

This week is the second week in our 5 week series we are calling **'If You Only Knew'** and in this series we are talking about some of life's great moments of transition... transitions like the one Amy talked about last week... the time when adult children begin caring for their elderly parents. I hope you heard Amy's sermon. It was a wonderful message that came out of Amy and her sibling's experience caring for their older parents. Amy was the right person to deliver that message and she did so with such grace and respect. It's a must listen. This week we are looking at another major moment of transition in life: when you become a parent to adult children. And I guess that I was the obvious choice for bringing this message because I have been, or rather I should say, my wife Jennifer and I have been parenting adults now for almost as long as we parented infants, young children, and adolescents. We have 3 adult children. Jacob, who is 45. Emily who is 42. And Elizabeth who is 39. They are adults. They all have children... 8 between them and they are living what everyone would call adult lives. So, I guess I **should** be qualified to speak to this subject... though it is a subject that can be, how shall I say it, it can be all over the map. Parenting adult children is dynamic... things are always in some sort of flux. Why, it can be wonderful, difficult, confusing, frustrating, maddening and heavenly all in the space of one Christmas family get together. And that Christmas get together can be a very different experience for the older adult parents and the younger adults. What seems absolutely appropriate to an older adult can strike a younger adult as terribly insensitive and inappropriate and vice versa. I know this to be true from my own life... both ways: being the older adult parent and being an adult with an older adult parent who was trying to parent me.

Now, I must admit that I am not a ‘certified’ expert on all of this, there wasn’t a course on this subject in Seminary. But I do have decades of experience in this business and there are a couple of things I am sure of... the first being that in our culture we raise our children to be independent... We did. And what should be the case is that when they become independent it should be seen as a success. But the second thing I am sure of is that when our adult children flexed their independence muscles, they don’t always follow in their parent’s footsteps... I have absolutely no problems with my children’s career decisions or their financial decisions or their child rearing decisions or their food decisions, but when you raise them to take care of themselves... they take care of themselves and often do so in ways that you don’t recognize. Oh, and another thing I am sure of is this: when you have more than one adult child you can bet that all your children will make very different decisions about life. Again, I want to reiterate that I have nothing to be upset about, nothing... but this Covid thing has put a microscope on the business of adult children from the same family making different decisions about what is appropriate and acceptable from their parents and their siblings: I’m just saying... trying to remember 3 very different protocols... again, I’m just saying.

One thing that I have done is spend a lot of time looking into what the Bible has to say on this subject. And while again, I don’t consider myself to be a Bible guru concerning all things related to parenting adult children, I do think I’ve got a handle on some things that will help all of us no matter where we find ourselves in this delicate dance we call being a parent to adult children. So, let’s pray and then get after it.

Okay, let’s look at what the Bible has to say on this subject and to be completely honest it doesn’t directly say very much. I

do believe there are 2 verses in the New Testament that are relevant to today's subject, but truthfully there aren't any teachings or commands or parables or anything really that say, 'This is always important when you are the parent of an adult child,' or that say, 'This is how an adult child should respond to their older parents.' Both of the two relevant verses were written by the Apostle Paul, who was one of the leaders of the early church and the writer of a number of the books we find in the New Testament. The 2 relevant verses are **Ephesians 6:4** which says, *'Fathers do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.'* **and Colossians 3:21** which says essentially the same thing, *'Fathers, do not aggravate your children, or they will become discouraged.'* My bet is that your first reaction to these verses is something like, 'Wait a minute. Those verse aren't talking about parenting adult children. Those verse are about parenting younger children.' And I get that... but let me tell you something about the Greek in these two verses. There is a Greek word for younger children and that word is παιδιον, but the word that Paul uses for 'children' in both of these verses is the word τέκνα and τέκνα is a word like our word 'children.' Let me explain. Listen is sentence: *'I have 3 children and between my three children they have 8 children.'* You all know exactly what I mean because the context lets us know when we mean little children or older, adult children. **τέκνα is this kind of word.** Plus, here in Ephesians and Colossians these are 'children' who can be angered, aggravated and discouraged. We'll talk about these words in a minute, but the context tells us that Paul is far more likely to be talking about older children, even adult children, then younger ones. So, I want to step back for just a minute and

put this verse in Ephesians, the verse I am going to be talking about the most, in context. This verse *'Fathers do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.'* is found in a long section in a letter where Paul gives the Christians in the town of Ephesus instructions for all sorts of relationships. Husbands and wives, children and parents, Fathers and their children and such. And I have to say that what Paul says in these passages is some of the most radical, counter-cultural, table-turning stuff in all of 1st Century Greek and Roman literature! It may not seem like it to us, but believe me, it is. When Paul talks about husbands and wives, he tells them they should submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. But he says this in a world where wives were the property of their husbands. Wives were not legally people; they were simply their husband's possession. Paul also wrote this at a time when husbands were under absolutely no obligation to even pay any attention to their wives, let alone show them any love or respect. Paul wrote submitting to one another in a world where a man could divorce his wife for simply serving him a breakfast he didn't find to his liking. I could go on. And yet, Paul even goes so far as to say that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church. Paul also talked about children obeying their parents, but he said the reason for being honoring and obedient towards our parents is because we belong to the Lord; he could have said you'd better obey your parents because your parents have absolute power over every aspect of your life... because parents did have power over every aspect of their children's lives... or he could have said you better obey your parents because it's a capital crime to disobey your parents, because it was... but no, he said honor your parents because it is the right

thing for people who belong to Jesus to do. And then Paul says this, *'Fathers do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.'* There is a reason that Paul says, Fathers here. There is a Greek word for parents... for both Mom and Dad, but Paul doesn't use it. He says Fathers. Fathers in the 1st Century Roman and Greek worlds had what was called **patria potestas: the father's power**. And this power was absolute even if a child was an adult. Fathers could sell their children as slaves; they could force their children to do any sort of work, even while in chains if they so choose. Fathers could take the law into their own hands and punish their children in any manner they wanted, even up to putting their own children to death. And get this, Roman sons never came of age; as long as a father was living, his sons were obligated to obey him in everything... without question... by law. Now, fathers rarely went so far as to put their own children to death, but the threat of *patria potestas* was always lurking in the background. Also, a child's life was always thought to exist out of the goodness of a father's heart. When a child was born it was placed at its father's feet and if the father stooped and lifted it up that meant the father had acknowledged the child and wished that it be kept. But if he didn't, if he turned and walked away, the child could literally be left outside to die, abandoned in the city center to be collected by others to do with whatever they wanted or drowned. And THIS is the world into which Paul says, *'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them.* One aside before we go on. Fathers do not have this kind of control over their children today. Our children are raised by fathers and mothers. Paul was speaking directly to 1st Century fathers, but I think it's okay for us, in our culture, to say that whatever Paul

says is important for dad to remember is equally important for mom to remember as well. And what Paul says is don't παροργίζω (parorgizo) your children... don't irritate your children, don't embitter them or provoke them into anger. The verse in Colossians 3 also adds that fathers shouldn't αθυμεω, (athumeo) dismay or dishearten their children... αθυμεω was a word that was used to speak of draining someone's spirit out of their life. Clearly, Paul is being very direct. This statement in Ephesians is an imperative... it is a command. 'Fathers, and I'm going to add mothers here, don't do anything that provokes your children, don't anger them, embitter them, or break their spirits. And I don't think that Paul would have brought this up if it hadn't been happening somewhere in the Ephesian church. But he wasn't finished. the NLT says, 'Rather, bring them up in the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.' Paul uses a word here that is translated as 'bring them up.' The Greek word is εκτρέθω (ektretho) and it means 'To nurture something you cherish.' That sure is different. Also, the word that gives us 'discipline' here meant something closer to 'training.' Our modern English word 'discipline' has a negative connotation and Paul isn't being negative here at all. So, if I were translating this verse what we would have so far is, *Fathers and mothers don't do anything that provokes your children, angers them, embitters them, or break their spirits but nurture your cherished children in the training and instruction...* and then we get to the really important part... *that comes from the Lord.* And here is why this little phrase is the important part: only one word that gives us 'that comes from the Lord.' The word is κυριον: Kurion 'of the Lord.' Scholars far smarter than I am have looked at this word

carefully from just about every angle and have concluded that what Paul meant when he said, ‘nurture your children in the training and instruction of the Lord’ was that we are to (and follow me here) **...train and instruct in the ways that Jesus did!** What I’d heard all of my life is that Paul meant for parents to discipline and instruct their children **in** the teachings of the Lord. But I agree with the way these scholars see this Greek. I believe now that what Paul was going for here was to tell Fathers specifically, but parents generally that their task is to be Jesus to their children no matter their children’s age. So, here is the Tim Ayers translation of this verse: **‘Fathers and mothers do not do anything to provoke your children to anger, no matter the age of your children, but nurture your cherished ones by training them and instructing them in the same way that Jesus trained his cherished ones.’** Now, that’s a mouthful but what an important mouthful! Of course, the question is, **‘How DID Jesus teach and nurture his cherished ones?’** And I’ll just get right to how Jesus was described: he was tenderhearted, merciful, kind, humble, gentle and patient. And for me, that changes everything about this parenting business.

I have been thinking about this sermon for a good while... thinking about what I’ve learned from experience and how using Jesus as the templet for my relationship with my adult children changes so much. So, at the risk of looking like I know it all, I am going to give you a list of a few things that I feel are important to remember if you are the parent of adult children... Oh, and then I have some advice for adult children of adult parents... and I also have some final things for all of us... So, here we go: the first thing that I have realized is that it is hard not to think of my children like this **(Picture)** when the truth is that they are this **(Picture)**... and this **(Picture)**... and this

(Picture). It's so easy to forget that time is continually moving on. Things change. The ways of the world change and it's so easy to get locked in thinking that my way of seeing the world is how everyone should see the world. Here is my advice: stay current with who your adult children are now; be certain that you really know what they are dealing with in **this** moment. Try to remember what it was like to be their age and what it was like to deal with the things they are dealing with... it's so easy to forget what those days were really like. Also, I've realized how easy it is to forget to compliment my adult children. While I may not always agree with all their decisions, if they have found solution that works for their families then I should let them know I am proud of them. Just worrying about breaking their spirit isn't enough. I need to build their spirits up, as well.

I don't want to sound too spiritual here but pray for your adult children. I know that praying for them seems self-evident, but I've started praying for them like Jesus prayed for his all of us in his last prayer before going to the cross. He prayed that we, his 'cherished ones,' would be filled with joy, that we would live holy lives, that we would have a deep sense of our calling and that our lives would bring glory to God. And praying those kinds of prayers has changed my attitudes about a lot of things.

Oh, something else: in every conversation work at guarding your children's hearts... and here is how: do your best to never say anything that leads to anger, jealousy, bitterness or shame. It's hard but it helps. Always remember that we raised our children, we nurtured them, for life as adults. Let them go. Let them be adults and don't let your words become an added source of unnecessary stress for them.

And here are the 12 Tim Ayers practical wisdom axioms: 1) **Don't give unsolicited advice**. Just don't. 2) Whatever you do,

Don't criticize your children's parenting. 3) Be the best model of good parenting in your adult children's lives. 4) Again, Remember being their age and think carefully about what it is like to be living through what they are dealing with in today's world. 5) Listen more than you talk. 6) Ask questions that show you want to understand and 7) Never lecture. 8) text or call before you come over. 9) Observe respectful boundaries. 10) Don't quickly rescue... this is hard to do when there is a sudden problem that they need to deal with, but part of being an adult is figuring out how to take care of your own world. I know, it feels good to be able pay for this or to take care of that, but you don't do anyone any favors if you become an easy source of rescue. 11) when it comes to going out to dinner or doing things together let them pay... no, make them pay sometimes. Take my word, this helps in the long run. 12) And when they do ask for advice be extremely cautious that you don't make judgements... and even if you are making judgements don't express them. And while I'm on a roll I have 3 more: 1) accept their significant others... with open arms. Believe it or not, you being magnanimous when they bring home a new special person will help them have the space to figure out whether this person is the right one... otherwise you will push your child into being defensive. 2) make being together fun, but don't try to do this by reenacting the past. Build new memories. And finally, don't ever say, 'Why don't you answer my texts?' or 'Why don't you visit more often?'

I could go on and on like this, but I'll stop and move on to some things for adult children to think about. 1) Don't pick arguments. 2) You don't have to state your opinion on everything. 3) Don't make your parents feel defensive. 4) Don't see disagreement as criticism of you personally and 5) certainly

don't make vast assumptions about generational differences like everyone in your parent's generation is unaware or incapable of change. In other words, don't treat your parents like children. Here is a big one... 6) Take responsibility for your own actions and your own attitudes. 7) Be quick to offer and ask for forgiveness. 8) If you do ask your parents for advice, listen carefully to their advice and do your best to include their advice in your action steps. 9) Spend time with your parents outside of the perfunctory moments like birthdays and holidays. In other words, try to be available a bit just for regular, old life. 10) Show them love that is expressed in some way that you know they will appreciate. I know you won't want to hear this, but try to keep in mind how fast time passes; you will, if you have young children now, someday sooner than you expect, wake up and find that you are the parent of an adult. It happens. Give your parents the room to figure out the things they weren't expecting to come so suddenly. And finally, please don't become helicopter parents to your parents. Here's what I mean: don't hover looking for something that say mom or dad are losing it. Your parents will want to stay as independent as they can for as long as they can, and they know when you are looking for a sign that they are losing their vibrance. You'll know it when that time actually comes.

Ok... and finally, some advice for all of us: 1) Don't freak out and turn everything into a catastrophe. Drama never helps. 2) Have ground rules for disagreements and talk about these ground rules when there isn't a disagreement, never start making the rules in the heat of a difficult time. 3) Allow one another to make mistakes without criticism. Mistakes are a normal part of every person's life. And finally, apologize and forgive... be the first to do this. Believe me, it helps.

I know I have only scratched the surface on this subject and every one of us has unique circumstances that can be difficult and wonderful all at the same time... but parents, if we take Paul's command seriously and we do everything we can do to not do anything to provoke our children to anger, no matter what their age, but we nurture these cherished ones by instructing them in the same ways that Jesus nurtured his cherished ones, it will go a long way toward making this new stage of life all that God wants it to be for all of us.'

I'm going to end by reading a passage of scripture that sums up what this Jesus-nurturing looks like. Just listen and think about how these words of Paul from Colossians might help you as you navigate the transitions of life no matter where you find yourself right now: *Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's fault and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For we are called to live in peace. And finally, always be thankful.*

Pray