

## Christian Fatherhood

### Colossians 3:21

***“Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”***

Our text is straightforward and simple this morning: *“Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”* It divides naturally into three parts:

1. First, there is the **address**, *“Fathers.”*
2. Second, there is the **command**, *“Do not embitter or exasperate your children.”*
3. Third, there is the **purpose for the command**, *“or they will become discouraged.”*

We will look at these three parts of the text one at a time in reverse order:

First, we will direct our attention to the goal of Christian fathers, namely, rearing children who are not discouraged.

Second, we will look at the duty of Christian fathers, namely, not to do those things that discourage children.

Finally, we will focus on the leader in Christian parenthood; namely, fathers.

**But first, a word about the fatherhood of God.**

In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught his disciples to call God Father: *“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.”*

Jesus taught that God is not everyone’s Father. In **John 8:42, 44** he said to those who refused to follow him, *“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God . . . You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.”*

God is the Father only of those who are led by the Spirit of his Son. In **Romans 8:9, 14–15** Paul says,

*“Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba! Father!”*”

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children and God is our Father.

Not everyone can lay claim to the privilege of knowing God as Father.

Only those who are born of God (**John 1:13**),

who receive Christ (**John 1:12**),

and who are led by the Spirit (**Romans 8:14**)

have the right to receive the inheritance of the children — promises like **Matthew 7:11**, *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”*

The privilege of prayer and the promise that God will work all things together for our good is part of the inheritance we receive as God’s children.

This is what it means to have God as our Father.

There are two reasons I begin with this word about the fatherhood of God:

First, I believe all human fatherhood should be patterned on divine fatherhood. The overarching guide for every father should be to live in such a way that his children can see what God the Father is like.

They ought to see in their human father a reflection — albeit imperfect — of the heavenly Father.

In his ...

strength and tenderness

in his wrath and mercy

in his exaltation and condescension

in his surpassing wisdom and patient guidance and understanding.

The task of every human father is to be for his children an image of the Father in heaven - a monumental and sobering task indeed!

The other reason I begin with the fatherhood of God is to give this message relevance for everyone in this room whether you are a father or not; and whether you had a Christian father or not.

I want to make clear from the outset that the sadness many may feel at never having had a father like the father I will describe, and the sadness others may feel at never having been a father like the father I will describe.

This sadness can be swallowed up and overcome with joy this morning because God offers his fatherhood to anyone who will accept the gift of adoption by trusting Christ and choosing to be led by the Holy Spirit.

There are two ways to listen to this message this morning:

One is to take it as a straightforward exhortation from the Word of God to fathers on how to rear their children.

The other is to take it as a parable pointing to the way the Father in heaven loves those who believe and follow his Son. Frankly, I hope all of you hear it in both senses.

So, let's go to the text and begin with the last phrase of **Colossians 3:21**,  
*"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."*

The goal of a good father is to rear children who are not discouraged.  
The word "discouraged" implies ...

losing heart

being listless

spiritless

disinterested

moody

sullen

with a kind of blank resignation toward life.

Don't be the kind of father who rears that kind of person.

Instead, develop a style of fatherhood that produces the opposite of discouragement.

Now what is that? I would sum it up in three characteristics:

The opposite of being discouraged is being hopeful.

The opposite of being discouraged is being happy.

The opposite of being discouraged is being confident and courageous.

So, I would say that the negative form of verse 21 really implies a positive command as well.

It says, “*Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged*” but it means not only ***to avoid*** one kind of fatherhood, it also means **to pursue** another kind; namely ...

the kind of fatherhood which gives ...

hope instead of discouragement

gives happiness instead of discouragement

and gives confidence and courage.

If we stopped right here, we would have said nothing distinctly Christian. There’s not one parent in a thousand who thinks that the aim of parenthood should be to discourage children, but the apostle Paul would be distressed if all I did were to use his words here simply to express some everyday common sense, or some natural wisdom. He was not inspired by the Holy Spirit to confirm the insights of the latest Parenting Magazine. He was inspired to teach parents things that no natural eye has seen and no natural ear has heard (**1 Corinthians 2:9–13**).

Here is what I mean. Paul’s teaching makes it clear that when he says we should be fathers who give hope instead of discouragement, he means **hope in GOD** –

not hope in money

or hope in popularity

or hope in education

or hope in a spouse

or hope in professional success.

If you had asked Paul, or Jesus, “What kind of freedom from discouragement do you want our children to have?” he would not have said, “I want your children to be freed from discouragement by being filled with hope that they will become wealthy . . . or well-known, or intellectual, or married, or successful.”

We know this is not what he means. He means, be the kind of fathers who do not discourage your children but rather fill them with hope in God.

And when we consider happiness as the opposite of discouragement, Paul would not be content if a father simply made his child feel good by giving him whatever he wanted. This sort of happiness kills.

About some kinds of happiness the Scripture says, “*Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom*” (James 4:9).

There is worldly happiness that has nothing to do with God, and therefore has no value in the sight of God. It comes from the creation alone and not from the Creator. This isn’t what Paul wants fathers to put in the place of discouragement.

But there is another joy that comes from God, for example, in Psalm 4:7–8,

*“You have filled my heart with greater joy  
than when their grain and new wine abound.  
I will lie down and sleep in peace,  
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”*

Fathers: don’t discourage your children, but fill them with joy in God!

Teach them early on that through many sufferings they must enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22),

that they can rejoice in sufferings, knowing that “*suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope*” — IN GOD (**Romans 5:3–4**).

Don’t discourage them. **Make them happy in God by helping them hope in God.**

And when we consider confidence as the opposite of discouragement, the message of Scripture takes a dramatic turn away from the common sense natural wisdom of the world.

The world says: Don’t discourage a child; build up his self-confidence.

The Scripture says: Don’t discourage a child; build up his God-confidence.

In fact, the Scripture is more precise than that; it teaches: Don’t discourage a child but do your best **to root out** his self-confidence and replace it with a confidence in God.

And when it teaches us to root out self-confidence, it means **root out the desire to be and to appear self-confident.**

One vivid illustration of how Paul’s heavenly Father was patiently working to root out Paul’s self-confidence is given in **2 Corinthians 1:8–9**. Here is a description of how God the Father was working on Paul *twenty years after his conversion*, which means this is a very deeply rooted sin in all of us. He writes,

*“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But **this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.**”*

In other words, the divine purpose of Paul's affliction was (as it is the purpose of all good fatherly discipline) to root out the remaining self-confidence of Paul's heart and to cast him on God alone.

Why?

Because God didn't want him to be confident?

Because he wanted him to be listless, spiritless, moody, sullen, weak, fearful?

No! It was God who came to Paul in Corinth and said, "*Do NOT be afraid, but speak and do NOT be silent; for I am with you.*"

So, the confidence that we are to build into our children is not self-confidence, but confidence in the grace and power of God. "*Do not be afraid . . . I AM WITH YOU.*"

A good father will ponder:

How can I be like my own heavenly Father?

How can I banish self-reliance from the heart of my children and fill them with confidence and courage and zeal and boldness that are rooted in the grace and power of God and not in themselves?

How can I be the kind of father whose children do not lose heart or become spiritless or listless or sullen or discouraged, but are filled with hope in God and happiness in God and confidence in God and courage to attempt great things for the glory of God?

**These questions lead us to turn now to the second part of our text; namely, the duty of Christian parents to not embitter their children.**

*"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."*

Again, we notice that the commandment is negative — something to be avoided. It is a warning against the misuse of legitimate authority.

Paul has just said in verse 20, “*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*”

This gives parents tremendous authority and responsibility under God. Children are to do what parents say.

Now in verse 21 he cautions fathers against a misuse of this God-given authority. The misuse he has in mind is that fathers might treat their children in such a way that their spirit is broken, and they become hopelessly discouraged.

Paul calls this misuse “*embittering*” them: “*Do not embitter your children.*” The term seems to carry with it the idea of long-term effects.

So, let’s ask, then, What do fathers do that provoke children to long-term discouragement and hopelessness?

I’ll mention two things:

**First, some fathers fail to BE happy and hopeful and confident in God. Fathers, who you ARE in relation to God is far more important than any particular parenting technique you might try to employ.**

Will your children hope in God if you hope in money?

Will your children be happy in God if they see that fishing and hunting and golfing are happier experiences for you than Sunday morning worship?

Will your children be confident in God if your whole demeanor communicates the desire to be seen as self-confident?

**The most important work that a father can do for the sake of his children is to be converted!**

The most important strategy for rearing children is to become a new man in Christ — whose hope and happiness and confidence are in God and not in himself.

We know this is true from Scripture because here we are taught to imitate our heavenly Father:

We are told to be holy as he IS holy (1 Peter 1:16).

We are told to be merciful as he IS merciful (Luke 6:36).

We are told to be kind and patient and understanding and forgiving.

To be a good child is to copy daddy.

It honors a father to be imitated, and we are commanded to honor our fathers.

**And so, the most important question a father can ask is not what shall I teach my children, but rather who am I before the living God and before my children?**

The first thing that fathers can do to **embitter their children** to long-term discouragement and hopelessness — they can fail to BE hopeful, happy, and confident in God.

**The second thing** that fathers do which embitter children to long term discouragement and hopelessness is to discipline them in an impulsive, erratic, and inconsistent way.

Unpredictable, impulsive, hostile discipline makes children fearful, bitter, deceitful, and discouraged.

They don't know where or why the explosion will come next.

They say to themselves, "What's the use! How can I hope that being good is any better than being bad?"

And so the spirit of hope is broken, and in its place comes calculated, deceitful, discouraged maneuvering.

On the other hand, when discipline is ...

controlled and appropriate

consistent and based on clear rules and principles of justice in the home, an atmosphere is created where children flourish in freedom.

They know the limits and they feel secure and free to dream and play and plan and work inside those limits of righteousness.

They gain confidence that this is the way God is. He is not impulsive or erratic or inconsistent.

There is order.

There is justice tempered with mercy.

There is hope and encouragement.

Why, I might even be able to accomplish something of value or even greatness if I fit into this order and depend on the goodness of the Father who loves me like this.

So, fathers, don't embitter your children by being impulsive, erratic, or inconsistent in your discipline.

Be like your Father in heaven, so that your children can know him and become hopeful and happy and confident in him.

We can only briefly refer to the third part of the text; namely, the address: "*Fathers*".

Verse 20 said, "*Children, obey your parents.*"

This clearly teaches that mothers as well as fathers are to be obeyed. Mothers and fathers have a shared authority over the children.

But in verse 21 fathers are addressed in particular.

There is a peculiar role that the Scripture gives to husbands and fathers. Fathers bear a special responsibility for the moral life of the family.

So, I urge you to take up this responsibility, fathers, and be the kind of man who imparts ...

**hope and happiness and confidence to your children ...**

**And you can do this, because you yourself have found ...**

**your hope**

**and your happiness**

**and your confidence in God.**

Amen, and Happy Father's Day!