

**Colossians No. 13****Colossians 3:20-21****December 2, 2012****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We are descending from Paul's grand summary of the Christian life in 3:1-17 to more specific instructions to Christians in respect to their various stations of life. We pointed out last time that it was natural for Paul to begin with the home, where our lives begin, and with marriage, the most fundamental and constitutive relationship of human life. But nearly as fundamental is the relationship between parents and children.

**Text Comment**

v.20 Once again take note of the Christocentricity of biblical ethics. We are people who relate everything we do to our loyalty to Jesus Christ. Why are children to obey their parents? There are no doubt many reasons but they are all related to the one Paul chooses to mention: such obedience *pleases the Lord*. We don't train our children to fit in to their culture or to make us look good as parents, but *to please the Lord!* When they please the Lord, they will fit in to the extent Christians should and they will certainly make us look good as parents! Paul, for example, can say more. In the parallel passage in Ephesians, he reminds Christian children that the command to honor one's parents is the "first commandment with the promise." (6:2) In the Ten Commandments that promise, as you remember, is that "your days will be long and it will go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." In Ephesians 6:2 Paul changes the wording of the fifth commandment somewhat to adjust it to the circumstances of a Gentile church that no longer lives in the holy land: "that you may live a long life on the earth." Paul doesn't mention the promise here; just as he was much more concise in vv. 18 and 19 than he was in Ephesians 5 in his instructions to husbands and wives.

Now there is a question as to what Paul means here by "children." The term he used could, in fact, refer to children of any age and in the ancient world a household might well include adult, even married children. Even they would still be subject to the *paterfamilias*, the father of the family whether he was their father or their grandfather. But the parallel text in Ephesians clearly refers to children who are being raised in the home and so it seems safe to conclude that Paul here referred to younger children, not yet adults. [Moo, 304]

Another question concerns Paul's "obey your parents *in everything*." It is a typically universal statement without qualification, such as we find often in the Bible. You have it again in v. 22 in reference to slaves obeying their masters. The qualifications are assumed

and safely assumed because the Bible makes them explicitly elsewhere, such as when we are told to obey God rather than men or to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but to God the things that are God's. If we are speaking of younger children, as seems to be the case, it makes more sense to emphasize the obedience by the addition of "in everything" and all the more since Paul is assuming that he's talking to genuinely Christian fathers who care to treat their children in a genuinely Christian way. But, alas, we know all too well in our day and age that there are limits even to the obedience that children owe their parents. In Victorian Britain it was easier for Bishop J.B. Lightfoot in his influential commentary on Colossians to say that "The rule is stated absolutely because the exceptions are so few that they may be disregarded." [227] Child pornography and the sexual abuse of children were not part of Lightfoot's world. [Clark, 123] Even children have an absolute right to say "No!" to certain things. In a spiritually mixed family in Paul's day it wouldn't have been unheard of for Christian children to be put upon by one of their parents to worship the family gods, for example. A fourteen year-old son would, as a Christian, certainly have been expected to refuse.

Once again, as with the brief remarks regarding wives and husbands, there is a theology of family, of children assumed here, a theology of the sons and daughters of Christians. Obviously the Apostle Paul includes them among the members of the congregation in Colossae, includes them among the Christians, among those who are to live their lives to please the Lord, among those who have a summons from their heavenly Father to answer. Like their mothers and fathers, they have commandments to keep as Christians for Christian reasons. Everywhere in the Bible, *I mean everywhere in the Bible*, we find the same and *never* do we find its opposite. Covenant children, the term of art for children born to believing parents or to *a* believing parent, *are Christians*. Everywhere in the Bible they are considered to belong to the people of God. They belong to the membership of the church and are to be disciplined like all other Christians. You could say of a convert, after all, that he is to be brought up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." [Eph. 6:4] It is striking, very striking it seems to me, that never in the Bible are we given the faintest idea that such children would not already be baptized but would be expected to be baptized at some point in their adolescence or young adulthood. We never hear of this in the Bible; we never see it happening.

Upon this fact -- that our children are Christians, that they belong to the church of Christ -- is built the biblical doctrine of parental nurture. Something must exist before it can be nurtured. Something has to be alive before it can be fed and watered. What exists is our children's life in Christ. But, you say, surely some children of Christians do not believe and do not grow up to follow Christ. True enough, sad as it is to say. Some converts don't continue either. But we are taught in the Bible to treat them as Christians and to nurture their faith until we are sure they are not believers. So with our children. The way to

nurture Christian faith, whether in a convert or a covenant child, is not to treat him or her as if he or she were an *unbeliever*, but to teach them to trust the Lord, to stand on his promises, to obey his commandments, and to be grateful for his salvation as Christians should. And, of course, in devout homes, the children grow up under such nurture to love and serve the Lord as adults. Church history and virtually any faithful Christian congregation provide massive demonstration of that fact.

- v.21 In Ephesians Paul put the point slightly differently: “Fathers do not provoke your children to anger...” and follows that with “but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord,” [6:4] These somewhat different ways of describing the ethics of Christian parents and children serve to indicate that however you sum it up in a few words, an entire ethic of family life and of the nurture of children is being introduced with this brief instruction for fathers. There is a great deal about raising children in the Bible. What Paul says so briefly here is intended to bring all of that teaching to mind. For example, mothers are not mentioned specifically, though they are included in the “parents” of v. 20, but it is perfectly clear in the Bible that both mothers and fathers have direct responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children. We read of mothers as teachers of their children in Proverbs, which seems to us utterly uncontroversial but it is a role that is never mentioned of mothers anywhere else in the literature of the ancient near east. And, of course, there is much more to that nurture than simply not discouraging your children. Everywhere and emphatically in the Bible the nurture of children in a Christian home consists of three things: instruction, discipline, and example and all of that occurring in a family atmosphere dominated by the gospel and by the love, thanksgiving, and joy that the gospel produces in believing hearts.

I won't belabor the point but the term “provoke” might better be translated “stir to rebellion.” The most authoritative dictionary of NT Greek paraphrases the verb this way: “to cause someone to react in a way that suggests acceptance of a challenge.” [Moo, 307] The point of “provoke” is that fathers are not to drive their children into rebellion.

We said last time that the particular commandments given to husbands and wives in verses 18 and 19 are due to the susceptibilities of each sex. That is, women were commanded to be subject because submission is hard for them, especially married to the men they often are, and an obligation that tends to chafe and so one they tend to ignore or deny outright. So it is *that* they need to be reminded of. In the same way, men have a particular susceptibility to anger and temper and have the capacity by their sex to intimidate their wives in harmful ways. They need to be reminded that such behavior betrays the law of Christ and does not serve the purposes of the Lord in marriage. Well, in the same way, fathers far too often discourage their children by either excessive temper or by a failure to be tender and loving toward them. So fathers are addressed accordingly.

As the great early Christian preacher John Chrysostom put it long ago: [Paul] “corrected what needed correction.” [ACCS, ix, 52]

While human nature created in the image of God ensured that there would often be in pagan homes of the Greco-Roman world real affection between parents and children, the authority of the father was absolute and he could be very severe with his children, far too severe, without concern that anyone would question his authority. The image of the family, of the proper relationship between fathers and children, was definitely not what it has become under the influence of Christianity. So it is because Christian men have obligations as well and tenderness toward their children is one of them. They can only please the Lord by being as gentle and loving as they are firm. So far these two brief verses in Colossians 3.

We live in strange and unhappy times, brothers and sisters. The American family is in tatters and the situation continues to worsen and will continue to do so because the foundations of happy, healthy family life continue to be systematically removed. You young people in the sanctuary this evening who are under thirty, I wonder sometimes if you have any idea of how times have changed; this is your world and you are used to us. But do you know *how* different your world is from the world that existed in our country not long ago. I graduated from a large public high school in suburban St. Louis in 1968 and most every one of my classmates was still living with his or her biological parents, not parent, parents. Divorce was comparatively rare in our community. Out of wedlock pregnancy was virtually unheard of. We had in our high school no program for unwed mothers. Not a single gal that I can think of in my graduating class of almost 700 was pregnant or had become pregnant during the years of her study at Parkway High. Even promiscuity, which certainly was not unheard of, was comparatively rare. Not any longer. I saw some time ago, as I suppose many of you did, the movie *The Blind Side*. It is a wonderful story of a Christian family rescuing a boy who had been virtually homeless and neglected his entire life and sending him on to a high school education and athletic stardom, more wonderful because it is true.

I had always wanted to read the book by Michael Smith upon which the movie was based to see how much more of the family’s faith made it into the story. So, when I found a copy on a shelf at my daughter’s home in Minneapolis a few weeks ago, I read it. I was pleased to discover that the movie is actually quite a faithful account of what happened, given the need to shorten a much longer story. One thing you learn in reading the book is that the entire chain of events that landed Michael Oher in the NFL was set in motion by the dying wish of an African American woman, a former drug addict who had been found by Jesus Christ, whose life had been dramatically transformed, and who had spent the last years of her life ministering to the needy and despairing people of her community. Her dying wish was that her nephew receive a Christian education. It was to honor that wish that Big Tony took the boy, her nephew, to an upscale, virtually all-white

Christian school in east Memphis to see if he might get him enrolled there. He happened to bring Michael Oher along with him. Both boys went to the school.

What the book also provides, and this is more to the point, is a much more detailed account of life in Hurt Village, the Memphis projects, the slum in which Michael Oher spent much of his boyhood. Few of the children of Hurt Village had any parents to speak of. They may have had a mother, but she may well have been a drug addict, as Michael's mother had been, and virtually useless to a little boy or girl. Few of these children received any education to speak of; if they went to school they went sporadically until they quit altogether. Crime was the economy of that community and crime was the future of those children. It is unspeakably sad to contemplate precious children being born into such a world where lives are ruined before they have begun! What makes the Michael Oher story so remarkable is that the number of children who escape the despair of such an upbringing in such a community is vanishingly small. When the story of the American 20<sup>th</sup> century comes to be written, the destruction of the African American family will surely be one of the most significant and revealing features of the story.

But then we don't need to hear about Hurt Village. We have a similar community much closer to home on the reservation at White Swan near Yakima, Washington. Our Presbytery's Sacred Road ministry works among a community that is largely defined by the absence of the family. I once asked Chris Granberry if he knew of a single family on the Yakama reservation that was intact; that is, in which father, mother, and children lived together in the same house. He knew of none. When twenty homes were destroyed by the wildfire two years ago, some 200 children were rendered officially "homeless." Those numbers are the dismal index of a total disintegration of the family in that native American community. They illustrate what happens when fathers and mothers, and especially when fathers, no longer take responsibility for their families.

But it isn't simply the family in Hurt Village or White Swan that is in trouble. The problems are already immense and are continuing to mount in millions of families nationwide that still have some structural integrity. The prevalence of divorce, of children being raised by only one parent, usually a mother, the example of family failure that has been set before them as they grow up, the sense of loneliness, alienation, and insecurity that results for children, the far greater likelihood that they will struggle and often fail as adults to make relationships work, and the increasing number of the children of divorce who will not marry themselves and who have no wish to have children: *these are social consequences of the disintegration of the American family that have immense implications for the future welfare of our society as much as they do they do for the affected individuals themselves.* In horrifying numbers the American family is no longer a close-knit community of love and loyalty and no longer serves as the school, the temple, and the shelter that God made the family to be. The biblically defined family is for vast numbers of American children either a distant memory or an institution and a personal experience of which they know nothing.

The great experiment now underway in Europe and North America is the attempt to establish healthy personal and social life on some other foundation than the nuclear family, the family composed of parents and their children, the foundation upon which a healthy human society has always been founded before. The indications are deeply discouraging. God made human beings to thrive when raised and nurtured in the heart of a loving family, with father and mother absolutely and obviously committed to the welfare of their children above all else. As children in our society become only one among several of their parents' commitments and often and too obviously not their first commitment, their inner selves are destabilized and there follows a cascade of anti-social consequences. Good grief, even Dr. Spock knew that and was talking about this years ago!

But none of our politicians is speaking of this because to address it would require the public admission that the culture, with the government's encouragement, has made one self-destructive decision after another and has no one to blame but itself for the catastrophe that has overtaken us. What are the defining features of European and American life? If you ask a politician he or she might tell you that it is economic opportunity or freedom of speech or the so-called "safety-net." But an honest observer wouldn't find those things nearly as telling, because not nearly as distinctive, as the astonishing number of adults who are unmarried, the unprecedented levels of drug use, the divorce rate, the number of children born out-of-wedlock, the soaring incidence of venereal disease, and the plunging birth-rates. This is a culture that has death written all over it and we continue to talk about taxes because no one is willing to talk about marriage and family and the ghastly consequences that a generation of systematic dismantling of what was a broadly Christian understanding of the social order has visited upon us. We not seem to be prospering without the family, by which we mean the lifetime loyalty of husbands and wives, and the supreme responsibility of parents -- fathers and mothers together -- for the care and nurture of their children.

One of the key concepts in Abraham Kuyper's thought -- you remember Kuyper as the Dutch polymath of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a theologian, churchman, politician, educator, and journalist -- I say, one of the key features of his social thought was the idea of *spheres*. According to Kuyper, if you study the Bible you will find that God created a variety of spheres within human life and culture, each sphere with its own responsibilities, its own sovereignty, and its own mode of social engagement or interaction. The family is such a sphere, business another, the university another, the state another, and, of course, the church still another. The family is not the market; the church is not the government, and so on. In Kuyper's thought art is also a sphere, as would be science. As God created it, each sphere has its own life and its own "work" to do for the welfare of the human community as a whole and for the welfare of the people of God within that community. The state has no authority over the church or the arts; the church should not run

the army, the university should not control business, and so on. Human life is designed to work best when each sphere is playing its own role in the society.

“Each sphere has its own identity, its own unique task, and its own God-given prerogatives. On each God has conferred its own peculiar right of existence and reason for existence.” [Gordon Spykman cited in Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 24]

In other words, with these different “spheres” God has organized human life so that it might be happy, prosper and be fruitful. The rights of each sphere are God-given and cannot be conferred or withdrawn by another, at least cannot be without tampering with God’s order for human life. It is not hard to see that much grief has come to us because of the interference of one sphere in the life and work of another, the state, supremely, interfering nowadays in virtually every other sphere of human life. There are many fewer people, for example, who will any longer deny outright that the government’s however well-intentioned tampering with the Native American or African-American family was the principal means of its destruction and that its tampering with the American family as a whole is now bringing that family to its knees. Of course, many other factors, including feminism, the sexual revolution, and the omnipresent influence of the media, have done their damage as well.

But here’s the point. No other sphere or institution can replace the family and its role in the cultivation of honorable and happy adulthood, any more than another sphere could replace the government or business. Richard Mouw points out that the incivility of modern life, the prevalent disdain for others that is a feature of our public discourse, its ruthless, profane, aggressively disrespectful character, is the fruit, the inevitable result of the disintegration of the family as a school of character. It used to be that much instruction in civility, in the proper way to think and to speak of others, including and especially those with whom you disagree, was acquired at the family table. We learned there the proper way to speak of others, about others and to others including others with whom you might disagree. Good manners -- which are simply a form of the respect of one’s neighbor -- are no longer taught at the family table and so, increasingly, they are never taught at all. As Mouw observes, young people today don’t know how to “dine;” instead they “graze.” They eat in front of the TV or standing in the kitchen or gorging on fast food that is mostly eaten somewhere else than at the family table. Their table manners are horrible because they never sat at a family table and were taught how to eat in a way that demonstrated respect for others. This is but one example of what Richard Mouw has called “sphere shrinkage.” [119-121]

The family is no longer doing its job raising children. They are not being taught the art of citizenship and of mutual respect at the family table and in the daily interactions of a well ordered family life. As many have observed, not having been taught in the school of character that an intact family is meant to be, they are not prepared for adult life the way only a family can

prepare a young person. As a result many young American adults nowadays latch on far too quickly to a variety of doubtful relationships or institutions because, having never learned the art of true loyalty in their own homes, in many cases having lost their “homes,” while they still crave a place to call home they don’t know what home should look like. The result is a nation of people who can’t keep their commitments and can’t seem to find what they are looking for. Their parents were supposed to have prepared them for life, but never did. They are inept at life!

Mouw proposes that in the case of sphere shrinkage, when spheres of human culture are weakened, other spheres must take up the slack. But it is doubtful that any other sphere can replace the family or compensate for the loss of its proper influence in the life of children. We have found through the years, and our experience is typical, that from time to time the influence of the church can make up for a dysfunctional family culture, but, the sad fact is that most of the time it cannot or does not.

Indeed, I say all of this so that you will be reminded that God’s law and the pattern of human life as God ordained it is built into the fabric and structure of human existence. The Bible is not first a law book or even an account of the way of salvation. It is first an account of reality, of how the world works. The divine order can certainly be denied and rebelled against, as it is in our day, but it cannot be eradicated. Man is but a creature, not the creator. So when the effort to replace God’s order is made, what happens inevitably is not vistas of new and better life opening before us but fragmentation, disintegration, and alienation. The world was made to run well in one way and one way only. It will never run well in some other way. What you are seeing before your eyes in our culture is the demonstration of the truth of God’s Word. The law of God is proved not only by the blessing that attends those who obey it but by the misery that eventuates when it is disobeyed. In our day, when people scorn the law of God and the will of God for human life, it is important for Christians to have the confidence of their convictions. And that should be easy enough when a culture that has made the repudiation of God’s created order the principle of its social life can be seen to be disintegrating around us!

But, of course, we are not in the first place concerned about the place of the family in human life in general, though its supreme importance is some dramatic proof of the truth of the biblical worldview, but of the role of the family in the transmission of the faith from one generation of Christians to the next. The Christian family is, above all else in the Word of God, a nursery and a school of faith. Children born to Christian parents are to be raised to be committed, earnest Christians themselves and when parents are faithful to the obligations laid upon them in the Word of God Christian children become Christian adults; always have, always will. *This* is the burden of vv. 20-21!

As soon as we move out of the apostolic age itself, we encounter the Christian family as the nursery of faith and the source of far and away the largest number of Christians in the

burgeoning church. Even the early church, a church that was gaining converts in great numbers through its evangelistic enterprise, grew first and foremost through the Christian family. Most of the names an educated Christian would recognize from the first four centuries of Christian history after Pentecost were the products of Christian homes. I have been reading of late a study of the life and ministry of Basil of Caesarea, one of the so-called Cappadocian fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. He was born and raised in a devout Christian family. Both of his parents were likewise the product of a distinctly and avowedly Christian upbringing. As the author of this work observes:

“Remarkably few of the well-known Christians of Basil’s generation leap onto the historical stage straight from a completely pagan milieu. Christians had been breeding Christians for a long time.” [Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 3-5]

I happened also to have read recently a study of Ambrose, the great Italian bishop of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, whose life and work you may remember intersect in important ways that of Augustine. He too was the product of a Christian family and faithful Christian parents. His sister and brother were both devout Christians and the three remained confidants of one another all their lives. That is a story repeated endlessly in early Christian history and in church history ever since.

This congregation provides evidence aplenty that Paul’s commandments to parents, to fathers especially, have in view the nurture of Christian faith in the children of a Christian family. Fathers are not to provoke their children to rebellion *precisely because such rebellion may well lead them out of the faith and the circle of salvation!*

Here, as in many places in the Bible, we are reminded of the fundamental importance of *obedience* to human life. Paul tells children *to obey* their parents and fathers not to provoke their children to rebellion, which is to say, don’t provoke them to disobedience, don’t make it hard for them to obey. Spoiled children, embittered children rarely *learn to obey God*. That is why obedience is so important. The obedience of children to their parents is training in obedience to God. Disobedience to parents is almost always preparation for disobedience *to God*.

As Alexander Whyte once beautifully observed:

“A child’s father is much more than his mere father to him. His father is both his father and his God to every child. A little child cannot rise above his father, he cannot see beyond his father. To every child his father is the man of all men to him on earth or in heaven. There is nothing his father cannot do for him, if he pleases. There is no strength, no resource, no nobleness, no wisdom, with which every child’s own father is not endowed. The young heart that will yet rise to the love and the adoration of its Father in heaven, for a long time knows him only by his paternoster name. And in all this ‘earthly

fathers learn their craft from God.’ For God, for a long time, clothes every father on earth with all his own attributes and prerogatives and duties and dues. The divine throne, the divine scepter the divine sword, are all as good as made over into every man’s hand into whose house a little child is born.” [*The Walk, Character, and Conversation of our Lord Jesus Christ*, 68]

Do you see his point, fathers. Your children learn who and what God is, and what God is like, and what use there is in trusting him and obeying him, from living with their fathers at home. They will think God as wise as their fathers are wise, as gentle and loving as they have found their fathers to be, as firm and unbending when necessary as their fathers were with them. Your sacred stewardship is to model God himself to your children. You say, “Who can possibly do that?” But God is gracious and will take your little for more than it is if only you are sincerely and earnestly seeking to love your children with Christ’s love and to train them in the ways of the Lord and to show the face of their heavenly father to them in your own. Fathers can do this, we know, because they *have* done it, times without number.

Johann Albrecht Bengel, the great Lutheran Pietist commentator on the New Testament, whose original work in Latin is a marvel of compression, has a four word comment on v. 20: “fractus animus, pestis juventutis.” It means “a broken spirit is the bane or the ruin of youth.” So Paul’s short word to fathers: don’t break the spirit of your children, don’t ever do that; don’t cause your children to lose heart. Encourage them, love them, make their life a happy life and teach them that it comes from the love of their heavenly Father and of their Savior Jesus Christ and that this is the overflow of the joy of your salvation and of theirs. In that context then you can make proper demands upon them that they will accept and take pleasure in meeting.

Remember, the whole point is to bring them up to love, to trust, and to honor the Lord. They are his children before they are yours and your stewardship is to prepare them *for him*.