

DISCIPLINE FOR GODLINESS

DISCIPLINE OF FATHERHOOD

FATHERHOOD'S "DO NOTS"

The “do not” is perfectly clear, because it literally means, “*do not provoke your children to anger so they begin to seethe with resentment and irritation.*” The *New English Bible* captures the idea very well: “**You fathers, again, must not goad your children to resentment.**” The directness and simplicity of this “do not” invites us to do some honest thinking about the ways we goad our children to exasperation.

Criticism

Near the top of most lists has to be criticism. **Kent Hugh's** said: “Every year when our family decorates our Christmas tree and I place a tiny red-and-green glass-beaded wreath on the tree, I think of the little boy who gave it to me when I coached soccer. His sarcastic, demeaning father would run up and down the field belittling his boy with words like “chicken” and “woman.” He was the only parent I ever told to be quiet or leave the field. I wonder sometimes how that boy, now a man, has fared.”

Winston Churchill had such a father in **Lord Randolph Churchill**. He did not like the looks of Winston, he did not like his voice, and he did not like to be in the same room with his son. He never complimented him — only criticized him. His biographers excerpt young Winston's letters begging both parents for his father's attention: “I would rather have been apprenticed as a bricklayer's mate ... it would have been natural ... and I should have got to know my father.... ”

Fathers who criticize their children often bring them to discouragement. The parallel version of this “do not” in [Colossians 3:21](#) indicates that children embittered by nagging and deriding “lose heart” (**NASB**) — like a horse that has had its spirit broken. You can see it in the way a horse moves, and you can see it in the eyes and posture of a disheartened child.

Criticism comes in many ways besides overt words. Some parents never praise their children on principle — “my praise will mean something when I give it” — only they never give it. Then there is faint praise, backhanded praise like that given to the boy who had just scored a soccer goal: “That was okay, son; now next week do better.” Often it is not the words — it is the tone of voice or the distracted eyes which say it all. Why are fathers critical? Perhaps that is the way their fathers treated them.

Perhaps they are simply critical people who mask it well in public, but cannot restrain themselves in the heat of domestic relationships. To such fathers, God's Word comes like an arrow headed for the bull's-eye: do not exasperate your children with criticism.

Over strictness

Some fathers exasperate their children by being overly strict and controlling. They need to remember that rearing children is like holding a wet bar of soap — too firm a grasp and it shoots from your hand, too loose a grip and it slides away. A gentle but firm hold keeps you in control.

We cannot begin to estimate the ravages of over strictness on the evangelical Christian community over the years. I have had occasion in my ministry to bury people who lived virtually all of their seventy years in reaction to the harsh legalism of their upbringing — lost bars no one could manage to pick up. Others were not so tragic. They came to renounce legalism Biblically and theologically, but still wrestled with it emotionally for the rest of their lives.

Why are some fathers overly strict? Many because they are trying to protect their children from an increasingly Philistine culture — and smothering rules seem the best way to accomplish that. Others are simply controlling personalities who use rules, money, friendship, or clout to rule their children's lives. The Bible, read through their controlling grid, becomes a license to own and dominate. Still others wrongly understand their faith in terms of Law rather than grace. Some men are overly strict because they are concerned about what others will think. "What will they think if my child goes to this place ... or wears this clothing ... or is heard listening to that music?" Not a few preachers' kids have been catapulted into rebellion because their fathers squeezed their lives to fit their parishioners' expectations. What a massive sin against one's children!

Rather, we ought to begin our fatherhood by holding the tiny helpless bar snugly, but as it grows, gradually and wisely loosen our grip. As conscientious fathers we have to say "no" to many things. Thus we should try to say "yes" to as much as possible, and save our no's for the really important situations.

We must be Biblical in regard to our no's — and as our children grow, be prepared to discuss the rules Biblically and principally. We must learn to trust God with our children, realizing they must learn to make decisions for themselves.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children by being overly strict. **Learn to hold their lives with God's pressure and to mold it with His love.**