

Sermon 43: Ephesians 6:4: The Priestly Duties of Parenting

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INTRODUCTION

Recently Kevin Deyoung in a blog article called 'The World is Catechizing Us Whether we Realize It or Not,' commenting on his recent experience of watching the Olympics he writes, 'You couldn't watch two weeks of the Olympics—or at times, even two minutes—without being catechized in the inviolable truths of the sexual revolution. Earlier in the summer, I watched parts of the Euro, and you would have thought the whole event was a commercial for rainbow flags.' His point is right, we are being catechized whether we like it or know it or not. He issues this pertinent warning:

'It is worth remembering David Well's famous definition: worldliness is whatever makes righteousness look strange and sin look normal. Here's the reality facing every Christian in the West: the money, power, and prestige of the mainstream media, big time sports, big business, big tech, and almost all the institutions of education and entertainment are invested in making sin look normal. Make no mistake: no matter how good your church, no matter how strong your family, no matter how gospel-centered your Christian school or homeschool, if your children and grandchildren are even remotely engaged with contemporary culture (and they are), they are being taught by a thousand memes and messages every week to pay homage to the rainbow flag.

The Christian family, Christian church, and Christian school must not assume that the next generations will accept the conclusions that seem so obvious to older generations. We must talk about the things our kids are already talking about among themselves. We must disciple. We must be countercultural. We must prepare them to love *and* teach them what biblical love really means. We must pass on the right beliefs *and* the right reasons for those beliefs.

We must prepare our children—and be prepared ourselves—that following Christ comes with a cost (Luke 9:23). The Jesus who affirmed marriage as between a man a woman (Matt. 19:4-6), the Jesus who warned of the *porneia* within (Mark 7:20-23), the Jesus who warned against living to be liked by others (John 12:43), this Jesus demands our total allegiance (Matt. 28:20).

The world is already busy promoting its catechism. The only question is whether we will get busy promoting ours.¹

We are continuing our look at our parenting responsibilities. We are still looking at Paul's charge to parents from Eph. 6:4, 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' We are using the paradigm of representing Christ as a prophet, priest and king to cover our main responsibilities. We have looked at the area of prophet and the key areas of teaching that are involved in our parenting, today we want to focus on our role as priests. In particular we want to focus on the parental responsibilities of praying for our children, sympathizing with them, and family worship.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-world-is-catechizing-us-whether-we-realize-it-or-not/>

Praying

A priest we know is someone who intercedes on behalf of others. They stand before God on behalf of others, representing them, praying for them, seeking blessing for them. Christ as our great Highpriest has done this and is continuing to do it still. All Christians are now royal priests who have a priestly function, not in terms of making sacrifices but certainly in terms of ongoing prayer for others. A well-known picture of priestly parental prayer is Job 1:5, he was a righteous man and he had ten children. He was a diligent father who had his children's spiritual wellbeing at heart. 'And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.'

Praying for our children is something that parents do well and badly. On the one hand, there is no one who will pray for your children like you will. You have brought them into this world, you have provided for them, you love them dearly and know them better than they know themselves. Your heart is deeply invested in their wellbeing. If God moves in the hearts of our children in answer to prayer, then that burden you feel, that deep conviction you carry, those tears that drive you to your knees, that is a welcome start in prayer. Imagine we had the same burden for the lost or for the church, imagine how we would pray. Parents have a natural advantage when praying for their children. What wisdom on God's part that they have been put under your care! Turn those burdens and those concerns into earnest prayer.

But as parents we can also pray badly, what I mean is we take our fears and instead of bringing them to heel by faith, we begin to doubt and question God. Our faithlessness can breed a desperation that lashes out at our spouse, ourselves, and even God. Our feelings can be so strong that instead of thinking clearly we fret, instead of applying the truth we know we fixate on the problems. Instead of casting our cares upon the Lord we hold on to our burdens and add to them. I have seen it happen that when our loved ones are in some sort of danger because of desperation there is a readiness to adopt any technique and believe any promised silver bullet, and they turn away from the clear teaching of the word. We can be more loyal to our loved ones than to God. Sometimes we can find it is easier to pray for others and believe the promises of God for others because we are not so emotionally invested.

As parents we have great encouragement to pray for our children. If we are to pray in accordance with God's will, we know that it is God's general will that believing parents have godly offspring, Mal. 2:15, 'Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.' We also have the highest confidence that our prayers are being heard for we pray in Christ's name and not our own. There are multiple commands to pray to God as our Father who hears and cares and is willing to answer. Christ Himself intercedes for us, and the Spirit too when we know not how to pray.

What should we pray for our children. Job teaches us to prioritize their relationship with God and that their sins are forgiven through faith in Christ. Pray for their future spouses. Pray for their future friends and that they would choose their friends wisely. Pray that they would be spared a life of sin and know Christ from the earliest years. Pray for their future vocations and spiritual gifts to be used to the glory of God. Pray for their holiness and the

good deeds they will do to the glory of God. Pray for wisdom for yourself as parents to model and teach the truth.

As parents we are to pray with perseverance. God may use a delayed answer to prayer to challenge the idolatry of your heart towards your child. We see many examples in scripture of parents who have had to prioritize the will of God above their children, think of Abraham called upon to sacrifice Isaac; or Hannah who had to honor her vow to consecrate her only child Samuel. Every parent has had to learn to give their children to God as belonging to the Lord and not us. As parents who know exactly what our children have been taught from our lips, and so their sins are aggravated as more serious because we know how much knowledge they are rejecting if they choose to sin. Many a parent has feared that their children have committed the unforgivable sin and will be beyond redemption. If your child is not walking with the Lord, remember, while there is life there is hope. We do not know whether our children have committed the unforgivable sin and so we should not stop praying for them. Whether your child is a believer or an unbeliever do not stop praying. One blogger puts it this way, 'If our children are doing well spiritually, they are not out of the woods. If they are not doing well, their story is not over.'²

Prayer is important not only as we plead to God for our children but as a model for our children as well. There are many powerful stories of praying parents, both fathers and mothers in church history. Because today is Father's Day I will share the influence of the prayer life of John G. Paton's father, here is how one biographer reflects on it: 'There was a "closet" where his father would go for prayer as a rule after each meal. The eleven children knew it and they revered the spot and learned something profound about God. The impact on John Paton was immense.

Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, were blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, "He walked with God, why may not I?" (Autobiography, p. 8)

How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend." (Autobiography, p. 21)³

Sympathy

Hebrews 4:14-16, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' One of the key characteristics of Christ's priesthood is His sympathy. He has worn our humanity, He has felt the weight of pain, He has endured temptation, He has entered the fray, we would highlight that He has suffered more personal attention and greater temptations than any other human beings have had to face. This experience means He is well equipped to know our pain and is sympathetic and readily receives us.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dont-give-up-praying-for-your-children>

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/john-g-patons-father>

We have a priesthood like Christ's but unlike Christ's. Yes we are called to be sympathetic because we share a common experience with our children. However, where Christ was sinless we are sinners. It is this experience of knowing what it feels like to be under sin and in our case in sin and forgiven of sin that we are well equipped to be in sympathy with our children.

It is sad to admit but as sinners we love to hold the reins of power over other sinners, we love to be the ones who examine another's life for their sins and stoke our righteous anger as we wax lyrical on the innumerable ways in which they have failed. Our duty to hold the mirror of the law up in order that they might see their need for Christ becomes a criminal investigation where the magnifying glass and the microscope are called into action. Parents daily have the battle of fearing and hating sin in their children's lives yet they must imitate Christ in His sympathy and ready mercy.

Remember that we are all sinners, we are all weak, we will all break the rules and will all need the support of other believers to help pick us up off the ground. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. This means that you must be in sympathy with a child's needs and sinfulness. They have many needs and desires as you do. Where we would find it very easy to apply a military discipline to another's diet but a libertarian ethic to our own, we must make sure that we not only avoid hypocrisy but a callousness where we have no sympathy for another's legitimate desires. As sinners we all know that there are aggravating circumstances which increase the difficulty of our temptations. We are to be in sympathy with the difficulty our children face and not indifferent to the difficulty. When they sin and they bring hard consequences upon themselves we must not be cold with a ready I-told-you-so; but like Christ have pity and compassion. We must understand God holiness and love so that we will not be too lenient nor too severe.

This pity will inform how you make rules in the home, how you react to sin, how you discipline your children. Those who have pity will not seek to publicly humiliate their children as part of their discipline remembering that discipline is an act of restorative love not a dehumanizing confidence in shame to change the heart. When a child sins they wound their consciences and bring the consequences of their actions against themselves. There is nothing worse than hurting from sin and then having to face a cold parent who offers no pity, no comfort, no loving discipline. God does not switch off His pity as He is being holy, He has a holy pity towards sinners, a pity that does not compromise holiness but a holiness that is ready to receive and restore.

This means that we must also forgive as God forgives. When we come to God and confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us. He is faithful because He keeps His promises and He is just because He forgives the debt that has been justly paid in the death of Christ. As parents we face a difficult temptation of forgiving but not forgetting. Because we have the task of helping our children learn from their mistakes the past is a necessary concrete lesson. The trouble is we don't let go of our anger and hurt over the sins of the past. Remember as parents we often take sins personally and see them as a form of betrayal. But the Bible is clear that God forgives and forgets. Ps. 103:11-12, 'For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.' Micah 7:19, 'He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.' Is. 43:25, 'I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.'

Devotions

We have looked at our priestly duties of praying for our children, and sympathizing with our children, now we want to talk about helping them learn devotion through private, public and family worship.

Let us think in particular about family worship. Family worship is a distinctive of the Protestant Reformation. Before the Reformation the height of devotion was the monastic life, ordinary life with our ordinary family lives and vocations was thought to be less. The Reformation rediscovered the dignity of labor but also the dignity of marriage and the family. Contrary to views on celibacy marriage and sexual intimacy in marriage is a good thing, and children are a blessing from the Lord. Joel Beeke informs us that the average Puritan family had 7 children with an average of 3 surviving infancy. These children were usually staggered 2 years apart for the sake of the mother. There is a famous wood engraving of Martin Luther at family worship playing a lute as his family sang along. Luther taught that we can glorify God in the home obeying the commands of God in being good husbands and wives and children better than a monk in a monastery. This led to a development in the practice of what we now call family worship or family altar. There is no formula in exactly how you must do family devotions. It is a parent's duty to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but it does not give us a formula as to how this should look. This gives us liberty in structuring family worship to suit the routines of each home.

Before we speak about family worship we must add that family worship is not something that we do in the place of private and public worship. We must still gather as the Lord's people weekly, and we must attend to our own private devotions. Family worship is the training ground for children to learn and a vehicle for the family to worship together.

Historically there were five main parts to family worship, the reading of the Bible, prayer, singing, catechism and conference/discussion. An early impulse from the Puritan movement was the insistence that every child should be taught how to read in order that they can read their bibles. Early laws on all children learning basic education came from this Christian instinct. Readings from OT and NT, reading from an understandable translation, including the children in the reading, these are all ways to incorporate bible reading. Scripture memorization was added to this as well. When we homeschooled we used scripture memorization aids that used songs to help kids remember the Bible.

Then there is prayer. It is encouraged that each member of the family learn to pray publicly. And all the various forms of prayer in the Bible should be used at one time or another. Prayers of praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and confession. Prayers for the sick, our government, the lost, our missionaries, our church, our neighbors, and importantly the daily needs of the children so that they can learn to bring the issues they face to God. They are to pray before a test, about a conflict on the playground, and remember to ask your children to pray for your needs too.

Singing was something that Luther gave back to the people. During the Medieval era singing was something you watched more than something you participated in and it was often in Latin and not beneficial to the people. Luther and others were important hymn writers who wrote simple songs to enable the people to learn through the medium of singing. We often remember what we sing. I will confess that because I did not grow up in a Christian family I always felt odd singing and so did not incorporate it into our family culture. This is something I regret.

Catechism is a practice that was revived from the early Church. Before someone was baptized there was a rigorous process of catechism. This was a process of learning using

answers and questions. At the time of the Reformation it was felt that there was a terrible amount of biblical illiteracy and a great need to be taught the basics of the faith. Nearly every Reformer and even pastor would write their own catechism. Many of the catechisms cover the content of the gospel looking at our guilt, the grace of God and our ensuing gratitude and covers the Apostle's Creed; the Ten Commandments; and the Lord's Prayer. I would recommend Errol Hulse's Catechism for boys and girls; Spurgeon's Catechism which is a Baptist version of the WSC; the Heidelberg Catechism; or the New City Catechism. We used a family devotional structured around the WSC.

Conference means the discussion that goes on around the bible reading or catechism. At this point it should probably stress that a relaxed environment for discussion is very important. We want to create an atmosphere where children feel free to share their feelings, bring their dumb questions, seek clarification, and engage in natural conversation.

Historically the father has led the family worship, but there has always been individual involvement from each family member. Family worship has usually happened after the evening meal before the dishes get done, but some families because of their routines have had their main devotions in the morning before school. We found when we were homeschooling that Lynn would do a devotion at the beginning of each school day and I would do the evening devotion. As our boys got older we encouraged them to have personal devotions in the morning and then we had family devotions in the evening. If you really struggle for time or ideas there are many resources available that you can buy. We have used daily devotionals by good pastors; Jesus Freaks, a modern day version of Foxe's Book of Martyrs; weekly devotions on each question of the catechism; the book Leading Little One's to God; missionary stories, and other resources. We have even occasionally used some online material like Bible Projects overview of books of the Bible. There is no rule to what shape family devotions takes, the key is consistency, that each person is engaged, that you are doing it sincerely and not merely ticking boxes, and that we are reaching and engaging with the hearts of our children not merely getting them to go through the motions.

The world is catechizing our children whether we like it or not, we do not have an option to coast and do nothing, we must be proactive in winning the hearts and minds of our children for Christ. We cannot guarantee the salvation of our children, the Lord will save whom He will save, but we have the highest confidence that through our feeble prayers, faulty examples, and fumbling attempts to help our children know Christ, God uses means. So let us pursue being like Christ in His priesthood as we pray for our children, sympathize with them, and lead them in family worship.