

# OUR WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Ephesians 6:1-4

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This week on The Fish (104.7) the DJs were asking listeners to respond to the question, “Are you the kind of parent you envisioned yourself to be BEFORE you had children”? There were a variety of answers, but the lady who was the funniest to me said, “I have always been a person who laughed and had fun. I always thought when I had children, I would be the mom who would do all the fun things with my children, and be the mom who all the other children wanted to be around. But I am not like that. I mean I like to have fun, and we do fun things, but, well, I hate to say it, but I am strict!”

I, too, had an idea of what I wanted to be as a parent. Did you have an idea, and is it different now that you have children? Today is Father’s Day, but I have to tell you, I have tried really hard to be more than just a father. I have tried to be a dad. So to all of you fathers, Happy Fathers Day, and I hope you are more than just a father too! In my mind, any man can be a father, but from my experience, the highest compliment is to be a dad.

This morning I want to take you on a journey with me. It is actually part of my personal journey, but I want to share it, and then I want to share with you what I see as our window of opportunity as parents. Within our grasp is the chance to make a positive difference in the lives of our children, and the children of others. I want us to take a look at foundational stones which will help us to be the parents God has called us to be to our children.

The place to begin would be . . . yeah, the hospital. It was Georgia Baptist Hospital then, and I was named after my Father – Ermel Ernest Forrester . . . . Jr. I know you have never heard of such a name, but don’t worry. There are several theories on how we got that name. I personally think it had to do with some of the family events. Word has it that my father’s family did some moon shining back in the day. I’m thinking lead poisoning! Ermel probably used to be something normal, but maybe with the lead, it got slurred somehow.

By the time I was three my parents had divorced, and it was the beginning of what would be no contact from my father for 23 years. Fortunately, my mom met a man who became my dad around the time I was five. He had two children from a previous marriage, so every other weekend my brother and I had two extra playmates! My sister was born a few years after that, so when my dad’s children came over, there were five of us.

I know you can see where I am going. Yes, this is where I get my idea of being a dad. It is from a man who is technically my step-dad, but who has never addressed me, nor treated me like a “step” anything. There are many positives I can say about him, and some negatives too, but the positive far outweigh the negative. In fact, just a few years ago a song was written by Brad Paisley that I intend to say it at my dad’s funeral. Well okay, I probably won’t be able to say it, but I will have the song played, okay?! It is called, “He Didn’t Have To Be”. I won’t bore you with the entire song, but

the chorus will give you an idea. *“Lookin’ back all I can say about all the things he did for me is I hope I’m at least half the dad that he didn’t have to be.”*

My ideas about parenting have greatly changed over the years. I can tell you without hesitation that as a college student I knew exactly how I would raise my children. Of course I wasn’t married at the time, and had no children! (For what it is worth, I also had an idea of how my marriage would go. I refer back to “I wasn’t married at the time”). After years of working with students and seeing their experiences with their parents, I have changed, revamped, and modified my ideals many times, but I have always kept the primary belief. No matter what, I want to be a dad!

There are three words I want you to hear in the sermon today. It is three words every parent should have in their vocabulary. The words should be considered regularly as a measure of where we are in our families. The words are in no order, but listen for “example”, “consistency”, and “perseverance”.

My message this morning is about the Christian Home, and it might sound like what you have heard before. I have begun to think differently about Mother’s Day, and I also think about Father’s Day. The truth is many moms are having to be dads and dads are having to be moms. The passage of scripture for this morning mentions “fathers”, but is actually directed at “parents”. It is for all of us because whether we are mom, dad, grandfather, grandmother, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, or just a friend, we can have a part in shaping our children.

*First, we must be present for our children.* Just as a teacher has to show up for class to be able to teach the students anything, so we must be willing to spend time with our own children. There is a story about the person who was the biographer for Samuel Johnson. His name was Boswell. Boswell frequently mentioned a special childhood memory - a day fishing with his dad. Apparently, Boswell’s life had been deeply marked for the better on that one day, because he constantly referred to the many conversations he and his dad had on their day of fishing. Many years later someone stumbled upon Boswell’s father’s journal and found these words: "Went fishing today with my son; a day wasted." Oh dads and moms, think of the impact Boswell’s father had upon him when he wasn’t even trying. It was a day wasted, but it impacted a little boy more than any other moment in his life.

My mom would tell you today that my dad was gone “all the time”, but I remember the times throwing the ball in the backyard, going to the lake to ski, camping trips, and vacations. One year we begged for a horse and dad brought home a mule. It was a jenny, actually and was the smartest animal I ever met. It would always head toward the garage which had a tin roof. The roof line was about neck high if one sat on the jenny. We spent all our time dodging the tin so we would get cut.

The difficult thing is finding a balance. I’m sure you are like me. After considering the call of God to pour my life into our students, I find that I fall far short of God’s high calling as a parent. All too often I am "too" busy, rushing off to another appointment, or to a student’s function, visiting the hospital, or overbooking. Last week I was away from my own children at camp, and then I am here every night this week because it is VBS. God forgive me for my irresponsibility.

I need help. I bet you need help as well. It is not that there is a lack of love on my part. I love my children, but there is a pervasive problem - I allow things to crowd the

clock so that I am constantly hustling just to keep my head above water. Do any of you know what I am saying? Do you struggle with the same problem? If I fail to spend time with my children I feel guilty. If I do not do my work, or make time to see our students in their environments, I feel like I am out of touch. I need to learn to say, "No" to the things that are not essential so that I can say, "Yes!" to the things that are of greatest importance. Doing my job is fun, but if I fail to share laughter, joy, correction, instruction, and praise with my own children...then I have failed.

Our children need our time, not tomorrow, not AFTER our meetings, not AFTER our golf game, not AFTER our women's club meeting, but NOW! We must persevere in this endeavor.

*Secondly, we must teach our children.* Paul writes in the fourth verse of chapter six, *4Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* There are some very, very important words that are used in verse four which we need to understand. I want us to look at three of those words now and we'll come back to the fourth a little later. Paul says that we are to "train, instruct, and warn" our children.

The Greek word for "bring them up," (ektrepho) means "to nourish up to maturity, to bring up." The very same word is used in Ephesians 5:29, where Paul wrote, *29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church...* (Ephesians 5:29 NIV) Teaching our children includes much more than simply sitting down at a chalkboard and feeding them facts. We must nourish our children and provide an atmosphere where they can grow and thrive in the Lord.

The idea of nurturing our children can be found in a verse we are all familiar with, Proverbs 22:6 *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."* Now, you and I have heard countless sermons on this passage. I have seen broken parents whose children have gone astray quote this verse holding onto hope. We need to understand what this verse really means. The verse does not mean that if we take our children to Sunday school and church, have family devotions, and memorize verses with them that they won't turn away from God. From experience I can tell you that some of the worst students have come from some of the best homes. Some of the best, most godly students have come from some of the worst homes.

Proverbs 22:6 is not a verse that deals with religious instruction, it is more about horticulture than it is religion. It is about where the child is planted. The literal reading of Proverbs 22:6 is, "Teach a child according to his way and when he is old he will not turn away." Parents, it is so important that you and I recognize that God has placed within each of His precious children, our children, unique gifts, abilities, and aspirations. That is why no two children are alike in a family. They are different, and have unique qualities and different dreams.

Back in Texas there was a father who was a farmer. He wanted more than anything for his son to be a doctor. When the boy graduated from high school, dad sent him to college, and then to medical school. The second year of his studies at medical school the boy quit and came home to go to work on the family farm. I know the father wanted his son to be more than a farmer, but the boy said, "You know I never did want to be a doctor. I love working the soil, planting crops, and gathering the harvest. There is nothing in this world that I enjoy more than farming." God had placed a love deep inside

the heart of that young man, but dad had misread it. We need to recognize those abilities and God-given dreams which our children possess so that we can help them to become the young men and women that God created them to be.

The second word that we need to understand is "paideia." The word means, "the whole training and education of children (which relates to the cultivation of mind and morals). It can also mean, "Instruction which aims at increasing virtue, or chastisement." The Word of God is replete with the command to teach our children about the Lord, His mighty acts in history, His counsel for living life so as to experience it in all its fullness as the Father intends, and His commands for living in right relationship with Him and others.

I am constantly reminded of the importance of daily spending time in God's word. There are so many different reasons for this, but one of the most important to me is so I can have something to give my children in times of distress. My children need to know God is there and understand the reality and powerful presence of the Holy Spirit.

My children also need to know more than theology. They need to know how to apply their beliefs to every aspect of their life. They need to understand who they are and why they are here on this earth. They need to understand what it means to be a man, woman, son, sister, husband, wife, father, mother, employee, boss, friend, and follower of Jesus in each of these capacities. These lessons can only be learned from one source. Oh, you can get plenty of ideas from the world on all of these topics, but good luck sorting through them all. Before I can ever hope to teach my kids, I must first attend class myself. How can I teach what I have not learned? How can I share what I have never experienced? How can I lead where I am unable to go? There cannot be enough said on the importance of example. The example you set for your children will do more for them than any word you might create. Like you, they need to "see" a sermon more than they need to hear one!

The third word which we need to understand is the Greek word which means, "admonition" or "warning" (noutheteo). Paul instructs us to warn our children about the consequences of life lived apart from God's design. This is not harsh; as a matter of fact we owe it to our children to instruct them about the hazards of living life apart from God's will. The consequences are far-reaching.

I find it funny (not humorous), and you may already know his, but according to a report in a national magazine, there are two factors that have proven to be most effective throughout history for maintaining societal order and avoiding chaos. Do you know what they are? (1) Fear of swift punishment from governmental authorities and (2) a reverence for God. Neither of these two are realities in our society today and look where it has gotten us. There is no fear or respect for authority in our society. Young people know that if they commit a crime they will do little if any time. Reverence for God is a joke. "God" is mostly known as the first syllable of a swear word in our society rather than the holy, just, and righteous God that He is.

We must instill within our kids the deep knowledge that life lived apart from God will lead to ruin. Again, the best way to teach is through example.

Last of all, we must not enrage our children by our actions and words. Paul precedes these lessons for us by saying, "Father's do not exasperate your children." What does "exasperate" mean? The Greek word (parorgizo) means, "to rouse to wrath, to

provoke, exasperate, anger." The word is used only in one other place, Romans 10:19, where God is said to have "enraged" Israel. The Jews were enraged because God provided a Messiah which the Gentiles believed in, but whom the Jews rejected. This made the Jews more than angry, it made them furious!

We are told to not enrage our children. In Colossians 3:21, Paul told the Colossian fathers, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." Do you know how to provoke anger in your children? I have a list of several. Do you want to hear them?

The list is not exhaustive, but here are some examples:

Being inconsistent with discipline

a. Differing parental standards

b. Differing parental enforcement

Being harder on their sins/mistakes than your own

Failing to build a relationship with the child

Abusive words, expressions, tone of voice

Constantly finding fault

Not listening to the child's side of the story or his/her opinion

Failing to keep promises

Disciplining the child in front of others

Giving too much freedom

Giving too little freedom

Not admitting when you are wrong

It is so important that we handle our children with care. They are God's precious, priceless gifts that He has entrusted into our care. We must avoid attitudes, actions, and words that would alienate our children from us. We must avoid at all costs nagging, deriding, and destroying them so that they don't lose heart. It will take a measure of consistency on our part.

Just this week in VBS we learned about Scream FREE Parenting. I was amazed. I didn't know it was possible! Paul doesn't question the authority of parents in the home, but he sure does encourage us to use our power to bless our children rather than destroy them. The problem for so many parents today, and a real problem I struggle with is, "I don't want my kids mad at me so I should just let 'it' go." All too often we refuse to deal with negative, hurtful, bitter attitudes and actions we see going on with our children because we want them to like us. We must discipline and teach our kids or we risk more than a ruined relationship, we will witness the ruin of our children. The key to our discipline is that we must always do so in love. Anything else, either too harsh of discipline, or no discipline, will lead them to ruin. Our loving discipline must reflect 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul says, "Love is patient, love is kind...it is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

If we enrage our children, cause them to become bitter, we will discourage them and they will never experience the fullness of life that God desires for them. Could there be any more relevant or applicable teaching in the world for raising children than a strong foundation of love which refuses to enrage our kids, godly nurture to help enable them to

realize their unique abilities and gifts that God has given them, biblical teaching concerning every aspect of life, and warnings concerning the hazards that will be encountered apart from living in God's will? Folks, you can take that to the bank!

We have been given the greatest instruction and support for being a blessing to our children. Even with these reassuring and comforting teachings I have to tell you that many, many times I am simply overwhelmed with the high calling God has placed on me to be a godly parent to my children. It is much like the story of the young woman who was a stay-at-home mom with a three year old, a one and a half year old, and a newborn. Her husband came home one day to find five dozen diapers hanging on the clothesline in the back yard. Her husband came in the house and found his wife on the floor with the toys, walkers, clothes, and babies all around her. He said, "I saw all the white flags in the back yard. I take it that you have surrendered."

Ever feel like throwing up your hands and saying, "This is too much, too hard! Help!" Boy I have, and on more than one occasion. I want to encourage you this morning - don't give up, give them over. Ask Christ to come into your heart and home, give you the insight, patience, and courage you need to bless your children. Bless your children as the Father seeks to bless you in all that you do.

Would you join me in a word of prayer please?