessive in the discipline, or even abusing them, is horrific and provokes the child toward resentment.
4. **Overprotection** – As the child develops, the parent smothers them and hinders their maturation. They think they need to protect them from every little thing, that they need to continue making all their decisions, that they can't be entrusted with anything serious, etc. This kind of helicopter parenting often claims to be for the protection of the child, but is often motivated by some self-interest in the parent. And instead of actually protecting the child, it has the opposite effect. It causes withdrawal, and ends up tempting the child to bolt in anger.
5. **Unrealistic Expectations** – Sadly, sometimes parents set unreachable goals for their children that are utterly unrealistic. I've heard heart wrenching stories of children committing suicide because they could never live up to their parents' expectations and constant criticisms.² Challenging your kids to grow, take risks for the glory of God, and move beyond their comforts for their own good—these are noble things. But constantly pushing children beyond what they are capable of as you're trying to live vicariously through them will exasperate them. It will provoke children to anger.

² MacArthur, *What the Bible Says About Parenting*, 140.

6. **Neglect** – Finally, when a dad neglects his kids over time, it's hard to recover them. There are more obvious examples of neglect: the parent ignores them, doesn't pay attention to them, doesn't take an interest in them or the things that interest them. But there are also a few more subtle forms, too. When parents treat children as an intrusion into their otherwise happy lives, when they make them feel unwanted, as though they are in the way of things they really want to do—these are forms of neglect, too. And when kids are neglected, they are tempted toward all kinds of things, including being provoked to anger.

What a list, huh? So, what can you do about it now, to avoid becoming a parent who provokes your future kids to anger? The number one detriment, I think, is a parent's unwillingness to humbly admit sin to their children and repent of it. I think that single failure leads to long-term, repetitive hypocritical sin, and that, more than anything else, is what is exasperating. So, ask yourself: are you sensitive to sin *now* or do you hypocritically point out the sins of others while not seeing the very same sins in your own life? Do you take responsibility for sin and repent of it when you're convicted, or do you push back against conviction and correction, constantly justifying yourself? Are you pliable under the word of God, or do you stiffen your neck and think you have better solutions for your problems? Even more, when is the last time *you* sought someone's forgiveness, or said, "I was wrong and in sin," to another person? These are all signs of humility. If you're neck deep in pride now, as a single person, if you live a life of hypocrisy and insensitivity toward sin now, you most certainly will provoke your future kids to anger.

Let me take it one step further. Perhaps you yourself have been provoked to anger by a sinful parent. Yet you've internalized the hurt, and you've grown bitter, and now you seethe when you think about the injustices of your childhood. You feel so justified in your anger because you were legitimately wronged. When someone comes alongside you and says, "Friend, let me help you learn to forgive your parent," you immediately respond with all the ways they've hurt you, and why you can't forgive them, and why you're so right to be angry with them. But if you're angry now, and you refuse to deal with it, listen in: you'll affect your own kids one day with that same unchecked anger, provoking them in the very ways you've been provoked. The vicious cycle will only continue. And if you refuse to forgive them, you may even prove yourself to be an unbeliever (

So, cultivate humility now! Humility is a powerful way to influence your future children away from resentment and anger. It's a great way to model the gospel, and your own dependency on the mercy of Christ. Humble confession, repentance and dependence on Christ is life-giving in the home.

For dads, Paul knows this temptation to be proud and to provoke the kids is an alluring temptation. It's easy to fall prey here. Paul knows we're going to struggle with it as dads. We've got to know that we'll be tempted to act in ways to provoke our kids to anger so that we're motivated to avoid it. But that's not all Paul says in these verses. Dads, and would-be

dads (mothers and would-be mothers as well!), are called to positively pursue something else. This brings us to our third parenting principle.

Principle 3: Dad's must learn to nourish their kids with truth (6:4b).

⁴ ...but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The way the ESV translates this is that dads are to “bring up” their children. But the verb is actually what is used for ‘nourish.’

What does ‘nourish’ mean?

This verb might ring a bell if you’ve been studying Ephesians. Paul used it earlier to describe how a man “nourishes and cherishes his own flesh,” back in 5:29. He was telling husbands that they need to care for their wives like they care for themselves, and like Christ cares for his own body, by *providing nourishment*. It means we provide what is necessary for growth and development. And here, Paul uses this same verb to refer to how dads should raise their kids. Dads are to nourish them.

Nourishment certainly, at its baseline level, includes physical support. But in this context, that’s not Paul’s primary thrust. Dads are to provide the right growing conditions for his children *spiritually*. Do you see that? This means that the dad’s goal is for his children to come to know Christ, and to grow in Christ.

And that’s exactly where Paul goes next. Look at how this nourishment, this bringing up is supposed to happen: “bring them up in the *discipline* and *instruction* of the Lord.” Paul gives us two ingredients, if you will, in this nurturing process. The ESV translates them as (1) discipline, and (2) instruction.

What do the words ‘discipline’ and ‘instruction’ mean and what do they involve?

These two terms are very similar in their usages in the Bible, meaning there often isn’t a lot of difference between them. But both words share the same *range* of usages. And there are essentially two ways these words are used.

1. In some contexts, they refer *positively* to instruction or training. The idea in this context is that truth about Christ is articulated to the child, so that the child comes to fear and trust and obey Christ. The dad is called to proactively teach the child about Christ and his ways, helping the child learn to come up under his God-given authority as dad. Proverbs 1-9 is an expose of this kind of training, from father to sons. This kind of instruction and training is proactive, seeking to implant in the child’s heart and mind the truth of God, and so help him to dispel the lies he is prone to believe. So that’s the first way these terms are used.

2. But there is a second way these terms are used, and it refers *negatively* to warnings, to discipline and even to remedial punishment. Sadly, because we are sinners, we need to be taught that sin is evil and that sin will always lead to pain. And we need to teach our kids this as well. So, Paul tells dads to not be shy to warn their children, and to bring remedial discipline when necessary. The child has to learn that sinful behavior has negative consequences, and this kind of discipline reinforces these realities. But it also is redemptive and restorative, and its end goal mirrors God's end goal when he disciplines us. Although it is painful in the moment, its end goal is the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11). When God disciplines us, it evidences that he loves us and is training us. Without it, we would not be his sons (Heb. 12:7-8). That's why the Proverbs can say that "whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov. 13:24). And, "the rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Prov. 29:15).

So, we've seen that the dad (and, by extension, the mother, too) is called to nourish his kids in truth. But that raises yet another question.

What does it look like for a dad to nourish his kids with truth? What's involved?

There's no one way to do it in the Bible. The Scriptures don't command fathers to have daily devotions with their families (although that's a great application of these principles) or go out to breakfast each week with a different child for discipleship (although that's another good idea). However, the Bible does give us some core instructions to help us flesh out exactly what this should look like. A key passage that really clarifies this for parents is Deuteronomy six. In this text, Moses is telling the people of Israel how to remain faithful to the Lord who saved them, and how to pass down that faithfulness to their kids. And what he says helps us see what all is involved in teaching our kids truth.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, 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. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

1. Notice **the truth must first be on the parent's heart** (Deut. 6:5-6).

⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

Before he ever commands parents to teach (6:7), he first commands the parents to both love the Lord themselves (6:5) and for their own lives to be governed by his word (6:6)! To *love* the Lord is to be in a genuine relationship with him. To love him means that we

have first received his merciful love for us in the message of the gospel. We've tasted this by faith, and we know we don't deserve it. His love has humbled us and, now, we love him *because* he first loved us (1 John 4:19). We are *devoted* to our King, because he has redeemed us from enslavement to sin, he has forgiven and cleansed us from all our defilements, and he has promised to be with us now and forever in incredible faithfulness. The dad needs these truths pulsating in his heart, so that his devotion to Christ continues to increase with all he is—all his heart, soul, and strength. That's what Moses means when he says the word needs to be "on your heart" (6:6). The Scriptures should be the ultimate authority in the dad's life. His kids need to see him repenting under the word, heeding its warnings, embracing its promises, coming up under its discipline, delighting in its wisdom, and seeking to diligently apply its principles to his own life. They need to see dad's commitment to the church and his willingness to serve and disciple. Without this zealous pursuit in his own life, his instructions to his children will fall flat in hypocrisy, and will become a means to provoking his them to anger. But when the truth is convictional for him, his love for Christ will drive him to be increasingly faithful as a father, even when life in the family is difficult. That's because his ultimate love is not his kids or his wife—it's Christ. If a dad is going to faithfully nourish his kids to love the Lord, he needs to love the Lord himself, and model this for them.

2. Notice also, that once truth is internalized by the parent, Moses says the **truth is diligently taught** (6:7).

⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children...

Moses tells the parents not just to teach, but to teach diligently. Their passion for Christ is to come out in proactive and regular teaching of their children. This implies there will be some formal instruction taking place in the home and under the supervision of the parents. *How* this formal instruction is carried out is left up to the parent, but Moses says it should be done diligently.

3. And finally, notice that there aren't just formal instruction times. Moses also says the truth should be constantly coming out of the parents **in every situation of life** (6:7b).

⁷ ...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.

We sometimes call this "teaching in the milieu of life." If the parent has internalized truth, the truth will come out in the various situations of life. Dad will be showing how the truth comes to bear in multiple scenarios. This means a father's instruction has to progress from the formal into the informal and the kids need to see how it impacts real-life scenarios. Dads need to be constantly asking, "How does truth apply in *this* situation," and then articulating it to them, modeling it for them, and even involving them in its application alongside him.

To help bring all this together, let me give one example of what this process could look like. The dad wakes up early and spends an hour in his daily Bible reading. He's reading through the Bible each morning, and he's turning each passage he reads into prayer before the Lord. That particular morning, he reads of Christ's crucifixion in Luke 23. As he is praying and meditating, he is reminded of how profound a servant Jesus actually is that he would lay his own life down for him. And he is reminded of how Christ has called him to imitate him in that very way.

A bit later, at the breakfast table, he engages his children about the death of Christ and its meaning. He describes what he read that morning to his family, and how it impacted his own heart. He gives some examples of ways he intends to serve others that day because of what Christ has done for him. He encourages his own children to think about a few ways they can serve each other today in light of what Christ has done for us.

That evening, when he gets home, he notices the laundry isn't completely folded. So, he gets his son and commissions him to help him fold the remaining clothes that his wife didn't have time to get to. He reminds the son of what they talked about that morning—how Christ has served them in the cross, and that he wants us to imitate him, and that servanthood for the good of others is really what being a man is all about. After the son helps the dad fold the clothes, they go do something fun together.

This is just one very simple example of what it might look like for the word to first be on the dad's heart, then taught more formally at the table, then spilling out into application in the evening. Day after day of things like this will make a tremendous impact in the life of the child.

Conclusion: Preparing & Processing

So, we've seen in Ephesians 6:4 a few parenting principles, especially as it relates to fathers. Dad's bear primary responsibility for the home. Dad's will be tempted to provoke their kids to anger via their own sin. And dads are tasked with the tremendous privilege of learning to nurture their kids in the truth.

As we wrap up, let's give some attention to how you might practically prepare now, and how we should process our own upbringing.

Preparation for Parenting

As we've seen already, the best way to prepare to be a faithful parent is to constantly grow in being a faithful Christian. Whatever is in your heart, whatever governs you, will come out and influence your future family. Will it be the word of God? Does truth, now, govern your life? Are you learning to commune daily with Christ, to abide in him, and to follow him in your *current* areas of responsibility? Are you humble under the word, and quick to repent

when you see incongruity in your life? Who you are, at your core, is most important. As you come to resemble Christ, you will be a tremendous influence upon your family.

Beyond this, are you learning to articulate your convictions to others? It's one thing to have convictions and live by them. It's another thing to know how to articulate those convictions to others from Scripture. You can prepare now for the future influence you will have in your family by learning to help others develop and grow in biblical convictions.

If you really want to challenge yourself, get in involved in the children's ministry now, as a single person. Learning to interact with kids, learning how to talk to them, watching other seasoned parents help other children, will be so beneficial to you. And you'll really be forced to learn to articulate truth *simply* and clearly. So challenge yourself by serving the children of our church!

Finally, I would also encourage you to befriend a specific couple with kids in the church. Offer to help them in the various tasks in and around the home. You provide some practical help, but you'll also get the chance to really get to know a family and watch how the parents parent. You'll be able to observe their strengths *and* weaknesses. You'll be able to see the joys and burdens. And no doubt you'll be a real encouragement.

If you're thinking, "Man, I'm just not a children kind of person. I'm not good with kids." Keep in mind, we are learning to imitate our Lord, who loved children. Kids felt at home around Christ. They wanted to be with him. He gladly received them, taught them, prayed for them and blessed them. His humility—his lowliness—was attractational to them. He noticed them and listened to them and loved them. In this way, he shows us what he means when he calls us to love the "least of these" in our body.

Processing Your Upbringing

As we've worked through this text, you've no doubt been thinking about your own dads, your own childhood experience, and perhaps even your current circumstances. For some of you, a text like this reminds you *of the positive* experience you had as a child. You're encouraged and humbled by the godly influence you've received from you dad. He wasn't perfect by any stretch, but he was faithful. He was humble. He repented when he was wrong, and he set a Christlike trajectory for the family. How should you respond to this?

- You should **humbly rejoice** for this incredible mercy. The temptation is to take it for granted, or just assume this is how it is for everyone else. I know many in this very ministry that *long* to have had what you had. They talk to me in tears as they undo years of abuse or neglect. But that's God's story for them. The point is not for you to feel guilty about your blessed upbringing. The point is for you to rejoice. God's story for you is that he gave you faithful parents. You should be profoundly thankful for that influence and humbled to think about the legacy that's been passed down to you. God in his great

mercy chose you to have such a blessed childhood and upbringing. What an undeserved privilege. Let it humble you into rejoicing.

- Beyond being thankful, this reality of having faithful parents needs **motivate you to be zealous** to take the baton and go even further than your dad or mom. Build on the foundation of generational faithfulness that was laid for you, like young Timothy did (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). Be zealous to grow in Christ yourself, to hand the baton off to your own family one day, and to your own disciples. To whom much is given, much is required!

For others of you, a passage like this may be incredibly painful because your dad (or mom) may have intensely provoked you to anger. Now you see with clarity why your upbringing was full of difficulty and devastation. An incredible temptation for you is to be filled with discontentment, anger and bitterness, especially as you realize the negative effect your dad or mom had on you. You may *still* be angry even now. How should you process this?

- The Bible is clear that **sin is evil and destructive**, and it does have consequences. Unfaithful parents are no exception to this. Parental abuse, neglect and abandonment will leave scars behind. Many of you have told us about what you've faced growing up, and it breaks our hearts. We've grieved with you and have walked with you as you've processed through the pain. If you've never opened up, please know that we're here to help you. We want to lead you to Christ so that you can experience the joy and transformation that he can bring.
- As heart-breaking as it is, the good news is that **your upbringing is not ultimately determinative**. This means you aren't doomed to a life of sinful anger and sin yourself just because you had unfaithful parents. You were provoked to anger, yes, but that doesn't mean you have to stay there. In fact, every moment, you *actively choose* how you will respond to your parents, and to the Lord who stands behind them.
- So, the first step is to **entrust your upbringing to the Lord**, the sovereign and good God who loves you and, in his mysterious wisdom, chose this path for you. In his great wisdom, he chose this path of difficulty for you, in order to lead you to himself so he could pour out his infinite mercy on you, if you'll trust him. When we get to the kingdom, we won't question the path he took for us to get there. He didn't spare his own Son in order to redeem you. And he will one day freely give you all things. Your difficult upbringing is something the Lord will use to bring about good and blessing and great glory, but we have to trust him *now*. If you belong to Christ, you're not ruined, or irreparably damaged. You are a new creature in Christ, and God will teach you what it means to be a faithful, humble parent.
- The next step, then, is to work **toward repenting from any sinful anger, resentment or bitterness and forgiving your parent from your heart**. We have an entire resource devoted to the topic of forgiveness that I would encourage you to work through. It will

help you understand what forgiveness is and how to extend it, even when it feels impossible to do.

- It's important to remember the glorious reality in all this: regardless of how faithful or unfaithful your earthly father is/was, **you now have a perfect Father in heaven**. He perfectly cares for you and perfectly models how to parent for you. As you grow in your relationship with him, he himself will teach you how to be a faithful parent. He will teach you how to imitate him.
- Even beyond that, the Bible says we can have **spiritual fathers in the faith**. You may not have a biological father who is currently involved in your nurturing, but it doesn't mean you can't have a spiritual father right here in this church that can nurture you and help you. Paul called Timothy his son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2) and he also called an older woman in Rome his spiritual mother (Rom. 16:13). This shows us that right here in the church others can "fill in" those familial roles for you in discipleship if you have unbelieving or unfaithful parents.
- By God's grace, if you have children, you can resolve to stop the legacy of unfaithful fatherhood, or motherhood, and reverse the tide. You can bring redemptive influence into your home for generations to come. Let this motivate you to repent of your anger and truly press in for the sake of all your future children and disciples in the church.