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RELEASE POINT
Colossians 3:20-21

I've been thinking a lot about my experience as a parent lately. When I was single I was one of those guys who had no interest in babies. Friends who had a baby would ask, "would you like to hold her?" Though I didn't say it I usually thought, "Why would I want to do that? The thing will almost certainly do something disgusting on me." I was pretty much certain that the child would egest some bodily fluid onto me. When Laurie was pregnant with Carissa I was all in mentally to the idea of having a family, but I wondered how I would do with this baby business. It was astounding what happened when Carissa finally arrived. Suddenly I found that this little infant was the most wondrous, adorable thing in the world.

I remember vividly our first visit to the pediatrician's office for a well baby checkup when Carissa was 6 weeks old. I was wearing a navy blue shirt and some white shorts. I was holding precious little Carissa as we were sitting in the waiting area. While we were waiting she spit up all over the front of my shirt. It was hard to believe that much stuff could come out of such a little baby. When we were called in to see the doctor I stood up and discovered that my precious girl had also expelled a prodigious amount of matter out the other end, so much that it overwhelmed the diaper she was wearing and it was no deposited on my shorts. The amazing thing was, I didn't care. It was about as disgusting as it gets, and it didn't matter to me. That was an early lesson that being a parent would involve experiencing some things that are less than appealing, but that it is all worth it. It was going to be messy, but wonderful.

Toby and Anna were overjoyed to learn that Anna is pregnant, for their first attempts to start a family had not gone as easily as hoped. However, Anna has been struggling with morning sickness, only not just in the morning. She has been so sick at night she hasn't been able to sleep. Recently I was talking to her and she was obviously tired and ill. I said, "So, really glad you're having a child, huh?" She said, "I'm really wondering why I thought this was a good idea."

Being a parent is not an easy thing, right from the start. There are times when it is easier than others, but it never goes away. You never stop being a parent, which means there's always an opportunity to do the job poorly. Today we're going to consider some instruction to parents from Colossians 3:20-21.

PARENTS SHOULD NOT EMBITTER THEIR KIDS

Verse 20 is every parent's favorite verse. So my instruction to you kids is "just do it." Right now, however, I want to focus on parents. You never stop being a parent. The old joke is that parenting is a life sentence without possibility of parole. Our children will always be our children, and what is happening in their lives will always matter deeply to us. Yet we also know that being a parent is not a static thing. What a parent of an infant does is very different from the parent of a teenager, and that parent does things very different from the parent of an adult.

Laurie and I have been through most of the gamut at this point, as have many of you. It has been so long since we had infants and toddlers when parents who have kids that age ask us how we handled various issues we often draw a blank. Did we ever do that? It's been a long time since Carissa asked me, "do spiders have faces?" Those days are long gone. I guess no matter what you do you're never really prepared for any aspect of parenting. At least I wasn't. Included in that was the role of being a parent of adult children. You can find all kinds of books, seminars, videos, resources for raising young children and teen agers, but you don't find the same thing for this stage of life. Our kids were fully adults, now capable and living life on their own, making the biggest decisions they'll ever make, and we were standing on the sidelines watching.

The phases of parenting are quite distinct from each other, but there are some truths that can apply at all stages. We will have to apply them in different ways, but they still can guide us, whether our child is 2 or 32 or 52 years old. In addition let's not forget that parents get a sort of parenting, part 2, that we call grandparenting. In this phase the same principles will come into play, though in a less intensive way.

Paul commands that parents should not "embitter" their kids. In Ephesians 6:4 he said much the same thing. They should not "exasperate" their kids. In other words, parents, don't treat your children in such a way that you will provide a fountain of material for them to discuss with a therapist when they're grown up. Don't cause them to be loaded with the baggage of resentment toward their parents. In part that is because resentment toward parents is likely to morph into resentment toward God. Paul goes on to say that if we fail to heed this instruction we can cause our kids to be discouraged.

The Greek word that Paul used there is *athumos*. It's kind of an interesting word because the root of it, *thumos*, can and often does mean "angry." The "a" on the front means "not," so it seems like the word means "not angry." Isn't that a good

thing? Don't you want your kids to be not angry? However, the word can also mean "passion," or "spirit." So as Paul used it here it means if you embitter your kids you can cause them to be "without passion." That is not how God wants people to be.

Our culture actually works to sap people of passion. John Eldredge in his book, *Wild At Heart*, writing specifically about men, said the way life unfolds today "tends to drive his heart into remote regions of the soul. Endless hours at a computer screen, selling shoes at the mall; meetings memos, phone calls...Corporate policies and procedures are designed with one aim: to harness a man to the plow and make him productive." Meanwhile, he says, "the soul longs for passion, for freedom, for life." What he says applies to everyone, not just men. Our society seeks to harness us to the plow and just make us produce even if the whole process is soul-deadening.

Jesus said he came that people might have life to the fullest. That means that we could be fully alive, and that is only true of us when our hearts are alive, full of passion for whatever this day might bring. That is how God wants us to live. So parents are faced with the task of raising kids in the middle of a culture that tends to destroy their passion. Unfortunately parents have the power to kill their children's passion more effectively and thoroughly than anything our culture will ever do to them.

How might parents "embitter" their children? One way is by being harsh with them. Harshness can come in several forms. One is simply using harsh words or tone of voice. I recall one of those classic "don't make me stop this car" moments in our family's history. Toby and Carissa in the back seat of the car had just pushed me over the edge with their bickering. I gave them both barrels of a verbal barrage and Toby protested. That really fueled my fire so I proceeded to explain in no uncertain terms what his problem was. He tried to say something but I cut him off with "I don't want to hear it," and set off on another tirade. When I finally ran out of gas and quit talking he said, "What I was going to say was you're right, Dad, and I'm sorry."

Harshness can be rigid, unreasonable demands and rules. But it can also be lack of affirmation. The man who is an adult who still longs to hear his dad say just once that he is proud of him, to pat him on the back, is so common that it is a cliché. Pat Conroy is a best selling author of novels such as *The Prince of Tides*, *The Great Santini*, and *The Lords of Discipline*. His dad was a horror who would never praise him. Conroy tried to gain his dad's approval first through being a basketball player.

He was a terrific point guard who played for The Citadel. His dad would never acknowledge his success. He rarely watched him play. He came to see him in one big game and he had probably his best game of his life. He led all scorers and enabled his team to win a big upset victory. Afterward his dad shoved him up against a wall and essentially said, "You're a piece of garbage." Conroy said he ended up in a mental hospital every time he wrote a best seller, all because of his dad's unwillingness to love his son and give praise. Conroy wrote in his memoirs, "I've come to realize that I still carry the bruised freight of (my) childhood every day. I can't run away, hide or pretend it never happened. I wear it on my back like the (shell) of a tortoise, except my shell burdens and does not protect. It weights me down and fills me with dread."

Parents can exasperate children by going to the opposite extreme and being too lenient. Dr. Stanley Coopersmith, a psychology professor at UC Davis did a longitudinal study of over 1700 boys in which he followed them from pre-adolescence through adulthood. He especially focused on measuring their security and sense of self-worth. He found that those who were most secure not surprisingly came from homes marked with by openness, acceptance and expression of love and affirmation for the boys. But one other aspect of the homes was surprising. The parents in the home were significantly more strict in discipline than were the others.

Laurie and I have friends whose son is a classic failure to launch example. He is a fully grown adult who still lives at home and has yet to show any aptitude or inclination to actually take responsibility for himself. Of greater concern is he is an angry man. This is true even though his parents have always loved him, perhaps to excess. The problem was that he has been like that boy we saw on vacation, throwing tantrums all his life. He still throws them, and he has learned that he can control his parents with them. He always has. And the result today is that he is a truly unhappy, angry man, whose unhappiness is virulently contagious.

Parents can embitter children by being distant. In our world today so many parents are stressed, and the home is ruled by the pursuit of success, career and money. All too often the parents just don't have enough time and energy to devote to their kids. Children have a sense that they should have the devotion and attention of their parents. They also have a sense when they don't have it.

Ron Fournier is the editorial director for *The National Journal* and he has covered numerous politicians, including presidents. Two years ago he wrote an article that discussed a successful man who has avoided the trap of being distant because he is too busy. The article was titled, "Go Ahead, Admit It, George W. Bush Is A Good

Man.” In it he related a conversation he had with Bush when he was the Governor of Texas. Fournier had scheduled a phone interview with him. Bush interrupted his first question asking, “What’s all that noise in the background, Fournier?” Ron answered, “I’m at the pool with my kids, Governor.” Bush replied, “Then what are you doing talking on your phone?” He quickly ended the interview.

Parents can embitter kids by hanging personal dreams and identity on their kids. This is a huge temptation for parents. When a child misbehaves in public what is at stake? Every parent feels it. “I’m looking bad here. I look like a failure as a parent.” That ups the ante considerably. Being inconsistent is another way of exasperating children, as is trying to control everything. Most parents want so much for their children’s lives to go well that they try to manufacture a good life. The *New York Times* recently published an article that said helicopter parenting is now an international thing. In Sweden they call them “Curling Parents,” because they are like the sweepers in curling trying to clear a path for their kids. What comes with that is trying to control the child’s life and decisions. Everyone of us knows what it’s like to be around a controlling person. You just want to get free of them. Oddly, many parents don’t realize their efforts to control their kids’ lives create that same desire to just get away. But all of that is mostly about what not to do. What’s the positive? What are parents to do?

PARENTS SHOULD NOURISH THEIR KIDS

In Ephesians 6:4 Paul doesn’t just tell us what not to do. He gives positive instruction. Instead of embittering our kids and crushing their spirits, we are to raise them in the “training and instruction of the Lord.” But what does that mean? It means we must teach them about the Lord and about the gospel of grace. That has a long history in the Bible. When Moses told Israel about God’s commands he said of his instructions in Deuteronomy 6:7 “Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road; when you lie down and when you get up.” In other words, God’s commands are to be part of all your conversation with your kids.

But I think it is interesting that Paul said we should bring children up in the training of the Lord. The Greek word translated “bring them up” also meant “to nourish” or “to feed.” Parents are to nourish the souls of their children. Part of that has to do with content. It involves the instruction of the Lord. But part of it has to do with how we relate. We are to nourish them in the training of the Lord, the kind of training the Lord does for us.

It is not a mistake nor is it random that God says he is our heavenly Father. The closest analogy God could give us in human terms of how he relates to us is a father to his children. God is the perfect Father. So it makes sense that we should seek to nurture our children the same way he nurtures us. Of course we all fall short of being God-like in our parenting, just as we fall short of the glory of God in everything we do. Yet in Ephesians 5:1 Paul said, “Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children.” Will we imitate him exactly? No, but if we seek to live according to his pattern we will certainly be better than we otherwise would have been.

Do they still teach kids to write in cursive script in school? You have to be old to remember this, but I recall learning to write cursive. We had that paper that was such poor quality it had wood chips in it. It was just one step up from writing on tree bark. It was lined with red and blue lines that were miles apart so your clumsy little hand had plenty of room to squeeze your scrawl in between them. In the classroom the teacher had up front this display of the alphabet with perfectly formed cursive letters, upper and lower case. And we were supposed to emulate those perfect letters. My writing never got close to being like those beautiful letters. However, you will notice they didn’t bring a doctor into the classroom to write in his chicken scratching and say, “Now, students, write letters like those.” You aim for the ideal, and though you won’t hit it, you’ll get closer to the results that you need. That’s as true in parenting as in writing.

So how does God relate to us? With unconditional love and grace. Romans 8:38-39 says that nothing in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. We did not earn that nor do we deserve it. But that is how God loves us. We know of some people who are wonderful Christian people who have loved their children and sought to raise them to follow Jesus. Unfortunately their daughter made some choices to not obey the Lord. Her parents were deeply distressed, and tried to dissuade her from the direction she was choosing, to no avail. How do you deal with a situation like that? Unfortunately, they became angry with her and essentially cut off relationship with her. By doing that they have created a far larger gulf between them and their daughter, and now have less chance than ever that she will change her direction. It became apparent to her that their love was conditional. They would love her only if she lived in a way they agreed with. That is not how God loves us.

As he loves us God also instructs us. The Bible is full of his wisdom and guidance. Just as he imparts his guidance, so should we. He disciplines his children. Hebrews 12:6 says “the Lord disciplines those he loves.” God’s discipline never involves the loss of relationship. It is also never punitive. He does not discipline us because he’s

upset with us or disappointed in us and wants us to hurt the way we have hurt him. God's discipline is always loving and corrective. It almost always involves experiencing the consequences of our choices.

God is patient with us. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you." Romans 2:4 says, "Or do you think lightly of his kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

I heard a story about some parents whose son was out on the extreme end of rambunctious. They thought perhaps camping would be good for him so they went to a campground that involved real, rugged camping. The only restroom facilities were some porta-potties. It didn't turn out all that well. At one point the dad confronted the son and asked him, "Son, did you push a porta-potty over so that it slid down the hill last night?" The boy flatly denied it, but the dad was sure he wasn't telling the truth. So he told him the story about George Washington cutting down a cherry tree and confessing by saying, "I cannot tell a lie." Somehow it got through. The boy said, "I can't lie either. I did it." Immediately the dad started spanking him. The boy said, "But George Washington's dad didn't punish him when he the truth." His dad said, "Yeah, well, George Washington's dad wasn't in the cherry tree when he cut it down." I guess that's an example of the fact that parents need to be patient with their kids. In my own experience I can tell you I regret every moment of irritation or impatience I ever had with my children.

APPLICATION

LIVE IN AWE

Notre Dame professor Christian Smith wrote in his book, *Soul Searching*, that the faith of most young adults today consists mostly of "moralistic, therapeutic deism." God is there primarily to provide therapeutic benefits to us and to help solve problems. He says, "there is nothing here to evoke wonder and admiration."

We used Paul Tripp's video series in a parenting class last year. In it he made the point that the first job of parents is to help their kids have an awe of God. If you have an infant, or if your youngest child is in his or her 40's, this is still some of the most important advice you'll ever hear. They need an awe of God.

Some here are grandparents. You get a two for one deal here. The best and most important thing you can do for your grandkids is give them an awe of God. Live in awe of him continually and draw their attention to his presence, his goodness, his grace, his wisdom, his love and his power. Don't preach at them. Just talk about it

when you see it. The two for one deal is that as you do that you also get to remind your kids of the awesomeness of God, and they need to remember that. It can have a huge impact on your kids and grandkids when they live in awe of God.

Acts 4:13 says as the religious leaders were trying Peter and John, “when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Notice that the leaders saw the courage of Peter and John. Those two had been with Jesus. They had seen him heal people with all kinds of diseases. They’d seen him stop a storm dead in its tracks just by telling it to knock it off. They’d seen him walk on water. They’d seen him tell his dead friend, Lazarus, to come out of his grave. They’d seen Jesus himself die and then a couple of days later defeat death himself. They’d seen him ascend into heaven before their very eyes. By this time they lived in total awe of Jesus. They believed he could do anything. Nothing was too hard for him. And he was utterly deserving of their trust, devotion and service.

So when the human authorities threatened them they said, “Oooh, I’m so scared. You have so much power. Oh, wait, you can’t do anything to me that Jesus doesn’t let you do.” Living in awe of Jesus gave them peace, because they knew he is in charge. Living in awe of Jesus gave them confidence, it set them free from people and what they think, it gave them courage and it gave them power.

The most important thing we can impart to anyone, but especially to future generations, is an awe of God. It is awe of him, a powerful sense of his majesty, that enables us to live at peace. Do you want your kids to be secure? Do you want them to have strength and courage as they face life's inevitable challenges? Then do all you can to help them have awe of God. It is this awe of him that motivates us to want to honor and serve him. It is awe of God that gives us courage and power and freedom in life.

Francois Fenelon prayed, “Lord, help me see you everywhere.” That’s what we need to do. We need to start seeing God in his majesty, his goodness, his grace and his glory everywhere. We need to see him everywhere because he is everywhere. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” We need to see that God is present every moment when we experience good. That good thing is from him.

We are rejoicing in our family because Anna is pregnant. Do you not see the goodness and glory of God there? Modern medical science now can give us detailed information about the process of the beginning of this new life. But at its

most fundamental point we hit a wall. How does life suddenly start? We know what the process is, but how does that happen? Why does that happen? At that point we need to bow in awe before a majestic and wise God. We need to praise him for it, and remember it is his gift to us.

At the end of this year a child will be born in our family. What a helpless creature that child will be. It will be unable to do anything for itself. It will possess no language, will be unable to say anything or do anything for itself. Yet despite all that just be watching and listening in a surprisingly short period of time that child will begin to understand what is being said, and then to express in words, then in sentences, its thoughts and desires. Do you not see how astounding this is? This is the glory of God at work, and we should be in awe.

For the past 6 months I have had a continuing demonstration of the goodness, wisdom and power of God. Back in November I smashed my thumb while setting up chairs on a Sunday morning. I did damage to my thumb. The nail turned almost black and soon a dented in part began appearing. What has happened is that thing has healed itself. It has happened slowly as the damaged part has grown out and been replaced by a new, healthy nail. It's been like watching a slow motion miracle. Such a small thing, but what wonder. What else in this world can heal itself like that.

Friday afternoon we were driving home from LA after being up there to do a funeral. As we drove south from San Clemente we could look out at the ocean and the view was just spectacular. Laurie said, "Rick, isn't the water just gorgeous. God is so good." Exactly right. It is not that beautiful by accident, regardless of what our world tells us. It is good, which means it is a gift from God. See him everywhere. Too often Christian parents focus on just controlling their kids' behavior and choices. What they would much better focus on is helping their kids have an awe of God.

LEARN TO TRUST

Have you ever thought about how astounding the process of throwing a ball is? In order to accurately throw a ball to a target your brain must calculate in the blink of an eye the precise amount of force to apply to the ball with your arm, the proper trajectory and the precise time to release the ball. If you release the ball too soon it will just pop up in the air and go nowhere near the target. If you release it too late

you'll just spike the ball into the ground. You have to find just the right release point to send the ball accurately to the target.

As complicated as that is, parenting is far more complex. That's because parenting is a long series of release points. Almost from the time that child is born you are beginning to let go. A mom has that child totally in her control, totally protected when it is in the womb. But she must let go of that total control when the infant actually enters into this world. Soon the parents will have to let go to allow the child to take steps and walk on his or her own. It won't be long before they let go as the child goes off to school. There will be days when they let go of the child as he or she goes to a friend's house. Then there is that terrifying day when the child climbs into that car and drives away on his or her own. Not long after that comes that tearful day when you leave your little child at that dorm. You can hardly bear to leave even though they're anxious for you to be gone so they can get on with life in this exciting new place. And of course there is that day when your son or daughter stands at an altar and pledges to love another person for the rest of his or her life and you realize in the most profound way that the ball has truly left your hand for good.

A parent from the moment that child enters this world needs to keep that picture in mind. I do not own this child. I cannot control this child. My job is to launch this child toward the target. Always then we should prepare. When you throw a ball you always remember that at some point you let go of the ball. A parent should always be thinking that the release point is coming. At some point the child will be on his or her own, and all I do now is preparing for that moment.

That's not a perfect analogy, for we always have some influence. The problem is some parents have a tendency to try to exert control after the release point. That would be like attaching an elastic band to the ball and trying to use it to exert influence on the ball's flight after you've released it. But that's not very effective and it will inhibit the ball from actually reaching its intended target. We must realize that once we've launched that ball we have no more control over it. Same with kids.

In order to do that we must trust God. The New American Standard translation of Psalm 127:3 says, "children are a gift from the Lord." God has entrusted those kids to you and he thinks they are precious. It is crucial to remember Proverbs 16:9, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." Whatever your dreams and plans for your child, whatever your child's dreams and plans, in the end it is up to the Lord to determine what steps he or she takes. Psalm 139:16 says,

“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Life doesn't always work out like we'd wish. But my kids lives are in God's hands. The days ordained for them are written in his book. We have to trust that God has our kids' days ordained and that his plan is wise and good. That's what we can and must always do. In some ways we have to retire as parents. That's no longer our job. Now our job is to be a support, to be friends, but not to parent. Our job is trust God. And most of the time keep our mouths shut.

LIVE AS AN EXAMPLE

From beginning to end the most important thing we can do for our kids is to be an example. We need to live it more than teach it. They need to see awe of God in us every day of our lives. They need to see our trust in God in every situation. They need to see God's grace and his unconditional love flowing through us to them. They need to see God's patience. And they need to see our dedication to loving and obeying God with all our heart.

Young people have an interesting ability. They are hypersensitive to hypocrisy and seem to find it particularly offensive. In fact they are probably too quick to see any hint of inconsistency in their elders. And when they detect hypocrisy they tend to use it as an excuse for rejection. A friend told me this week about her brother, who was the first in her family to declare faith in Jesus. He was zealous in his newfound faith and volunteered in broadcast ministry. They made appeals for money and told people to send prayer requests with their donations. He was tasked with helping process the mail they received. He saw that all that mattered was the money, the prayer requests were completely ignored. The grubbing for ministry wrapped in a phony spiritual appeal completely repelled him. He decided then and there that they whole thing was a scam, and his faith went out the window for good. That was 30 years ago, and its effect continues to this day.

Theologian D. A. Carson tells a story of a man who had an effective witness for Christ on the campus where Carson taught. The man's name was Dave. Carson was dealing with a young man who was a skeptic when it came to Jesus and was getting nowhere so he took the guy to see Dave. The skeptic said he was from a great family, the members of his family were all good people, they loved each other, they did a lot of good in the community, so how was Dave or any Christian different from them? Dave said to him, “I have an extra bed at my house. Move in with me. Watch me. Live with me for three months. Follow me around, watch how I behave, observe how I live and what's important to me. You watch and after 3

months you tell me if there's any difference." The fellow didn't move in with him, but he did spend a lot of time with him. He did follow him around and he did watch him. And the skeptic put his faith in Jesus. Today he's a missionary.

That's mostly what we must do for our kids. Watch me. See my example. Observe my love for you and everyone else. See how real God is in my life. Experience how much I am in awe of my God. Watch how much I love him. At the end of the day, what we want our kids to get from us is something they have to catch. Let's make sure what we have is alive and contagious.