

OPENING SERMON
for the
Fifty-seventh Annual Convention
of the
CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

delivered by
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Text: **Ephesians 6:4**

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and only Savior!

Our sermon text for the opening service of the 57th Annual Convention of the Concordia Lutheran Conference is Ephesians 6:4 and reads as follows: “*And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*” This is our text.

Dear fellow sinners, ransomed from sin, death and hell by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, in His own precious blood:

Our text was chosen to support our Convention Motto, “*Be married to whom you will, only in the Lord*” (I Corinthians 7:39) and the doctrinal essay, “The Importance of Choosing and Having a Truly Christian Spouse.” In the keynote sermon this morning we shall hear: “Why Children Need A Christian Father” under two main points: (I) A Christian Father is Vital to Avoid What God *Forbids*: Provoking Children to Wrath; and (II) A Christian Father is Vital To Do What God *Commands*: Bringing Up Children in the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, in Thy grace and mercy bestow upon us truly Christian fathers who, in sound faith, rely on Thy Word and grace, to do what is necessary to provide for the spiritual welfare of their family and thus to prove a rich blessing also to the church and to society. Renew the Christian fathers in our midst in their God-wrought Gospel faith both to will and to do of Thy good pleasure. Enlighten us all with the Scriptural reasons why it is vital for children to have a Christian father. In Jesus’ saving name, we beseech Thee. Amen.

Our text again is Ephesians 6:4, which reads as follows: “*And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*”

Right after laying out the duty of children and the blessing of the Fourth Commandment, the Apostle directs God’s Word to the *fathers* in the Ephesian congregation and, by extension, to all fathers everywhere. He begins with a prohibition, telling fathers what they are forbidden to do and must avoid in their conduct toward their children. What is that? To provoke their children to wrath! What does this mean? Fathers are not to offend their children and thus cause them to get irritated, exasperated and angry with frustration. Fathers are not to give offense and thus provoke their children to just anger. Now children often *take* offense and become *unjustly* angry because of their sinful flesh. That is not the wrath here referred to. No, the wrath mentioned in our text has the father as its cause. He *provoked* it. How? By not doing what a *Christian* father should do. It may be that he is not a Christian father, and without faith it is impossible for him to please God, having neither the will or ability to do so. Thus, guided only by the corrupt flesh, he acts in ways that only confuse and frustrate his children. He may refuse entirely the responsibility he has as the head of the household and avoid the role of father in every way possible. This tragic situation may have life-long and

even eternal disastrous consequences for his children. The damage done is severe and sometimes fatal. It is vital to have a Christian father who takes to heart what God says about his responsibilities and is enlightened by God's Word to follow what God enjoins for the benefit of the children. A Christian father is motivated and empowered by the Gospel of God's free grace and forgiveness in Christ his Savior to avoid giving offense to his children, that which God expressly forbids here in our text. But Christian fathers also have their old Adam to deal with and may fail at times because of the weakness of the flesh. Christian father, examine yourself today in this regard. Have you given offense to your children? Yes — many times. This happens when we allow our flesh to react to a situation rather than to be led by the Spirit and Word of God. We often either over-react or under-react, “go overboard” or “ignore,” over-discipline or under-discipline. For example, we may fail to set rules, to enforce them consistently, to follow up with appropriate consequences, and so on. Why? We fathers are often lazy and selfish. What is the result? By our neglect, our children do not know where they stand; and, in their attempt to please us, they become quickly exasperated, frustrated and even angry. We fail our children as fathers when we fail to use the Law properly as a curb, as a mirror, and as a rule. We must set guidelines to show the proper way children are to please God, using His Law as a *rule* with the Gospel as the *motivation* and *power*. We must convict of sin when rules are broken, using the Law as a *mirror* with the Gospel as the *absolution* and *power* to bring forth fruits of repentance. We must, at times, chastise children using the Law as a *curb* against the flesh and its lusts, with the Gospel as the *power* for the New Man in his battle against the Old Man. But all too often we are too self-engrossed, tired and lazy to do these things — consistently. Our failure and neglect results in wrathful children — and **we** are to blame.

Again we may offend by going to the other extreme and setting up rules to the *extreme*, enforcing *unreasonable* goals and handing out punishments that are *too severe*. The children soon feel like “America's Most Wanted” and begin to view their father as policeman, judge and jailer. They become exasperated, frustrated and angry; and the over-reaction on the part of the father is directly responsible.

We offend as fathers when we fail to properly *divide* the Law and Gospel. The Law cannot reform or change a person into an obedient child — it can only curb, convict and guide. Over-discipline is a result of the failure to use the Gospel to *absolve* penitent sinners and *empower* them and *motivate* them. Also a father must follow the example of the Lord in the Fourth Commandment and use positive incentives and praise to help a child do what is God-pleasing. A father should be a master at giving absolution and comforting the penitent with God's grace in Christ. The *Gospel* makes cheerful children — nothing else does! If Gospel-forgiveness is not prominent in a father's vocabulary, he is offending his children by failing properly to divide the Law and Gospel for penitent sinners.

Fathers, when your sons or daughters say they are sorry, do you clearly absolve them by the Gospel, mentioning the cost of grace and exalting the Savior? If not, you are failing; and you will continue to fail. And the inevitable outcome of such offense is mentioned by Paul in Colossians 3:21, “*Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.*” Your children will become “*discouraged*”; they will be crushed and dis-spirited to the point of giving up, feeling that they can never please their father, no matter what, and lacking the Gospel motivation and power to even try! To do such damage to a child's spirit is inexcusable!

To avoid falling into these offending patterns, a father must learn anew the proper attitude toward his children. To do so, he must examine himself in the light of Holy Writ.

Fathers, do you consider each of your children a precious gift of God? An undeserved blessing from the Almighty? Do you describe them as Jacob did: “*The children which God hath graciously given thy servant*” (Genesis 33:5)? My friends, put away any self-indulgent pity, bitterness or resentment you may have because of the past sins of your children or because of the burden of responsibility and work necessarily placed upon you because of your children!

Fathers, do you realize that you are accountable to God for how well you raise your children? Do you desire to be a *faithful* steward, seeking the praise of God? Brothers in Christ, put away any thoughts of pleasing yourselves, and think of self-sacrifice for your families!

Fathers, do you use the means God has given you to raise your children? God has provided you with all that you need to be a faithful steward. Fellow-redeemed in Christ, put away any thought that it is too late or too hard to be the Christian father you know you should be! God will work in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure! (Philippians 2:13).

Father, do you know that God will bless you in your proper efforts and give you true, lasting satisfaction in knowing you are doing things God's way? Brethren, don't look for a short-cut to happiness for your family. Your faithful labor will not be forgotten by the Lord — He always remembers the labor of love done for His sake, for He Himself works it in and through you by means of the Gospel! "But no one appreciates what I do," a father often opines. God does. And even though your children do not show their gratitude now, perhaps they will come to appreciate you to some extent when they grow up and have their own families. Regardless, God will bless you; and that is all you need to know. Remember, no Christian is appreciated as he should be by others in this evil world. While it is certainly God-pleasing for children to show their appreciation to "dear old Dad" more often, when is the last time you praised, complimented or thanked your father for all he does for you? Children are to respect and appreciate their father also as a precious gift of God.

Do you see why children need a *Christian* father? Only a *Christian* father is empowered and motivated not to offend his children, not to provoke them to wrath. Moreover, only a *Christian* father is enabled by the Lord to do what God commands for his children: "*Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:4b). *Christian* fathers understand that they are, as the heads of their households, responsible for the spiritual training and education of their children. We must answer to God directly. Even our wives are only our helpers — they do not bear our responsibility. A father must be the leader and guide — he cannot abdicate his responsibility to his wife or, God-forbid, to the State. Some men are under the erroneous opinion that, if they provide for the *bodily* needs of their family, nothing more can be expected from them. While the Scriptures tell us: "*But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel*" (I Timothy 5:8), a father's responsibility extends beyond the body to the soul. God holds him to bringing up his children **God's** way, "*in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*"

"*Nurture*" refers to the whole Christian training and education of children — instruction and correction. In II Timothy 3:16 this word is translated "*instruction.*" "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*" And here is our textbook: "*All Scripture*"! We are to teach its lessons both formally and informally, by word and by example. We must ever keep in mind how our children watch and emulate us, and that "actions often speak louder than words," as they say.

Much has been said about so-called "quality-time." But there must be sufficient quantity for there to be any quality! Fathers must remember that even in play-time they are able to teach valuable lessons in an informal manner.

But they should also teach in a formal way by means of devotions, checking up on Sunday school lessons, and teaching the Catechism. In the Old Testament, God says in Deuteronomy 6:6-7, "*And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.*" God gives us this promise in Proverbs 22:6, "*Train up a child in the way he should go; and, when he is old, he will not depart from it.*" The hard work we put in now will certainly be worth it in the long run for the eternal welfare of the soul of each of our children. No teaching of God's Word is ever in vain.

We must also bring up our children in the “*admonition*” of the Lord. This word literally means, in its verb form, “*to put in mind*” and thus “to admonish and warn.” To rule well our own houses (cf. I Timothy 3:4) requires us to warn and rebuke our children regarding sin. The Bible states, Proverbs 29:15, “*The rod and reproof give wisdom; but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.*”

Remember Eli? He failed properly to warn and rebuke his sons. It is written, I Samuel 2:22-25, “*Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he said unto them, ‘Why do ye such things? For I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear; ye make the Lord’s people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intreat for him?’ Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them.*” Eli didn’t do what he could, as God told Samuel later on, I Samuel 3:13, “*For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.*”

If you know your child’s sin and do not do all you can to convict him, you fail to admonish him as God commands. Remember David? He failed to use the Law properly with his son Adonijah, a proud and haughty child, as it is written, I Kings 1:6a, “*And his father had not displeased him at any time in saying, ‘Why hast thou done so?’*” Parental indulgence and partiality is a sin against one’s children — don’t confuse it with love! Children need to be *admonished!* Convict them with the Law to work contrition!

But don’t stop there, my brothers in Christ; remember to absolve the penitent with the clear, sure Gospel! Your children should see the Apostle’s exhortation in Ephesians 4:32 manifested by you, their father: “*And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.*” Forgive your children, as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven you.

How has God forgiven you? He has forgiven you 100% of your sins, as it is written of our great God: “[*He*] *forgiveth all thine iniquities*” (Psalm 103:3); “*there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared*” (Psalm 130:14). He forgives us every day, richly and abundantly: “*I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins ...I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins. Return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee*” (Isaiah 43:25, 44:22). Why does God forgive? Out of His mercy for Christ’s sake, Micah 7:18 – “*Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger forever, because He delighteth in mercy.*” Paul proclaims, Acts 13:38 – “*Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.*” And He explains why in Ephesians 1:6-7, namely: “*To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*”

When the Law works the “A-B-C’s” of repentance, so that a child: A - admits his guilt; B - blames no one but himself; and C - confesses his sin, you as his father must use the “A-B-C’s” of forgiveness by the Gospel: A - Absolve him completely; B - bring out the blood of Jesus as the cost of his forgiveness, and C - confess Christ to him as his gracious Savior. For the Bible states, I John 1:9, 7c: “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...*” “*and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin*” (Cf. Isaiah 55:7). Then, by the Gospel, the child will have both the power and motivation to bring forth fruits meet for repentance. Only by properly dividing the Law and Gospel can a father be a faithful steward of his children.

It is manifestly clear that, if a father is not a *true Christian*, he will not, he cannot, do what

God enjoys. He cannot teach by word and example what he himself does not believe and do. He cannot be the faithful steward of the soul of a child when his own soul is far from God and His Word. Why would a Christian mother desire such a tragic situation for the children entrusted to her? My dear Christian sisters, to choose someone to be your spouse who will put your children in spiritual jeopardy is to make one of the greatest mistakes a Christian can make. Children need a *Christian* father; and a *Christian* woman needs a *Christian* husband to be that *Christian* father to her children. May God provide us with *Christian* husbands and fathers!

Children, you have heard what a great responsibility and duty your father bears in your regard. He has made many mistakes; he needs to hear your forgiveness. Without the Gospel he has no power or motivation to do what he must either. Tell him that you love him, and show him that you do by your obedience. Tell him that you are grateful, and show him your gratitude by gladly doing for him what you can. Make every day a “*Father’s Day*,” and God will bless you, as He promises in the Fourth Commandment.

Fathers, God has forgiven us all our sins for Jesus’ sake. His holy, shed blood covers and blots out 100% of our failures and offenses forever. With this gracious remission, let us serve God as faithful stewards, bringing up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, by His grace and power alone! God grant it, for Jesus’ sake. Amen!

Soli Deo gloria!