

**“The Christian Family” (II)**  
Colossians 3:20-21 (NRSV)

**He began his life with some handicaps and disadvantages.** His mother was a powerfully built, domineering woman who found it difficult to express love to anyone. She’d been married three times, and her second husband divorced her because she beat him up regularly. The father of the child I’m describing was her third husband; he died of a heart attack a few months before the child’s birth. As a consequence, from his earliest childhood, the mother had to work long hours out of the home.

She wasn’t able to give him much affection, or love, or any appropriate discipline, or training during his early years. He was absolutely rejected from his earliest childhood. He was a typical latchkey kid, letting himself into the house after school. She even forbade him to call her at work when he needed any help. Other children had little to do with him. He became a loner. When he was thirteen years old, after assessing him, a school psychologist commented he probably didn’t even know the meaning of the word “love.” During adolescence, the girls would have nothing to do with him, and he fought with the boys.

Despite a high IQ, he failed academically, and finally dropped out during his third year of high school. He thought he might find acceptance in the Marine Corps; they reportedly built men, and he wanted to become one. He learned how to become a sharpshooter. But his problems went with him. The other Marine recruits didn’t get along with him. He was slight in stature and scrawny in build. He had an adolescent squeak in his voice. He was balding prematurely. They laughed at him and ridiculed him. He fought back, resisted authority, and was court-martialed and thrown out of the Marines with an “undesirable” discharge. So there he was – a disaffected young man in his early twenties, absolutely friendless, alone in the world. He had very little talent, no skill, no sense of worthiness.

Once again, he thought he could run from his problems, so he went to seek adventure in what was then the Soviet Union, a foreign country whose political system was deeply alienated from his own. But he was rejected there as well. While there, he married a girl who had had her own troubles and brought her back to America with him. Soon, she also began to display the same contempt for him that everyone else displayed. They had two children but he was never very good at, nor enjoyed, being a father.

His marriage continued to crumble. His wife demanded more and more things that he could not provide. Instead of being his partner and ally against the bitter world, as he had hoped, she became his most vicious opponent. Unsurprisingly, like his mother, learned to bully him. On one occasion she locked him up in a room as punishment. Finally, she forced him to leave the home.

He tried to make it on his own but he was terribly lonely. After days of solitude, he went back home and literally begged her to take him in. Despite his meager salary, he brought her \$78 as a gift, asking her to take it and spend it in any way she wished. She continued to belittle his feeble attempts to supply the family's needs. She ridiculed his failures. At one point, he fell down on his knees and wept bitterly as the darkness of his private nightmare enveloped him.

Finally, in silence, he pleaded no more. No one wanted him. No one had ever wanted him.

The next day, he was a strangely different man. He arose, went to the garage, and took down a rifle he'd hidden. He carried it with him to his newly acquired job at a book storage building. And from a window, on the third floor of the building, shortly after noon, on November 22, 1963, he expertly fired two shots into the head of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. **Lee Harvey Oswald**, the rejected unlovable failure, killed the man who at the time, more than any other man on earth, embodied all the good looks, family affection, wealth, success and power which he lacked. In firing that rifle, he utilized the one skill he had learned in his entire miserable lifetime.

Lee Oswald's story stands out from others because of the incredibly documented public infamy of the final days of his life. But, unfortunately, his miserable life experience is paralleled today by thousands and thousands of North American children who have known the same or even greater lack of affection, attention, direction, and **appropriate discipline** – i.e., mentorship, discipleship training, because what many families experience is a relational desert.

This next text in Colossians contains the bare outline of **what brings fullness to parent/child relationships**.

Again as we observed with women and wives, this teaching beautifully **elevated the position of children** in the culture of that day. Under a section of Roman law, "*Patria Potestas*," "The Power of the Father," a father could do anything he wanted with his children. He could sell them, turn them into slaves, even take their lives by putting them out with the garbage, especially if they were unwanted girls. But here, as with husbands and wives, both children and parents were presented as being "**in the Lord.**" They are both under the authority and protection of God. The dominating example here is **the loving, merciful and kind, Fatherhood of God.**

The instructions are given first to the children: "Children obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord." But the passage hastens to say, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart" (3:20-21). Again, it is clear: **good relationships are interchangeable, mutually accountable relationships.**

#### 1. **Instructions to children** (Col. 3:20).

The first thing we should realize here is that **discipline is indispensable** if we are to have Christ's fullness in the home. Unfortunately, this is increasingly not true of many households in the so-called "developed" western world. In the recently published letters between **Karl Barth**, the famous German theologian, and his friend, **Carl Zuckmayer**, a celebrated German writer, Zuckmayer wrote,

If one has lived in North America and seen in countless cases what injustice is done to children, one has [soon] enough of it. One sees too much that [a parent], hidden behind misunderstood psychoanalytical maxims, allows them to become little tyrants and ill-humoured despots, despots who adults crawl in front of for pure convenience, only to get peace; and one sees how this takes effect in the unfortunate adolescents when they, brought up without authority, are confronted with the difficulties of life (1982, p. 47).

These observers see the situation as an injustice, not so much to adults, but to children! Whatever you think of this observation – and I believe it is just as prevalent now in Europe, as in Canada or the United States – there is no doubt that we live in **a culture of entitlement**. It seems everyone is entitled to their rights – adults and children alike – and there is very little emphasis on responsibilities or duties. **Whatever we want we should have.** Really?

Further, **the views of these observers of our culture are in perfect accord with the Bible**, especially the ancient words of the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament, say for example as they are found in the “Ten Commandments: “Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12); or in the words following the great Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise (Deut. 6:4-7).

Consider also the words of the New Testament of our Lord, say for example, some words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, “My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord ...” (12:5a). “For what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children [should] share, then you are illegitimate and not [God’s] children...” (12:7b-8). Discipline is good for life and for the soul..

Mind you, the question is worth asking, “**What kind of discipline is required?**” Far too often, it was immediately assumed that discipline only meant “applying the rod lest the child be spoiled” (Prov. 13:24). But in its most basic and true meaning, “**discipline” has to do with teaching and training**, rather than with punishment. Good parents set appropriate boundaries for their children. Good children learn to live within safe and clearly set, appropriate boundaries. And there are many positive ways in which this can and should be done.

Further, it is interesting that many psychologists are finding more evidence that **discipline** -- rightly understood as providing a loving, kind and safe, but firm set of boundaries -- **is the great ingredient for building self-esteem**. **Dr. Stanley Coopersmith**, associate professor of psychology at the University of California, surveyed 1,738 normal middle-class boys and their families at the beginning of the preadolescent period and followed them through to young manhood. After determining the boys with the best self-esteem, he then compared their homes and childhood influences with those of the boys exhibiting a lower sense of self-esteem. He found three important characteristics that distinguished them:

1. The high-esteem children were clearly more loved and appreciated at home than were the low-esteem boys. The parental love was deep and genuine, not just an empty display of words. The boys knew they were the object of pride and interest, increasing their own sense of self-worth.
2. The high-esteem group came from homes where parents had been significantly stricter in their approach to discipline. By contrast, the parents of the low-esteem group had created insecurity and dependence by their permissiveness. Furthermore, the most successful and independent young men during the latter period of the study were found to have come from the homes that demanded the strictest accountability and responsibility. And, as could have [possibly] been predicted, the family ties remained the strongest – not in the wishy-washy homes – but in the homes where discipline and self-control had been a way of life.
3. The homes of the high-esteem group were also characterized by democracy and openness. Once the boundaries for behaviour were established, there was freedom for individual personalities to grow and develop. The boys could express themselves without fear of ridicule, and the overall atmosphere was marked by acceptance and emotional safety (James Dobson, Hide or Seek, 1974, p. 82-83).

Appropriate discipline and obedience are indispensable if we are to experience the fullness that God wants for us in our homes.

Notice that **the command for children to “obey” one’s parents** is significant for two reasons. First, it is a different command than those used in verses 18 and 19 where wives are told to “submit” to their husbands and husbands are told to “love” their wives. The verbs used there suggest voluntary submission, a choice; **here the command is more absolute**. Until they are ready to assume self-control, children are taught control. The other reason the word “obey” is significant is that it consists of two ideas: “to listen” – to actively “hear” -- and “to hearken” – to do it, and can be read literally as “Really listen, and do it!” Common phrases parents may use today can include: “Are you really listening to me?” “Did you hear what I said?” “Do you ever listen to me?” “Now listen to me!” Obedience begins with **listening and responding**.

Implicit in this is also, not just the hearing and doing, but doing it with the right attitude. My mother was big on this, all the time. That's why her talks – more like lectures -- to us were always at least twenty minutes! Children are too often like the proverbial little boy who was told by his teacher to sit down. As he sat there, he was thinking to himself, "I'm sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!" What the Scripture calls for is **heart obedience**.

Finally, you will notice that **this obedience to parents is to be "in everything."** Wait a minute here! Are there no exceptions? Of course there are. As children grow up into young adults, they will have minds and ideas of their own. These can and should be discussed. Children and young adults often have great ideas. Further, we are never to go against the Word of God, or our informed conscience, to obey anyone, even parents. The command is not a *carte blanche* for a cruel or abusive parent! But these cases aside, the Scripture before us says that obeying our parents is our "acceptable duty in the Lord"; it's part of what it means to "honour [our] parents" when we are young. And it will provide a blessing to both.

## 2. **Instructions to parents** (Col. 3:21).

The other half is addressed to the parents; interestingly enough, the father is particularly mentioned "Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart" (3:21). Unfortunately, provocation has happened and still happens often enough. Parents get into shouting matches with their children. Sometimes they even begin hitting their children in anger.

I have to tell you that although my father taught me many wonderful things as a teenager and a young adult about growing flowers, the art of landscaping, and how to design floral arrangements, his methods of disciplining our mis-behaviour when we were young was often brutal. There is no other word for it. He was often angry and abusive. I determined that I'd never act this way with either my wife or my children, and for the most part, although not perfect, I think I've been successful.

It's interesting to note the Bible's advice is to **be gentle** in correction. Coming from an ancient, more primitive time, one might have expected harshness to be all right. Yet parents -- especially fathers who may have more trouble with this than mothers -- are encouraged to "**not embitter [their] children.**" The specific sense of the Greek is **to irritate one's**

**children**, either by nagging them or deriding them – **putting them down** (Peter T. O’Brien, p. 225). A parallel passage in Ephesians says, “**do not exasperate your children**” (6:4, NIV). I like that translation.

Thousands of children, even in Christian homes, have experienced a **constant rain of criticism**. **John Newton**, the sea-faring slave-trader who became a peerless preacher and hymn-writer, experienced such a wretched life, and said, “I know that my father loved me, but he did not seem to wish me to see it” (William Barclay, p. 195).

Another kind of father who exasperates a child is the one given to **grouchiness**. Most people maintain a placid veneer at work – because they have to do so, but at home... Only the Lord knows how many children “lose heart” because their fathers have so-called hard days. This reminds me of a cartoon in which the boss is grouchy to his employee, who in turn comes home and is irritable with the children. His son, in turn, kicks the dog. The dog runs out of the house, down the street and bites the first person he sees – the boss! We parents must never let our pressures drive us into this unhappy cycle. The costs are too high.

Others exasperate their children with their **harsh and over-strict rules**. Admittedly, some over-indulge their children, but the opposite is also true. Some zealous Christian parents can be tempted to say “No” to virtually everything his/her child asks. Rather, the parent should be looking for every opportunity to say “Yes” to as many things as conscientiously possible. Our reasons for saying “No” must be valid, concerning the child’s safety, or healthiness, wellbeing, or the bottom-line maintenance of morality. Overstrictness (not firmness) sometimes clothes a lazy approach to raising children.

When Colleen and I began raising our children in the early 1970s we respected what **Dr. Dorothy L. Nolte** stated in her then popular piece, **Children Learn What They Live** (1972) and often used it as a paradigm to correct our own discipline of our children:

- If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
- If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
- If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.
- If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
- If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.  
If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.  
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.  
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.  
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.  
If children live with security, they learn to have faith  
in themselves and others.  
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place  
in which to live.

Parents, especially fathers, if we want to have all the richness and fullness in which God would have for us in our primary family relationships, we must discipline our children – love them, teach them, train them, correct them when necessary, and show them a better way. Our discipline must be given with encouragement. We must be patient, not irritable. While firm, we must not be over-strict. We must look for ways to say “Yes” as well as “No.” We must be consistent and stable in our direction. This means we will want to spend time with our loved ones, listening to them and loving them, and also watching how we practice (or do not practice) what we preach.

Amen

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May 23, 2010