

Showing Honor

The Rev. Dr. Peter
G. James

Ephesians 6:1-4

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*It was a
master stroke
when God
invented kids.*

Chris and I have been grandparents for 10+ months now. When I was a new dad, I missed a lot. I was so immersed in the task of raising children in a sleep-deprived state that I failed to fully appreciate the wonder of small children. As a grandparent, I now see parenting with a fresh set of eyes. I marvel that a human body can be made so small. I'm intrigued that a 10-month-old can exhibit so much personality. Allow me to illustrate. Our grandson, Luke, shows a decided preference for clocks. That's right, clocks of all shapes and sizes. We have a large clock in our kitchen with big numbers. Every time Luke motors into the kitchen on all fours, he pauses at the clock, becomes completely still and raises his hand, as if in a salute. I thought of bringing him up here to illustrate this unique character trait, but he doesn't always do it on cue. I wish I could get inside his head to find out what it means. Maybe it has something to do with one of my all-time favorite songs by Chicago, "Does Any-body Really Know What Time It Is?"

It was a master stroke when God invented kids. Life would

be so boring without kids. Their unbridled enthusiasm, inquisitive nature and childlike trust bring joy to life. Children exploit my playful side. I take myself so seriously. Preaching the gospel and leading a church is heady stuff. Children remind me not to take myself too seriously. Don't misunderstand me, we take God seriously, but not ourselves too seriously. You should see us with Luke. We get down on the floor on all fours and proceed to act like blithering, doting grandparents.

Our attention over the past two Sundays has been centered in a portion of Paul's letters called "the household codes." We examined husband-wife relationships two Sundays ago in Ephesians 5:21-33. Last Sunday, we looked at master-slave relationships from Ephesians 6:5-9. Servants are included in this household code, since families not only included a married couple with children but also extended family and servants. This morning, on Father's Day, we're devoting ourselves to parent-children relationships from Ephesians 6:1-4.

Paul begins this 6th chapter by directing children to obey parents in the Lord. Teaching

Obedience to parents is standard operating procedure for any civilized society.

obedience to children has two benefits: it promotes well-being in families and teaches children obedience in relationship to God. Obedience is an important dimension of Christian discipleship.

The little prepositional phrase at the close of verse 1, “for this is right,” is Paul’s way of communicating that obedience is part of the natural order of things. Obedience to parents is standard operating procedure for any civilized society. One distinguishing mark of a decadent society is when children exercise disobedience toward parents (Mark 13:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:1-2).

Paul appeals, in verses 2-3, beyond the natural order of things to the 5th command in the Old Testament, “Honor your father and mother.” Honor means to hold in high esteem. When couples exchange rings in a wedding ceremony, they recite the words, “I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow. With all that I am and all that I have, I honor you.” The ring exchange symbolizes the high esteem with which they hold each other.

I recently finished David McCullough’s biography on John Adams, America’s first vice president and second president. We forget that the 56 patriots who affixed their names to the Declaration of Independence did so at significant personal cost to them-

selves and their families. They literally put their lives on the line. That’s why the Declaration closes with the memorable words, “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

After addressing children in verses 1-3, Paul turns his attention to fathers in verse 4. Although Paul uses a word for fathers in verse 4, clearly he has both parents in mind, since verses 1-3 are addressed to parents.

In first century Greco-Roman culture, fathers were given particular responsibility for disciplining children. The Greek word for discipline—*paideia*—doesn’t have merely a punitive function but a pedagogical role in nurturing and educating children to full maturity.

When Paul reminds fathers of their God-given role to exercise discipline, the first thing he cites is the exercise of restraint. Self-control is another name for it. Paul warns fathers not to provoke their children by being excessively harsh, severe, arbitrary or unfair or by constantly nagging or humiliating them. Fathers can break the spirit of a child this way. Paul writes in a comparable household code in Colossians that if fathers are harsh in the discipline of children, they can cause children to “lose heart” (Colossians 3:21).

In verse 1, Paul instructed children to obey their parents

Children are like sponges. They soak up everything parents do.

in the Lord. Now, in verse 4, he calls upon fathers to nurture children in the discipline and instruction *of the Lord.* Fathers fulfill their role as Christian disciples in the way they exercise discipline and instruction.

Fathers bring up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord with words as well as actions. I learned early on as a young dad, sometimes to my dismay, that my kids mimicked my behavior. They not only imitated my good traits, but less flattering ones as well. It was a wake-up call to walk the talk. Children are like sponges. They soak up everything parents do. James Baldwin, an American author from the early 1900s wrote, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

Kay Hymowitz, in her provocative book *Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers their Future and Ours*, claims there has been a dramatic shift in the way our culture views child-rearing today. So-called experts have been encouraging us to regard children as miniature adults, as rational, autonomous human beings who know what is best for their own lives and have little need for adult instruction. Parents are no longer teachers; they have become allies, partners and companions to their children. Parents are needed to empower their children, to boost self-

esteem and provide them with information to help them make informed choices.

This new philosophy is based on the faulty assumption that children already possess the values, beliefs and self-awareness that goes into good decisions. These experts suffer from amnesia about what children and adolescents are really like! I, for one, did not possess the requisite values, beliefs and self-awareness to make informed choices when I was young.

Hymowitz believes the most pernicious effect of this new development is that children are less able today to negotiate the passage into adulthood than their predecessors. This book warns us about what can happen when culture gives up its traditional mission of teaching children. Parents today want to be friends with their children and are reluctant to assert authority. I can appreciate how much parents want to be on friendly terms with children, but let me remind you that children have other friends, but only one set of parents. Parents, what your children need most that no one else can give them is your gift of parenting.

We have this attitude in Christian circles that the primary institution for imparting Christian values to children is the church. Nonsense! The primary locus of Christian formation is in the home.

***If we want
our children
to go in the
way of the
Lord, we'd
better go that
way ourselves.***

Families cannot expect the church to pick up the slack if the Christian message is not modeled in the home. The same principle holds in public and private school education as well. Parents are their children's most indispensable teachers.

If parents are their children's primary teacher, then some parents need to step it up! If we want our children to go in the way of the Lord, we'd better go that way ourselves. If parents want children to have faith, the best gift they can give children is their own spiritual growth and development. Why not resolve to grow as a disciple in the practice of daily prayer and Scripture meditation by using our Daily Devotional?

People repeatedly tell me that children are the future of this church. No, a thousand times, no; adults are the future of this church. If we want children to have faith, it starts with adult believers.

People will sometimes say to me, "I want to expose my children to church." When people talk this way, the practice of immunizing children comes to mind. When children are inoculated against disease, they are given a small dose of the virus. This allows their bodies to build up immunities against the virus but not enough of the virus to actually contract the illness.

The same thing happens when parents expose their

children to church. Some parents bring their children to church just enough to expose them to religion in small doses but not enough to actually produce faith in them. They experience just enough faith to be inoculated against the real thing.

Do we expose our sons and daughters to music or sports? No, most certainly not, not in a high achieving region like Northern Virginia. We totally immerse them in it.

The same principle holds for faith. If, as parents, family and the church want our children to have faith, we must make the Christian life our first priority.

If the home is the primary center of spiritual formation, it's the job of the church to support and buttress what is taught in the home. That's why we've made next-generation ministry a priority in this church. We have two full-time staff working with elementary age kids and three full-time staff working with youth. I have a passion for the next generation. Maybe it's attributable to my age. In the middle of my life I care deeply about whether the next generation will, using the words of Psalm 78, "... put their hope in God." We tell this good news to our children "...so the next generation will set their hope in God" (Psalm 78:7).

