



**FATHERING IN THE YEAR 2009**  
**Ephesians 6:1-4**

Imagine for a moment that a person is hired to manage a professional baseball team – the Phillies for example. However, he rarely comes to the games. He only shows up for the games played in the afternoons. When he does come to the games – he offers no directions to the players. For example – it’s the bottom of the eighth inning – the score is tied. However the Phillies have runners on 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> bases – only one out. Should the batter try a suicide bunt – **hit away** – try to get a walk - to load the bases because your best contact hitter is in the on-deck circle?

However, the manager is watching “**The Beverly Hillbillies**” on cable television in the dugout. You finally get his attention and he says “**Do whatever you think is best.** My job is to see that you have plenty of bats and baseballs – and nice uniforms to wear. I have done my job – now get out there and win.” The team finishes dead last in the league. He declares: “This is all your fault. What have I ever done to you? I let you have your own way.”<sup>1</sup> The unfortunate truth is – that is how far too many fathers lead their families in America in the year 2009.

No father or mother who has stood before me in my 32 years of ministry and took vows of the baptismal covenant had anything but the highest hopes and dreams for that precious life entrusted to their care. We as a congregation also take those vows as well.

This past week I read an article which lamented the fact that our young children and youth have so few good role models in the athletic world to imitate in terms of their behavior and conduct.

However, this is not limited to the athletic arena – but the church house as well. Good models for Christian father are getting rarer each day. Without the richness of faith, those same parents who once had boundless love for that child – can end up with endless heartache.

That magnificent letter to the church of Ephesus – from which our lesson comes today, instructs the Christian believer - not only to think differently – but to live differently from the pagan culture of that time. Our Christian way and truth empowers our behavior to be lived out in a positive and holistic way.

God in Christ has established a new society – the body of Christ – the church. This body of believers is to reflect the character of the **One** who is over the body – Christ Jesus. Christ has died for us! That is the good news. Now, we are to live out our lives in thanksgiving for what God has done for us.

Yes, “Paul’s most joyous discovery was that God lived in him. It can be activated in the here and now. Paul’s favorite expression was ‘**Christ in me.**’”<sup>2</sup>

I recently heard about two United Methodist students who signed up to do missionary work in the rural part of western Pennsylvania. They received their training and went off to help save the world. One day they stopped at a rural farm house. They could hear the barking dogs – the screaming kids – and could see the woman of the house working over an old-fashioned pot belly stove in the kitchen. She heard the knock on the screen door and invited the boys in. She wiped the sweat from her brow – and pulled her hair back and said “**What can I do for you fellas?**”

They said, “Ma’am, we would like to share the plan of salvation today – you are guaranteed a place in heaven with Jesus.”

She said, “**If I sign up – can I go in the next five minutes?**” We have all probably known that same feeling. To perform the responsibilities of a Christian parent requires patience – persistence – and a lot of praying to remain a ‘positive’ role model.

I was surprised recently when I read that the Barna Research Group discovered that only 33% of those who claim to be evangelical believers shared that regular church attendance was more important than soccer practice – dance recitals – gymnastics – little league – and a host of other activities. A diplomat from Greece recently visited the United States of America and said he was surprised “the way parents obeyed their children.” He was dumbfounded that the youngest member of the family set the standard of behavior and conduct.

The passage read today from **Ephesians 6:1-4** is one of the few clear cut charges to the proper and positive role of Christian parenting in the Bible. I often would read **verses 1-3** to our children Jennifer and John. However, as they became students of the Bible – they discovered **verse 4** – and often reminded me of its essence – usually when I took the keys to the car away.

What our family learned from all 4 verses is that there needs to be a proper balance between providing direction and guidance for them – and not frustrating them with expectations that only lead to exasperation. There is a fine line between providing space for them to grow and not neglecting the time we need to spend with them to lead by example – and not default.

In an article from a parent’s magazine I recently read children shared “**They feel less protected because someone is not there to meet them at home.**”

Cell phones and I-pods are no substitute for a parent. No father or mother would allow a rattlesnake or a wolf to gain entrance inside their home. The chances that the child would be gravely endangered would be significant. Well, every parent and grandparent should feel the same way about modern-day wolves and snakes that seek to influence our children and damage their character. The influence and power of a godly father and Christian home is the strongest foundation that a civilization and nation can have. We as a faith community need to teach and live out that truth to Harrisburg, Washington, D. C., and every nook and cranny in between. It is unfortunate that more people look to Oprah and Dr. Phil – than to the Bible for instruction and inspiration.

Last Saturday, we visited with our two granddaughters, Erica and Arielle. My daughter shared with me that her daughters – now 8 and 5 – deliberately ignore her at times. I almost cracked up laughing. The apples don't fall too far from the tree. I encouraged her to keep on keeping on – even when you must repeat the instructions for the second or third time. Don't be like the manager who forgot to manage and provide leadership. As Dr. James Dobson taught: "Parenting isn't for cowards." Amen.

During the early 1970's – the Reverend James Johnson came to be our Associate Pastor for urban ministries at my home church in Newark, N.J. As our church's six-week summer street program came to a close – we held our family night program concluding the summer project. I can still see and hear Brother Johnson giving these words to a packed church "The pimps on the streets around this church will do anything and everything to make a prostitute out of your daughter. The drug dealer will do anything and everything to make a user out of your son. The bar room will do everything to make a drinker out of your child." On and on he went with his litany. Finally he came to his conclusion shouting out these words: **"You better decide tonight mother and father to raise your children up on the truth of faith – and in the fear of God. If you do not train up your child in the way he should go – somebody else will. Do you want somebody to raise your child – or will you accept your God-given responsibility to do so?"** There was a spiritual explosion that night as he called us to the altar to do so.

Most of us know the song, **"The Cat's In the Cradle."** It was sung by Harry Chapin and tells a story of a father who is always too busy to spend time with his son. He keeps promising that the two of them will get together – **but they never do** – and the son grows up while he is too busy to notice. Then the man grows old and wants to spend time with his son. However, now his son is too busy to spend time with him. And as the song concludes, the father sings, "And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me, he'd grown up just like me. **The boy was just like me.**"

It is a sad and revealing song that reminds us of the importance of taking time with our children while we still have it, before it is too late. Unfortunately, the real life story of Harry Chapin follows closely the events of the song. **"Cat's In the Cradle"** was actually written, not by Harry Chapin, but by his wife. She asked him one day when he was going to slow down the torrid pace of his life and give some time to their children.

His answer was, "At the end of this busy summer, I'll take some time to be with them." That summer, ironically and tragically, Harry Chapin was killed in a car accident.

It is not possible to read that postscript of Chapin's death and miss the larger point – that something was known, believed, and even preached but never 'lived.' Our lesson today from Ephesians is known to many of us – believed by us – and even preached to us. The question is: **Will it be lived by us?** That is where the power and influence will come. That worked in 63 A. D. when Paul wrote it – and will work in 2009 if by the power God's enabling grace – we will live it. Do it this summer – start with your children and grandchildren.

Learning to listen to the children is an important aspect of fathering. There are times they will show us aspects of life we have not noticed. A friend recently sent me a story that makes this clear. I will share it with you as our closing word today:

**One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the express purpose of showing him how poor people live.**

They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

**When they returned from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"**

"It was great, Dad."

**"Did you see how poor people live," the father asked.**

"Oh yeah," said the son.

**"So, tell me, what you learned from the trip," said the father.**

The son said:

**"I saw that we have one dog – and they had four.**

"We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden – and they have a creek that has no end.

**"We have imported lanterns in our garden – and they have the stars at night.**

"We have a small piece of land to live on – and they have fields that go beyond our sight.

**"We have servants who serve us, but they serve others.**

"We buy our food – but they grow theirs.

**"We have walls around our property to protect us; they have friends to protect them."**

The boy's father was speechless.

**Then his son added, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."**

If you will listen to your children, they will listen to you, and then you will both be wiser and blessed.<sup>3</sup>

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

June 21, 2009 – Father's Day Preached at the 10:30 a.m. service

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Steve May for this illustration. This is my adaptation of it.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1834.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to my colleague and mentor, Dr. Thomas Lane Butts of Monroeville, Alabama, for this material.