



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Parenting Among the Pagans:¹ Faith-Shaping in a Pluralistic Society

Ephesians 6:1-4

David Anguish

Introduction

1. The prominence of four news stories in which husbands were both publicly and grossly unfaithful to their wives led Wil Haygood, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, to call the summer of 2004 the “summer of bad husbands.”²
2. Seeking to explain why those events occurred, Haygood cited the assessment of David Conn, the former Los Angeles prosecutor who prosecuted the notorious Menendez brothers: “I think it’s just the loss of family values. It’s the narcissism of our age, of people thinking only of themselves—not even of their family. When you lose those values of morality, you suddenly have no footing. And I think that’s when these people think there’s no problem with doing evil.”³
3. Conn’s comment is a reminder that rearing children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4) is hard work in a culture that consistently pushes a radically different agenda.
4. The premise of this series is that it *can* be done, even in a world like ours. We can help our children develop substantive and thriving faith, capable of standing firm themselves and able to pass on a strong faith to their children.
5. Before beginning to look at some of the specifics involved, let’s clarify our purpose.
 - a. This series is about *faith-shaping*, not parenting techniques. The two overlap, but are not the same. I want to contribute to rearing heavenly citizens (see Phil 3:20).
 - b. Accordingly, this series is not about giving a “how to” list for better parenting. My aim is to reflect on biblically-grounded principles that we are wise to consider and apply.

¹ I am using “pagan” in the sense of “a follower of a polytheistic religion (as in ancient Rome).” (“pagan.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> [10 January 2019]).

² The following were the major stories from 2004 to which Haygood referred: Mark Hacking’s murder and dumping of his wife in a Utah landfill; the Scott Petersen trial with taped conversations with his mistress in the days following his wife’s disappearance; the Kobe Bryant story wherein Bryant’s defense against a rape charge was that he cheated on his wife; and the resignation of New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey who, with his wife standing by him, announced that he was gay.

³ From Charles Colson, “Summer of Bad Husbands: Lessons in Selfishness,” a Rush Transcript from *Breakpoint with Charles Colson* (Copyright © 2004 Prison Fellowship), September 9, 2004.

6. We will begin by noticing some principles suggested by Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6:1-4 for successfully shaping a strong faith in our children in our current culture.

Body

I. We *Can* Shape Faith in a Pagan Culture.

A. Our culture's worldview is increasingly hostile to the Christian worldview.

1. We are told there are no rights and wrongs, only preferences.
2. If this is true, then all individuals are free to decide for themselves in all circumstances.⁴
3. This can lead to an "anything goes" society where our families are regularly invited to accept a worldview that the ancient Christian writers viewed as pagan.

B. In our current climate, we are tempted to think we are facing something new when in fact ancient culture was little different from what ours is becoming.

1. The sense that we are facing something Christians have never faced results from having a perspective that is too narrow.
 - a) We do *not* have the same kind of support network from our broader culture that our parents and grandparents had.
 - b) Increasingly, we face a cultural environment that is more like what the first Christians faced (which is not to say ours is exactly parallel to theirs).
 - c) We need to study more instead of relying on recent experience and cultural memory.
2. Consider ancient Ephesus.⁵
 - a) Affluence: "'the greatest commercial center in Asia . . .'" (from Strabo).
 - b) Love of culture and entertainment: Ephesus had a theater which seated 24,000.
 - c) Love of sport, much of which was given to violence: a stadium [probably erected during the reign of Nero, 54-68 AD] measuring about 250 yards [229 meters] long x 35 yards [30 meters] wide for athletic contests, chariot races, and gladiatorial fights.
 - d) Religious diversity: the temple to Artemis Ephesia [= Diana Ephesia] "was the largest building in the Greek world" and was "one of the seven wonders of the ancient world"; shrines to numerous other gods, goddesses, and cults were also present.

C. The point: others have been where we are and were expected (and able) to pass on their faith.

II. We Must Shape Faith "On Purpose" (vv 1-3).

A. Though they are addressed to children, we learn three things about parenting from vv 1-3.

1. The fact that Paul quotes Scripture tells us that the inspired teaching ought to inform our efforts to shape faith in our children.
2. The fact that he calls on children to honor their parents—the fifth commandment—tells us that children should neither be left to raise themselves nor reared in a spiritual vacuum that does not try to inculcate godly virtues into their lives.
3. The fact that he tells children to "obey" (ὕπακούω, *hypakouō*—literally, "to hear under") tells us that we are to teach the respect that is necessary for faith development.

⁴ *Humanist Manifesto II*, published in 1973, suggests that this goal should be extended even to children. "We must extend participatory democracy in its true sense to the economy, the *school*, the *family*, the workplace, and voluntary associations. Decision-making must be decentralized to include widespread involvement of people at all levels—social, political, and economic." (*Humanist Manifestos I and II* [Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973], 19; emphasis mine.)

⁵ I illustrate with Ephesus because our text is in Ephesians. The ideas included are summarized from C. F. Arnold, "Ephesus," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 249-253.

B. Seeing these things helps us combat some hindrances to faith-shaping today.

1. Problem # 1: too many are looking to the wrong source for guidance.
 - a) I once visited a young couple who had just had their first child. They expressed apprehension about being new parents (what if we do the wrong thing?) and, I think by extension, about rearing that child. My counsel was that I don't think it's as complicated as the plethora of information available can make it seem to be.
 - b) Understand what I am and am not saying.
 - (1) I am not saying that parenting is not hard work.
 - (2) I am saying just the opposite; one of the problems in many homes today is that parents, too worn out from the hectic pace they maintain, cannot (or will not) consistently summon the energy to do the work necessary to parent.
 - (3) I am saying that our ancestors succeeded and the basics have not changed.
 - (4) I am also saying that parents can read so many how-to books and other writings that they can become overwhelmed and even confused.
 - (a) I do not intend to discount the value of exposing ourselves to useful information that will broaden our own perspectives.
 - (b) I do intend to stress the priority of relying on Scripture's teaching and the experiences of other believers who can provide examples and counsel to younger parents (cf. Tit 2:3-5).
 - (c) If we are not intentional about maintaining our focus, the basics can get pushed aside.
2. Problem # 2: abdication of parental leadership.
 - a) In four decades of ministry, a period that includes 12 years of school teaching, I have lost count of the number of parents who have said to me something to the effect that (1) they just don't know what they're going to do with their teen and (2) once they hit the teen years, you've pretty well done all you can do with them.
 - b) Without disparaging my two sons, I will say that I am sympathetic with the first (a problem with my wisdom), but disagree with the second.
 - (1) My dad often told me that he received his last spanking when he was 18. He did not follow that specific parenting model with me (I was several years younger when I received my last spanking), but he did believe that he wasn't finished raising me just because I turned 13, or 16, or even 18.
 - (2) A dad I know tells about the time his 15-year-old came home and announced the plans he and a girlfriend had made for a day during a school holiday the following week. His parents looked at each other, and then asked him, "and when did you get permission to do that?" Had he asked, they would have allowed it. Because he was presumptuous, a lesson was needed, taught, and received.
 - c) Our teens need our guidance, not our abdication.

III. To Shape Faith Is To Nurture (v. 4).

A. Ultimate responsibility for spiritual training rests with fathers.

B. Christian parenting is a process of nurturing (see the ASV), not just "giving orders."

1. The word translated “bring them up” (ἐκτρέφω, *ektrephō*) has as its primary meaning, “to provide food, nourish”⁶ (see Eph 5:29, its only other use in the NT).
2. Faith-nurturing is a task that requires striking a balance.
 - a) Positively, it means nurturing children toward godliness, a task also requiring balance.
 - (1) It involves “discipline” (“training” - NIV), from παιδεία, *paideia*, which primarily means, “the act of providing guidance for responsible living.”⁷
 - (2) It also involves “instruction” (“admonition” - ASV), from νοουθεσία, *nouthesia*, to “counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct.”⁸
 - b) Negatively, fathers are to fulfill these duties without “provok[ing] their children to anger” (παροργίζω, *parorgizō*).
 - (1) The force of the Greek construction here could be that fathers should *stop* provoking their children (μή, *mē* with the present imperative).
 - (2) We’ll return to this specific idea later in this series, but will point out here that to “train a child in the way he should go” (Prov 22:6) is not a call to force or program a lifestyle; it is a call to guide, giving discipline and instruction as the needs arise.

Conclusion

1. In tribute to the valiant flyers who defeated the German Luftwaffe in 1940's Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill said, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”
2. The battle we fight for the faith of our children is no less daunting. But Christianity began in similar circumstances. Paul instructed his Ephesian readers and believed it was possible for them to succeed in their battle, despite the odds. If they could do it in their world, we can do it in ours.
3. But we should also observe that Paul wrote to children and fathers as part of a letter about what it means to be part of the church. In his instructions about faith-shaping Paul assumed a commitment to the way of the Lord and his body / community.
4. Such commitment on our parts will make the difference in our quest to shape faith.

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www.davidanguish.com

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, Rev. & Ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 311.

⁷ Ibid., 748.

⁸ Ibid., 679.