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Ephesians 6:1-4 ESV

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

1 Timothy 5:8 ESV

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Matthew 5:21-24 ESV

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

The demise of Fred.

I was one of those kids who always had small critters that I was taking care of:

tropical fish and rats were my favorites. I actually bred black fan tail mollies –

these are tropical fish - and sold them to our neighborhood pet shop. The very

first rat I owned was one that I found at a construction site near our house. I was

probably about eight-years-old when I proudly brought it home and found a shoe

box that it could live in. I named him Fred. My mother was horrified that some rat from the outside world was now living in our house, but my father, who was a retired Marine, thought it was perfectly fine. It looks healthy, he said, the first night it was in our house. Although I had securely taped the box shut, the little bugger chewed his way out and it was a miracle that I captured him in our living room. My mother immediately went out and bought me a proper cage for him. But by the time I was ten or so, my mother had begun to insist that she buy me “clean” rats from the pet shop. I had a very big, pure white rat whose name I have to admit I don’t remember. We’ll just call him Fred. Now, I’m going to tell you about the tragic demise of Fred, but first, let’s look at our readings for today.

Let’s look at the beginning of Chapter 6 of Ephesians. Scholars by and large do not think that Paul actually wrote it. The writing is very different than what we find in the letters we do know he did write, like Romans: it is ponderous and difficult to read in part. The best guess is that the letter was written after Paul’s death by a student or a follower of us. But it is a beautiful document, and certainly very biblical. The main focus of Ephesians is to battle alternative forms of Christianity, like Gnosticism. The author, and will call him Paul, is trying to build up the Christian church as a whole, rather than correct or redirect specific people. And it was particularly meant for Gentiles to read, not Jews who were

following the beliefs of Jesus. In chapter 6 of Ephesians, where our quote comes from, the pseudo-Paul is giving advice on how to live Christ-like lives. In our passage, he's advising families on how to behave toward one another. Verse two is actually the second commandment from Deuteronomy: *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.* ² *"Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise),* ³ *"that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."* ⁴ *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* I want to focus on is the last line, about fathers not provoking their children, but rather bringing them up to follow the Lord. Interestingly, there is a suggestion here that provoking your kid and making a good Christian out of them conflict with each other. Maybe that's because a kid will believe and trust someone who is good to them. As it turns out, my father was very kind to me. I inherited his calm, caring demeanor. I am a chaplain and a pastor because of the DNA he gave me. Importantly, because of how he treated me, I listened to him. He didn't talk a lot. He didn't preach to me. He didn't instruct me much. But when he did speak, I listened to him. I listened.

Let's look at 1st Timothy, Chapter 5: ⁸ *But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and*

is worse than an unbeliever. The Timothy letters are two of the three so-called Pastoral letters, along with Titus. All three letters claim, in their text, to have been written by Paul, but again his authorship is far from universally accepted. They are called pastoral letters because, unlike other letters attributed to Paul, they were written to individual pastors, not to churches. These letters are often said to have “third generation” content. Paul represented the first generation of Christians. Timothy and Titus were second generation Christians. The purpose of these letters was to give pastors like Timothy and Titus advice on how to spread the word to a third generation of Christians. Many of those in the church were children of Christians – and not raw converts themselves. Timothy and Titus represented the challenge that faced the church for two millennia after this, and is so critically important today, and that is how to keep passing on the faith from generation to generation. Our quote is easy to interpret. It simply says that a key aspect of being faithful to God is being faithful to your family and taking care of them. Since I don’t like twisting the meaning of Bible verses to fit my sermons – like so many preachers do – I want to acknowledge that I am broadening the meaning of this quote from its original biblical context: it’s in the middle of a segment that has mostly to do with supporting widows. But the verse does make the point that those of us with responsibility for family members need to take

that responsibility seriously, in the eyes of God. And getting back to my father, well, he did indeed do this. He worked six days a week, often twelve or fourteen hours a day, selling tires and working on cars to feed, clothe and house us. And to pay for my tropical fish and rats, too. I'll get back to this.

Let's move to our third and final quote. It's from Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew. ²¹ *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'* ²² *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.* ²³ *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.* It's simple: Christians should not be hypocrites. If you have wronged somebody, don't just go and piously offer your prayers to God – first, make things right with the person you have harmed, and then go and worship the Lord. When you go before God, go with a clean heart. This is from Matthew's Gospel, and it comes from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus delivers the Beatitudes and the Lord's prayer, as well as describing the basic tenants of what it means to be a Christian. And yes, my father lived by this principle in a big way: he always

worked hard to make things right when he made a mistake. I saw him do this multiple times - and it impacted me hugely.

So, I'm sure that you've been worried all this time about Fred, my giant, snow-white rat. In case you were wondering, there are not many references to rats in the Bible, despite what you would have expected. In Leviticus, we're told not to eat rats. In First Samuel, there is a reference to offering rats to a pagan god; the idea is that by offering rats, pagans will be saved from a plague of rats – or at least that's the best I could make out of the passage. But as for my rat, he wasn't anything special. He just lived on a cubby in our hallway, in a cage. He had a treadmill that he loved. He ran in it day and night – and his love ultimately cost him his life. One Saturday night, the squeaking of the treadmill was keeping my father awake. So, he went into the hallway, with a pencil, and stuck it through the top of the cage and into the treadmill, to stop it from revolving. But he apparently shoved the pencil in a bit too hard. I think that what he did was accidentally administer a very serious wound, and once he turned on the light and saw what he had done, he decided that the merciful thing was to finish the job. But all I knew at the time was that early on Sunday morning, he came into my room, sat down on my bed, and with a very sad look on his face, said that he had to apologize to me. He told me that he had killed my rat without meaning to. He

explained that he had just been trying to stop the treadmill, that he didn't mean to crucify my rat. (He didn't use the word "crucify"). What really struck me was what he said next.

He said that the problem was that it was Sunday, and the pet shops were all closed on Sundays, so he wouldn't be able to replace my rat until Monday. I remember saying something like, that's okay, I can get a new rat on Monday. Can we afford another big one? He assured me that we would go from pet shop to pet shop until we found another big boy. We would buy the fattest rat in town. He had the saddest look in his eyes that I had ever seen, actually. He said that he knew that I loved my animals, and he felt bad that we would have to go to church without him having made this right with me, without having bought me a new rat. Our three Bible quotes were part of his life as a Christian man. He didn't read the Bible a lot, but he followed those teachings. He treated me well, he took care of his family, and he did not want to go before God before making things right with the son whom he had wronged. By the way, he told me that he had already buried Fred in the yard and that I was not to go looking for the grave. I asked him what happened to the pencil. He looked down at his shirt, and sure enough, there was a pencil in his pocket. He quietly said he had cleaned it off.

You know, many years later, our middle child Isabelle turned out to be like me when it came to small animals. She went through a rat phase, too. Now, I do have to say that they kept getting giant tumors and dying, that is, Isabelle's rats. My sister, who is a biochemist, told me that it's because they use the same stock to breed rats to sell to both pet stores and scientific laboratories. And those scientists are always trying to give rats cancer by feeding them something nasty, so they tend to breed rats that get cancer easily. One day, when little Isabelle was off at school, I went into her room and decided that one rat, who had a tumor on its back bigger than its head, just had to be euthanized. So, I did the little guy in. I was just going to tell Isabelle when she came home that I had had to kill it, so it wouldn't suffer. But I remembered what my father did, and so Wendy and I went and bought Isabelle a new rat. I remembered my father coming home from work early that Monday evening, rat in hand, and apologizing one more time for the fact that I had had to wait to get a new rat, and then dropping him in Fred's cage. I was happy as can be. It was even bigger than Fred. When Isabelle came home from school, she saw the new rat and asked me what had happened to what's-his-name. (I don't remember the name of the rat I executed.) I told her that it had died, not that I had actually killed it. She

accepted that with a shrug. I regret not telling her I killed it. Maybe she'll hear this sermon and find that out.

This Christmas season, as we celebrate the entry of Jesus into our lives, it's important to remember that he offered love and kindness to all people. That was the core of who he was as a human. We propret, as Christians, to be mimicking his life in our lives. We try to walk in his footsteps. We are entirely human, and he was only part human, but that part human of his was radically more generous and gracious and giving than any other human who has ever lived. We cannot be him. We cannot succeed at fully living like him. But our goal is to strive as hard as we can to be like him. We do it for more than just us or the person we are interacting with. How we treat our children, how we treat our neighbors and coworkers and family members and anyone else with whom we come into contact – that gets passed on by that person. That's why the teachings of Jesus are so important. That's why we celebrate his birthday and his entry into this world. We're not here to teach one person. We're here to teach that giant network of people who emanate from us. We act the way Christ acts and people mimic us. They pass it on, and it goes on and on and on. It's particularly important with our children: they mimic our behavior. They learn from us and then they end up passing that on and on in their lives. We act the way Christ acts,

and the people in our lives do learn from us and they do end up behaving the way we do. Timothy had to teach third generation Christians, and like him, we understand that human behavior, love and generosity, move through humanity like a wave in the ocean. Someday Isabelle will probably kill her kid's rat and then buy him or her a new one.

Please pray with me.

Jesus, you lived for about thirty-three years. You never traveled more than a handful of miles from your home. You wrote nothing down yourself. You had no video, no way to write Word docs. You couldn't record your voice. But others did it for you, the old-fashioned way, on rough paper, by hand. Others hand-copied those Gospels, and they were copied over and over and over. Then Paul and others wrote letters about your teachings, and those letters survived and were copied. Your teachings have been spread to maybe three billion people.

We know that we are simply part of that big human machine that passes your teachings on. We know that each of us will impact only a small number of people in our lives. But each of those people is as important as any other human. We ask that you give us a giant, extra measure of your grace, to lift us up, to encourage us, to remind us to always live by your teachings and to always teach them to others. May we show others how to be good to people. May we take

care of them, whether they are our biological family, or simply part of our family of humanity; may we care for them, whether they are lonely, hungry, in pain, frightened, or suffering in any way at all. And may we always make things right with them before we dare to stand before you in prayer. Because we know that these three principles: being kind, taking care of people, and always reconciling ourselves with those people, that is how we make them listen to us. That is how we ensure that they will adopt the beliefs that we share, the beliefs that we learned from you. Amen.