

Fathers: The Original “Children’s Ministers”

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“What do you have for my children?”

As a pastor, I have been asked that question numerous times by well-meaning parents. Essentially, they want to know what ministries the church offers for children. Their desire for the spiritual good of their kids is commendable and some children’s programs are very useful. Sadly, though, too many parents are only looking for a ministry that will substitute for what they should be doing in their home. I eventually will look at the father and, as charitably as possible, ask, “What do *you* have for your children?”



I speak directly to the father because Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Even though the word for “fathers” could be translated “parents” (as in Hebrews 11:23), “fathers” seems to be the more appropriate translation since God’s design for the home is loving, sacrificial male leadership (cf. Ephesians 5:22-25). Paul meant no insult toward mothers, as is evidenced in his call for children to obey and honor their *parents* in Ephesians 6:1-2. But in a home where both the father and mother are Christians, the father is ultimately responsible for the spiritual upbringing of his children.

In a sermon on Ephesians 6:1-4, Pastor John Piper illustrates the father’s obligation to lead:

(I) If there is a problem with the children at the Piper household, and if Jesus knocks on the door, and Noel comes to the door, he is going to say, “Hello, Noel, is the man of the house home? We need to talk.” Not that Noel bears no responsibility, but I bear the leading responsibility in seeing that the children are brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.¹

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul first tells dads what they must *not* have for their children: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.” A child will sometimes get mad because his father calmly and reasonably restrained or punished him. Paul’s concern, though, is the overbearing father who causes

his child to become embittered and hostile. This exasperated child is unnecessarily driven to frustration.

A father could do numerous things to instigate such anger. For example, he could demean his child with statements like, “You’re so stupid.” Or, a dad could repeatedly discipline for certain behavior without ever addressing the child’s sinful heart and need for Christ, consequently robbing the child of hope and enflaming resentment.

Even not laughing with children (who *will* say and do hilarious things) might incite anger. Beatrice Cleland, in her poem “Portrait of a Christian,” was writing about her pastor in the following stanzas, but these words are easily applied to the father/child relationship:

*Not only by the words you say
Not only in your deeds confessed
But in the most unconscious way
Is Christ expressed.*

*Was it a beatific smile,
Or holy light upon your brow?
Oh no, I felt His presence when
You laughed just now.*

Positively, what must fathers have for their children? “Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” There is undoubtedly a sense in which fathers must “let kids be kids” (playing outside, telling knock-knock jokes, etc.), but they need to know what God requires of them. Boundaries are required to teach a child right and wrong, to show them their need of a Savior, and to help them to have a disciplined life.

Furthermore, fathers must instruct their kids. Most educate them on the mechanics of throwing a baseball, and some dads are even obsessed with teaching their boys how to make funny sounds with different parts of their bodies. How much more important is it to diligently teach children Scripture? Teachable moments occur regularly, and taking 10 or 15 minutes after supper to discuss something from the Bible is a simple strategy that might lead a boy or girl to Jesus. Is there really anything more important a dad could desire for his child?

So, fathers, what do *you* have for your children?

¹ From the sermon titled, “Marriage Is Meant for Making Children...Disciples of Jesus, Part 2,” located at www.desiringgod.org.