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**Fathers and
Children**

Margaretta Mary Woodriff

Author

DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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FATHERS AND CHILDREN

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:4

One of the great hopes many of us have is that one of these days men will grow up and start acting as men should. Of all the great crises of our times, perhaps the greatest is the unwillingness of men to take their responsibilities.

Today I want to talk specifically about how important it is for us men to think of ourselves as fathers. All sorts of forces in our society nowadays are influencing men to avoid the role of father.

Now, many men become fathers in the biological sense, and in most cases at an early age. Many men also father children without the slightest intention of ever marrying. This is clear from today's growing number of single-parent families headed by women.

So, on the purely physiological level, many men are fathering children. And in addition to the fact that many of them are not assuming responsibility for the care of these children, many also are standing idly by, while their own flesh and blood

are destroyed by abortion. Often we think only of women making the choice for abortion, and we forget that in each case there is also a man, a father who apparently is pleased that the human being that has resulted from his activity is destroyed before it ever sees the light of day. Many women who seek abortions, in fact, do so not only with the consent of the fathers of their preborn children but also because those fathers have encouraged them to; in some cases, the fathers have practically forced the women to get abortions.

Because many men have become so irresponsible, we are experiencing a massive impoverishment within our country. Children are being impoverished deeply, since they must grow up without fathers. Henri J. M. Nouwen calls the present generation the "generation without fathers," and he reminds us that we must always remember this when we deal with people these days. The fathers themselves, however, are also deeply impoverished. A man is surely less of a man if he refuses to take seriously his responsibilities as a father.

Now, I do not want to suggest that true manliness is expressed only by marrying and having children. Not at all. Some men choose celibacy and live honorably as sin-

gle persons. Granted. But what I am talking about is that many men ~~seem to~~ have active sex lives but want ~~nothing~~ to do with fatherhood. Maybe they think they are manly. In fact, they are outrageously cowardly. They are hurting others ~~and~~ they are hurting themselves.

If men could just grow up and be truly manly and take on their responsibilities as fathers, we would see a revolution in our country. In fact, if the men of our country became men indeed and acted as fathers should, many of our society's other problems would take care of themselves.

It is not hard to understand why many men do not want to be true fathers. In the first place, being a father takes dedication and unselfish sacrifice. And many men today don't have what it takes to give that. They are looking out for number one.

In addition, today's growing pornographic culture cuts the foundations from beneath the very ideal of fatherhood. *Playboy* magazine has been around now for 30 years, and it has 20-million readers. And the *Playboy* philosophy, if it may be called a philosophy, tells men that women are here for men's pleasure and are always available. Sex, when viewed through this philosophy, is dissociated ~~from~~ marriage and the family. And *Playboy* is now sup-

plemented by around 80 other publications that carry this philosophy to the extreme. Many movies and videos also support this view. Given this kind of encouragement, many men today don't have the slightest interest in fatherhood, though they are interested in activities that are closely associated with it.

Fatherhood and fathering, however, can be among the most fulfilling aspects of being a man. And for those of us who in God's providence have been given children, there is every reason to approach the calling of fatherhood with enthusiasm. One reason why so few do approach it with enthusiasm, however, is that they have lost the vision of fatherhood found on the pages of the Bible.

Ephesians 6:4 says this about this important subject: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Now, take a close look at that simple sentence. You can build an entire philosophy of fatherhood on what it says. It's modern and up-to-the-minute. It's also comprehensive. And it contains an invitation to faith that is overpowering.

I say it is up-to-the-minute because of its emphasis on the psychological elements of fatherhood. Did you notice that the Bi-

ble's description of fatherhood approaches from a negative side and says we fathers must remember that the way we act affects the way our children feel.

The Bible takes feelings very seriously. Now, this may surprise you. Many people nowadays view Christianity as an outward code of behavior of some kind. They think that if people conform to certain standards, they are Christians. Well, that's not the way it is. If you become truly familiar with the Bible through continuous reading and study, you will discover that the Bible is in fact about inner feelings—about the way we feel. The Bible portrays a God who is not interested in outward show; He always looks at people's hearts. And when it talks about fathering and parenthood as does in Ephesians 6:4, the Bible emphasizes the way fathers feel about their children and the way children feel about their fathers. The material we find in Ephesians 6:4 tells us that fathering is unsuccessful unless children feel very good about their fathers. This is why we read, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children."

This is extremely good counsel. If we could analyze fully the reasons why many people act as they do, we would discover that in many instances they act that way

because they have deep feelings concerning their fathers. A father's abandonment for example, can cause deep personality wounds. A father's abuse can cause wounds that fester for years and years. And if a father has given his children a poor example, the chance that those children will follow his example in their own lives is very great.

So fathers the Bible says are not to exasperate their children. In another Bible translation this reads that they are not to provoke their children to anger. Yes, the Bible shows us that it takes children very seriously. And this is one of the hallmarks of the Christian religion. Children have often been viewed as valueless—they do not become somebody until they are older, and then only if they become successful. Children, as such, have no rights, no privileges—at least not in many people's minds. We see this today especially in the way many people treat the unborn. Statistics show that the most dangerous place for anyone to be is in the womb of his or her mother. Human beings who are yet unborn don't have a chance for life if someone decides that they should be destroyed. They really don't matter.

But they do matter, says the Lord. Their feelings are important, and fathers must

always be concerned about the way their children feel. It is possible to damage children deeply and corrupt them for life. The Bible tells us that, when we think about ourselves as men in our families, we must remember that it is not enough just to put bread on the table—we must also view our children and their feelings as extremely important.

I have to mention something now that is very unpleasant. There's a most fundamental point at which fathers have to begin when thinking about their children. And that point is this: fathers, never abuse your children, and above all never abuse them sexually.

Do not exasperate your child, do not provoke your child to anger—can you think of anything that would make a child more angry with a father than would sexual abuse? In this sex-drenched age, with its hideous *Playboy-type* philosophies, men are conditioned to think about many different things regarding sex. Some get so drawn into the vortex of hyped-up sexuality that they think about it all the time. They are not faithful to their wives if they are married. And when they have children, they find that they fall into habits of sexual thinking in connection with their children.

We are all wise to such disgusting matters, so it is not necessary for me to go into detail. But, fathers, hear what I am saying. And I must say a special word to you who are stepfathers—the statistics regarding sexual child abuse for stepfathers is terribly disturbing. One poll has revealed that one out of six women who have come from families in which the principal male figure was a stepfather were sexually abused by their stepfathers—one out of six! (With women who have come from homes in which the principal male was a natural father, the figure is one in forty.) Stepfathers are fathers, too. They have a sacred trust, and they are responsible for taking care of the children who have been given to them.

Fathers who sexually abuse their children will inflict on them emotional scars that are extremely devastating in the long run. If you are a father who sexually abuses his child, in the name of God Himself, I say, "Stop it." Talk to your child and whoever else must hear about this. Say that you know you have sinned and that with the help of God you want to stop. Ask God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of those you have hurt so deeply, and find the professional help you need.

Fathers also exasperate their children by

showing in countless ways that they really are not interested in them. Children are able to sense in a moment whether their fathers really love them and will do what ever is necessary to help them develop properly. Fathers must pay a great deal of attention to their children-remember that the Bible stresses feelings-and now adays when there is a greater emphasis on leisure, fathers can spend greater amounts of time with their children developing common interests with them.

Social scientists point out that one of the biggest difficulties today regarding child rearing is that most children do not get to see their fathers at work. The father leaves home and goes to his workplace each day, and his children don't have the slightest idea what he does. One of the advantages to farming, for example, is that fathers and children can be together and work together on the farm. For a child to work with his or her father is one of the most significant events of that child's life. But since this is usually not possible, it is important that fathers create times in which they can work and play with their children, possibly around the house or on some special project. In the context of shared activities, fathers and children can develop a deep and abiding bond.

Fathers may also damage their children if they allow their marriage to disintegrate. In many instances, children, even quite young ones, will feel they are the cause of their parents' divorce. And later on, such children often harbor deep-seated anger for their fathers because of what they believe their fathers have done to destroy their homes.

When we see what's involved in disciplining children, we see that being a father is a very broad and deep task. It's a task that calls fathers to distance themselves from today's prevailing ideas regarding sexuality, and it's a task that calls them to develop sensitivities for many different elements within their marriages and families. We also see that this task can be carried out with success only if it is approached in terms of the faith that is so prominently described in Ephesians 6:4.

Let's read this verse again: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Clearly, a father can achieve this only if he has a healthy spiritual life.

"Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Fathers must make sure that their children learn about God within the home, within the church, and

within the school. To do a complete job of fathering, a father must take responsibility for his children's spiritual welfare. And this means, among other things, that any men who look forward to getting married and being fathers owe it to their future children to make sure that their wives, who will mother their children, are responsible believers in the Lord Jesus Christ so that they, too, can provide the children proper training and instruction in the things of God.

What this means for us fathers, however, is that we have the primary responsibility for the spiritual nurture of our children. And this demands that fathers believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and live obediently for their Savior. God calls all of us to turn away from the sin and evil of this world and to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you ever surrendered to Jesus Christ? Have you ever asked Him into your heart? Have you ever confessed your sin and asked God to forgive you for Jesus' sake? If you have never done these things, this is the reason you have not done well as a father. If you find yourself powerless to resist the temptation to abuse your children, it's because you have not turned to Jesus and asked Him for help.

What our country needs desperately is

that fathers realize what fatherhood really is and begin to be what fathers should be. But this can happen only if those fathers who are now living outside of Jesus are converted.

It's inspiring and satisfying to know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. Fathers who have surrendered to Jesus become children of God themselves who are then able to train their children in the knowledge of God. They receive the ability to arrange their lives and the lives of their families in such a way that their children are continuously reminded of the claim Jesus has on their lives. Such fathers treat their children with the deepest respect. They make every sacrifice necessary so that their children may grow spiritually as well as physically and intellectually. They maintain Christian homes, where the Bible is read and where prayers are offered. And, if at all possible, they send their children to Christian schools, where Jesus Christ is honored.

Fathers who do this are highly privileged, because, as their children grow older, in many cases the children become like their fathers. The children love their fathers and want to be like them. In many cases, too, the children turn their lives over to Jesus. So the children become

equipped to be fathers ... and mothers ... who are able to bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

If this happened in our land on a broad scale-as more and more fathers gave themselves to Christ and began bringing up their children in the training and instruction of God-we would see wide spread renewal in this bitter and desperate country. Where there was anger and hatred there would be love. More and more people would begin to see how totally destructive it is to try to live apart from God. They would see that the way of life usually promoted nowadays is really nothing but a way of death.

Men have to grow up. They need to take their responsibilities as fathers seriously. Then we will have children who benefit from stable homes and marriages; then we will have children who will benefit fully from God's teachings.

How well do you think fathers are doing their job these days? If you are a father, how well are you doing your job? Are you sinning against your children? Are you making them deeply angry? So, please turn to Jesus Christ before it is too late. Surrender to Him and ask Him to come into your life with His Holy Spirit. Learn

what Jesus has to teach you, and then bring up the children God has given you in the training and instruction of the Lord.

PRAYER

Lord, speak to the fathers who hear this. Surely, those of us who are fathers have a lot of confessing to do. We do not always conduct ourselves as we should, and we are ashamed. Forgive us for our disobedience.

And Lord Jesus, with your Holy Word, capture those fathers who have never come to you and asked for your forgiveness and salvation. Show them that being a father is a ~~fatig~~ and marvelous calling. ~~So~~ many people are fatherless nowadays. ~~They~~ have no hope, and they are confused because of it. Please change this situation.

Please God, give this country men who think of their manhood in terms of training and instructing their children to know you. We need such ~~no~~ much. Fill the fathers of our country with faith, and renew us. In Christ's name, Amen.

This message, prepared by Dr. Joel Nederhood, was heard over The Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Christian Reformed Churches of America, in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, and by shortwave throughout the world.

P.O. Box 95,
Fairy Meadow.
N.S.W. 2519.

P. O. Box 5088,
Dunedin.
NEW ZEALAND.