

~Other Speakers S-Z: Valsan Thampu:

Paul exhorts fathers that they should not, "exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Eph. 6: 4).

Paul's instruction in this section is rooted in the larger context of the biblical understanding of the relationship between parents and children. The most significant insight in this respect is introduced early in the Bible through Abraham's attitude to his son, Isaac, on the one hand and his absolute obligation to God, on the other (Gen. 22). Isaac is the child of Abraham's old age, received as a gift from God. Even more importantly, he is the son of promise. All these make Abraham's relationship with Isaac very special. But that does not dilute either God's claim on Isaac or Abraham's importance as the father. Isaac, and through him children in general, are in a state of "double ownership", so to speak. Isaac belongs to Abraham, whose son he is. But Isaac belongs also to God, whose gift to Abraham he is. Indeed the second is the more primary identity. Isaac belongs to Abraham only as God's gift. And, therefore, the decisive authority rests with God. But this does not either interfere with parent-child relationship or dilute their mutual devotion.

The awareness of parents that their children belong, in a real and ultimate sense, to God brings an element of higher discipline into their relationship and protects it against arbitrariness, egoism and harshness. It also demarcates distinct boundaries to the scope of parental authority as well as filial responsibilities, especially vis-à-vis every person's need to obey and honour God. Nothing, not even one's filial loyalty, should be allowed to come in the way of a person's obligation to God. Hence Jesus' rebuff to the would-be disciple who gave the excuse of having to bury his dead father, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Lk. 9: 60)

The alternatives to this model of understanding parent-child relationship are:

Children as items of exclusive ownership, which involves a blindness to the biblical assumption that children are gifts from God. The biblical outlook obliges parents to be accountable to God for the way they bring up their children. When children are seen as one's own exclusive property, they may be seen either as an investment for the future (old age support) or as means for wish fulfillment. In the latter instance, parents seek to realize their unattained dreams and goals through their children. This introduces all sorts of tensions and traumas into their relationships and endangers the joy thereof. As and when parents begin to suffer from 'frustrations' concerning their children's achievements, they need to stop and self-examine. It would help if parents were to recall occasionally their own academic track record, lest they become too unrealistic and unreasonable in forcing their children to frog-leap to dizzy limits.

The other alternative is to idolize one's children, to set them up in the place of God. This parental capitulation does enormous harm to both parties. The present writer does not know a single parent, unwise in such idolatry, who has not come to grief thereby.

In a sense, Paul's instruction to fathers that they should not exasperate their children is rather strange. Would any father or mother want to "exasperate" his or her child, deliberately or knowingly? It might seem unlikely that they would. Yet, parent-child relationships are being characterized increasingly by exasperation and alienation. And, what is more, the degree of exasperation tends to be in excess of the provocation offered. The situation seems to fly in the face of the law of motion that "action and reaction are equal and opposite". They are, in the domestic and inter-personal contexts, more likely to be in excess rather than proportionate. "Exasperation" alerts us to this imbalance. The escalating exasperation in parent-child relationships has, at least, two major causes.

The kind of person you are as parent, including your understanding of discipline, desirable goals and problem-solving methods.

The sort of upbringing you give to your children.

As regards the first, the extent of exasperation that a parent causes varies from one parent to another, determined by a host of variables in the given family contexts. Stern words would be better tolerated if they come from a serious-minded and well-meaning person, than they would be if they were to come from an intemperate, frivolous or irresponsible person. Even harsh words are welcome if spoken out of love; whereas even innocuous statements could cause resentment, if uttered in apathy or disdain. A person who is out of sorts with himself, or is negatively oriented in personality, need not try hard to exasperate others, including his

own children. But a great deal of correction will be taken, and taken even gratefully, if it comes from a person of self-restraint, large-heartedness and magnanimity. So, the first implication in Paul's instruction to fathers is that they need to mind their own personality formation and personal stature. They have to become, prayerfully, persons who have the spiritual authority to correct and discipline their children. This involves, perforce, their standing with God. The only guarantee for personal stature of this kind is our day-to-day walk with God. Redemptive love, born out of godliness, ensures that the discipline we exercise proves helpful and redemptive.

The second part of this instruction â€œpertaining to the upbringing of children- needs to be examined in greater detail.

As against the above, Paul exhorts parents to bring up their children â€œin the training and instruction of the Lordâ€•. Paul prescribes this as an antidote to â€œexasperatingâ€™ them. Paul's insight here is an important one and it needs to be appropriated unapologetically.

Children may get exasperated because of two things:

the way they are treated and
the way they are brought up.

While the first is obvious to all, the importance of the second is seldom apparent to parents because its dynamic is spread over a period of time. Treated in an irrational, harsh or arbitrary manner, a child gets exasperated in an obvious and immediate sense. But that is not the case when exasperation is the product of a certain upbringing. It is commonplace that some children are more easily exasperated than others. Sadly, it is also true that some children are exasperated at everything that their parents suggest or stand for. The cause of exasperation could either be what the parent does or what the child concerned is like. Exasperation is a symptom of rebelliousness. In his instruction to fathers, Paul has both these types of exasperation in mind. The logic of the text suggests that he is more concerned about the latter than the former.

Paul insists that children should be brought up â€œin the training and instruction of the Lord.â€™ The essence of this training is the capacity for 'fullness of life,' and what it takes to achieve it. Jesus' eagerness to obey the will of his Father and to do His work is an aspect of it. So also his capacity to love and serve selflessly. This training and instruction of the Lord aims at the perfection of our human nature and the full appropriation of our greatness as people created in the image and likeness of God. From the perspective of such a redeemed nature, our need to love God absolutely and our duty to love others as we love ourselves become self-explanatory. So also the need for correction, reproof and training in righteousness so that we are equipped to do every good work (2 Tim. 3: 16). It is to be expected that any defect in this nurture is bound to produce unhappy and painful consequences.

It is in this light that we need to see the larger implications of the â€œexasperationâ€™ that children are likely to experience in respect of parental discipline. The practical truth is that children who are not brought up in the training and instruction of the Lord are likely to be exasperated even at the basic discipline that parents are obliged to impose on them for their own benefit. They mistake advice and sound counsel for â€œinterferenceâ€™. They fail to see the distinction between discipline and harshness and resent parental efforts to keep them in the right path. They resent it all the more when the keenness of their parents to urge them along the narrow path is not matched by a matching parental willingness.

Paul suggests that training in the righteousness of Jesus Christ is the foundation for parental authority. Parents who neglect this aspect in the nurture of their children, but labour hard to do their best for them otherwise, are indeed building their houses on sand. Evidence is mounting today to the effect that the neglect of godliness in family culture and the nurture of children has pushed parent-child relationship into the murky zone of mutual exasperation.

Bringing up children in the instruction of the Lord is not a matter only of repeating certain biblical texts and principles. It is more a matter of living an authentic life at home, which instills in children a sense of awe and wonder about the sanctities and the farther reaches of their life and destiny. The goal in bringing up children in this manner is to enable them to be Christ-like. It is obvious that children cannot be nurtured thus unless parents put themselves under the same discipline. That being the case, the emphases in this area should be on:

The need for consistency between word and deed. Two basic truths need to be stated here. The contradiction between word and deed is a disabling factor in the life of every human being. Secondly, children are very sensitive to double standards and self-contradictions, even if they do not resent or protest explicitly in every instance. The inward resentment keeps building up and beyond a point expresses itself as exasperation. Any

sign of exasperation on the part of a child can only mean one thing: that she is finding it very hard to respect her parent, and that the parent in question is squandering his parental capital.

The need to sustain loving and disciplined husband-wife relationship that is free from the virus of rebelliousness. It is pathetic that parents who make a virtue of rebelliousness and mutual exasperation expect their children to be free from it. They over-react to rebelliousness in their children, very likely because they have been rebellious themselves. In doing so, they drive children into greater exasperation. However, rebelliousness and exasperation make a deadly cocktail and it prevails over parental tactics and tantrums. As against this, children who are blessed in being nurtured in a Christian culture marked by Christ-like *“meekness”*, rather than rebelliousness, do not have to be coerced into submission. They are safe from exasperation, which is the opposite of loving submission. The beatitude that *“the meek”* inherit the earth is a profound practical truth in the context of family.

The need to foster a sense of mission. What makes discipline unpalatable to children is their inability to see the purpose of it. An athlete, on the contrary, puts up stoically, even joyfully, with rigorous discipline because it makes sense to him within a well-defined goal to which he is personally and passionately committed. Hence the blessedness in having a sense of mission in one's life and the desirability in weaving it into the culture of one's family. One cannot create a hedonistic and indulgent lifestyle and impose Spartan discipline on one's children. A sense of mission should undergird the family culture as a whole. And the discipline that is prescribed for the children must be intelligible in relation to it. Once children imbibe this sense of mission and are able to see discipline as integral to it, they become more fortified against exasperation. Discipline as an end in itself is indistinguishable from tyrannical harshness.

Respect for authority. Parents who indulge their children, and fight shy of their duty to correct them, disable them unwittingly from acquiring a healthy respect for authority. This problem becomes all the more acute in a liberal, individualistic and materialistic culture. In the absence of any respect for authority, children tend to be exasperated even when they are chastened or corrected legitimately. But authority is not a matter of age or relationship alone. Nor is respect for authority an innate trait of human character. It has to be inculcated in children on an intelligible and enduring foundation. That foundation is respect for the authority of God. Parental authority stands on, and is derived from, God's authority. Parents who make light of God's authority over them and the family, therefore, weaken the foundation of their own authority. The alternative to respecting the authority of God is to trivialize it. As the Psalmist says, *“The fool says in his heart, there is no God”*. Such 'foolishness' in the context of family breeds rebelliousness in children and they are inclined to be easily *“exasperated”* with anything that smacks of parental authority. It may be noted in passing that Paul urges wives to respect the authority of their husbands 'as unto the Lord'. Husbands are to love their wives as Jesus loves the Church. The children of those who do so are sure to be less vulnerable to exasperation than children who have rebellious parents as role models. If, on the other hand, parents prefer to eat sour grapes, it should not surprise them if it sets their children's teeth on edge.

Taste for the Word and family worship. The tendency to relate magically to the Word has obscured the practical wisdom in living by *“every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Mtt. 4:4). The Bible is not a talisman to which we are to relate either to ward off evil or to get out of the mess that we have got ourselves into. It is rather a total mental and spiritual culture that shapes us in a wholesome way. The Bible is a training manual for fullness of life. Within its wisdom, respecting parents is connected explicitly to blessings in this world. As the Second Commandment states, *“Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”* (Ex. 20:12). The logic of this Commandment is not self-evident to the wisdom of the world. Its logic involves a great deal more than the immediate practical arrangements from day-to-day. It exists within the larger ambience of spiritual and metaphysical awareness. That being the case, it should also be clear that a regular relationship with the Word should be complemented with a rich and meaningful worship life. Both together play a crucial role in shaping a person's attitude to life, within which alone a healthy response to parental authority can be acquired and sustained. So parents need to nurture their children in the knowledge of the Word of God as well as in an atmosphere of family worship even as a matter of *“inspired self-interest”*. This is also, besides, a crucial element in their accountability to God in the parental vocation they exercise. It does not have to be argued that there is a necessary connection between a child's respect for parental authority and his sense of the sanctity of life. One implies the other.

The basic challenge of parenthood, especially in our times, is to create a family culture in which obedience informed by mutual love is experienced as a joyful privilege rather than as a reluctant concession to exigency. Parents who expect to be obeyed must so conduct themselves as to enable their children to obey them, even as a matter of privilege. Alternately, they can make obedience seem inconvenient, even humiliating.

PARENTS BEWARE!

What dims the luster of parental authority in the eyes of children is the chronic conflict between their parents. This spoils the sweetness that should characterize every home and subjects children to contrary pulls between their parents that they know not how to handle. This infects their life with anxiety that expresses itself as exasperation. Husbands and wives, by maintaining wholesome relationships based on obedience and mutual love, can provide the umbrella of security for children and so save them from avoidable rebelliousness and exasperation.