

GREAT DADS

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Great dads follow Jesus Christ!

Parenting is not a slam dunk, but it is a blessed profession. Apostle Paul offered succinct instruction on this subject to the church in Colosse.

Colossians 3

²⁰ Children, always obey your parents. This is pleasing to the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, don't make your children resentful, or they will become discouraged.

The quote above is a single paragraph in the original text. One paragraph indicates one subject or theme. If it appears to be two subjects, then we must look more carefully to see the connection.

Obedience

The paragraph addresses children, the obedient lifestyle they are to follow, and the life-context that is most conducive to their obedience.

Everyone in the Kingdom of God is to live an obedient lifestyle. Jesus said, "If you love me, obey my commandments." Could it be clearer? But each of us obeys within a context of relationships.

In childhood, that context is the family. Other contexts include school, sports teams, employment, military service, church, clubs, and civic community.

If, in such a context, we were to say, "I don't have to obey you, because I obey Jesus instead," then we misunderstand what it is to obey Jesus.

Authority

All authority is delegated. Beginning with God, who made all things, and then Jesus, who has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth," authority trickles down into the context of each human relationship.

Unfortunately, we usually think of authority in terms of power, but we would do better to think of authority in terms of responsibility. No one is really authorized with power over another human being; you cannot make anyone do anything simply because you have a title or a position. Nowhere is this clearer than in the family.

Authority, then, is the measure of your responsibility for another person. Your responsibility is not for the other person's outcome, because they have a will of their own and may choose to ignore or disobey you. Instead, your responsibility is to provide the context of relationship that is most conducive to their obedience.

Context of Relationship

Not rules, not information merely, not commands or threats; the context of relationship is what we must provide. In each of your positions of authority in life, your challenge is to develop the kind of re-

relationship with the person you are responsible for (in authority over) that will encourage and assist them to do their very best—to be obedient, faithful, diligent, and effective.

Children

The context described in our Bible passage is the family. The focus is the children in the home.

How many wish you had obedient children in your household? How many wish today that you had been an obedient child?

Paul's instruction to children is "always obey your parents." Why? Because it is pleasing to the Lord. Do you see how quickly Paul scales the ladder of authority? Children should obey their parents, because this is how they obey the Lord. Your response to appropriate authority at the lowest level reaches all the way to the top of the chain.

Children are not expected to march out in obedience to the Lord all by themselves, as if in a vacuum. Children *learn* how to obey the Lord by obeying their parents. This is the context of their development and deployment. Each of us has our own contexts of current spiritual development and deployment for the Lord.

Fathers

The persons most directly responsible for nurturing obedience in the home are the fathers. To some extent, this is a shared role, so mothers are not excluded from Paul's guidance. In some homes, father is absent and mother is forced to serve as father also. In some families, the grandparents, or other guardians, must take this place.

Nevertheless, the role God gave to fathers is to nurture obedience in their children—obedience that reaches all the way up to the Lord Jesus.

The first implication is that a father who takes this role seriously must himself be in line with the Lord Jesus. Without his own godly example, no father can expect to nurture faithful obedience in his children.

Dads, if you are not obedient to Christ in the way you conduct your life, your words and efforts will sound hollow. Your children will soon see right through your hypocrisy. So, man up, and be obedient to God yourself. Give your children a good and clear example of an obedient heart.

The second implication is that the obedience you should be reaching for is their obedience to Christ, not simply to you. It is not enough for them to obey *your* voice. Your children must learn from you how to recognize and obey *His* voice. You can teach them this by reading God's Word to them, helping them to get to know God the way you are getting to know Him, and telling them stories about your own life and growth with God.

Courage

Now, we reach the real heart of the matter. For everyone, at every stage in life, it takes courage to be obedient, because obedience requires trust—sometimes more, sometimes less—trust in another person's understanding and direction.

Yesterday, Martha and I went swimming with our grandkids. I was in the water, with my back against the side of the pool, when a little boy leaped over my head into the water. I heard Martha holler, "Will,

that's Asher!" Asher is three and doesn't know yet how to swim, but that didn't stop him from leaping in. I moved forward and grabbed him under the arms and lifted him out of the water. He was having a great time, unaware of his danger!

Our son, Steve, was the same. He would jump right into the pool and we would see him, eyes open, looking up at us through the water, waiting for us to take him by the hands and lift him up. Absolutely fearless, he assumed that we were always on the lookout for him and always ready to lift him up before his air ran out. At that age, he thought that was what swimming was. By the grace of God, so far, we've been able to be there for him, even though he swims just fine now. In fact, it wasn't too many years ago, he and his brother rescued *me* from the waves when I couldn't catch my breath (but that's a story for another time).

Obedience requires courageous trust. Developing and maintaining that courage and trust in a child is the responsibility of parenthood, especially of fatherhood.

Paul's advice to fathers is "do not aggravate your children." This will drive away their courage. This will diminish their trust. Other translations suggest "exasperate," "irritate," "provoke," and "make resentful."

I suppose there are many ways to accomplish this folly. Absence, inattention, carelessness, lack of instruction, rough handling, unreasonable demands, harsh words, frequent yelling, angry outbursts, and so on. Whatever tends to frighten or confuse them, whatever tends to make them timid, will also tend to interfere with their obedience to the Lord.

If you interpose mere obedience to you, instead of ultimate obedience to the Lord, you make yourself their idol, replacing God in their thinking, feeling, and living. If you become their fear, they may never develop the proper fear of God. Instead, you must gain their trust. The kind of obedience we are looking for is this: I obey you because I trust you (not because I'm afraid of you).

Process

To develop trusting obedience requires time and attention, and many patient and repeated words of explanation. Most of what I know of this I have learned from my wife, who has an extraordinary gift in this area.

And that raises another important point. Fathers, you need not (in fact, probably will not) come by this naturally. No coaching is needed for those things we do already by nature, but God instructs our weaknesses. Don't dismiss this matter because it is not your nature. Whether or not it is your nature, it *is* your responsibility. Learn how to do it. Study others who do it well. Ask for help. You can become a better father or grandfather than you have been (or than you had).

Furthermore, your children will not come by their responsibilities naturally either. The proper context of family life and careful, patient instruction are necessary to inculcate proper values, spiritual sensitivities, and obedience. Praise for well-doing rather than constant criticism, along with loving discipline, will help raise children in "the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Fathers, you are not responsible for determining your children's outcome and future achievements, but you are responsible for guiding and empowering your children to discover and to pursue *their own* destiny—the course God has charted for them. This is a big job, for someone who wears big shoes. I believe you are just the men for the job!

Follow Jesus Christ to become great dads.