

Disciplined by Love

Dave Hart • March 12, 2023

Over these last weeks we have explored the fact that God sends our children into the world on a mission, for a purpose - a purpose that is beyond anything we are capable of achieving on our own. That mission is so important that God takes it upon Himself to train and instruct our children.

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

If it is God's job to train and instruct our children, then what is our job as parents? Simply to show them how to recognize and respond to all that God is doing in their lives to prepare them for their calling in Christ. This is a paradigm shift that changes how we raise our children, and as such it means that we cannot just raise our children however we like. We must make sure that our methods take into account the various factors we will encounter along the way.

God's method of training is distinguished from all others by the fact that it takes factors into account that the world is not even aware of. God knows....

- That our children don't belong to us, they belong to God, and that He sends them into the world for a purpose.
- That there is a barrier of sin that keeps our children from moving forward into their calling...a barrier that cannot be removed by human effort. We learned that sin is not just bad behavior, rather it is our nature that defines what we are as humans. We are sinners by nature. We sin because it is our nature to sin.
- That He alone has provided a solution to deal with sin....not to improve us, but to replace our sin nature with an entirely new nature that is rooted in the righteousness of Christ Himself. In so doing God restores the relationship with Him that was broken by sin.
- And finally, as we saw last week, God knows that this solution is not automatically applied to anyone. Each must choose to receive it for themselves, and therein lies the problem: our natural bent is to reject it. Our children come into the world already enslaved to a tyrant called sin, and sin by its very nature is designed to keep them from accepting God's provision. Sin begins its work in the lives of our children from the moment they are born.

If we want our children to rise to their full potential in Christ, to experience the abundant, eternally significant life God wants for them, then they must accept His provision. We can't make them receive it. We can't receive it for them. They must choose it for themselves. Obviously newborns are not capable of making a decision like that, so this means that our children will live a portion of their lives dominated by their sin nature.

The longer they live under the control of sin, the less likely they are to respond to God's offer of salvation. Sin has many effects, but the most insidious is the fact that sin hardens us. One who is hardened not only refuses to

repent, they can actually get to the point where they cannot respond to God's mercy. It is an extremely dangerous condition to be in.

This hardening grows over time with each act of disobedience. The more they sin, the greater the effect; the less they sin, the less the effect. For years studies have shown that the vast majority of Christians came to Christ by the age of 18. This one fact totally changes the focus of our parenting. Our goal is not just to teach them to be good. Our goal is to preserve their innocence for as long as possible by minimizing their involvement in sinful behavior.

How do we minimize their involvement in sin? By disciplining our children. The Bible is very clear that children need to be disciplined.

Proverbs 19:18 Discipline your son...

Proverbs 23:13 Do not withhold discipline from a child.

Proverbs 29:17 Discipline your son...

We discipline because God disciplines. Remember Paul's command in Ephesians 6.4

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

The word "training" is translated from the Greek word *paideia*, which is elsewhere translated as "discipline". In other words, how does God train our children? By disciplining them.

Deuteronomy 8.5 Think about it: Just as a parent disciplines a child, the LORD your God disciplines you for your own good.

Proverbs 3.12 For the LORD corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

In fact, it could be said that God disciplines our children through our discipline. When we refuse to discipline our children we are short-circuiting God's training and instruction.

What is discipline?

Proverbs 22.6 tells us that we are to...

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

According to Henry Brandt, discipline is everything you are doing to "train up a child in the way he should go."

"Train" - Discipline is a process that takes place over time.

"In the way they should go" - Discipline measures the child's life by a standard God expects them to live by. When we discipline our children we are literally teaching them what is right vs what is wrong. But is that enough? In most cases our problem isn't that we don't know what is right. Our problem is that we don't *want* to do what is right.

James 4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

This is a universal problem.

Isaiah 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way

Notice that this is something “we all” do. Why do “we all” insist on going our own way? Because...

Proverbs 22:15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child...

Our inclination to resist what is right and do what is wrong isn't just a preference, it is our instinct, it is our nature to prefer the wrong over the right. It is, as the verse says, “bound up” in our hearts. This is why it is so important to understand the theology of sin. If you don't take sin into account, you'll assume that it is enough to simply instruct your children in the difference between right and wrong. You'll make the huge mistake of believing that once they know the difference they will gladly choose the right. This is simply not true.

Biblical discipline assumes that our children – as sweet as they are – don't naturally want to do what they ought to do, they must be trained to not only *do* what is right, they must be trained to *want* to do what is right. Do you see the difference?

So how do you teach a child to *want* to do what they ought to do? To accomplish this you must not only change their behavior, you must change their values, their attitudes. This requires what Paul describes as a transformed mind:

Romans 12.2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

A transformed mind is a mind that has been disciplined. How do you know when a mind has been transformed...when it has been successfully disciplined? There are two tests:

First, look at the next phrase of the verse...Once your mind has been transformed...

you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

When a child is first confronted with God's will (i.e. His commands), how do they respond? They reject it. Why? Because they don't approve of it, to them it is “not good, not pleasing, and certainly not perfect”. But when their mind has been transformed and made new, they now “approve” of God's will – they choose it because they agree that the command is “good, and pleasing, and perfect”.

The second test of a transformed / disciplined mind is found in Proverbs 22.6

Train a child in the way he should go, **and when he is old he will not turn from it.**

If a parent disciplines their children to live as they ought, then when the child is old – i.e. when they are on their own, they will continue to live as they ought. Why? Because they're scared to death? No, because they have internalized the standard. They have learned to *want* to do what is right because they are convinced of the benefits of doing what is right, so they choose it without mom or dad constantly reminding them.

How does this transformation take place? Certainly you must familiarize them with what God expects of them. But you must also demonstrate the advantages of doing what is right (benefits), and the disadvantages of not doing what is wrong (consequences). A child that has not learned the benefits of doing right, and the cost of

doing wrong, they will never change their mind, they will never overcome their natural resistance to the life God calls them to live.

Discipline is needed to overcome their natural resistance to the life God wants them to live. Which brings us to the next question:

How should you discipline your child?

The key to effective discipline lies not with the child, but with the parents. While discipline certainly involves a method, in order for that method to succeed there are five conditions parents must put in place.

Parents need to be convinced of the importance of discipline

Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, *for this is right.*

But it goes deeper than that

Proverbs 19:18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; **do not be a willing party to his death.**

The stakes are enormous! Discipline is inconvenient. If you aren't convinced that your children need to be disciplined, then anything else will seem more important. Is it more important than the game on TV? Is it more important than what's on your phone?

Parents need to be committed to the process. It takes 18-22 years to raise a child. You are in it for the long haul. Just when you think you have it mastered, they move into a new stage of development that requires you to rethink your strategy.

Parents need to be consistent. Children thrive on routine - when nap times, meal times, bed times, chore times and play time remain the same each day. No doubt there are times when there are interruptions that can't be avoided, but these are the exception. This consistency requires the parent to limit their own schedule according to this need for routine. Busy, distracted parents who force their children to live a life of unpredictable chaos should not be surprised when this chaos shows up in the behavior of their children.

Proverbs 29:17 Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul.

Parents need to have clear expectations. Clearly identify what is expected (the way they should go), and what the consequences are if violated. Isn't this what God did for Israel?

In verse 1 God tells them what He expects of them....

Deuteronomy 11:1 Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always.

Then in verse 18 He shows them how to rehearse what He expects of them....

11.18-20 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Then in verse 26 He tells them what the consequences will be if they disobey.

11:26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – 27 the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; 28 the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.

This is our model. Let them know what is expected. Review it often. Make sure they know what the consequences are. That way when they disobey, you aren't imposing a consequence, they themselves have chosen the consequence.

For example: "Ok, junior, you know that you must eat all your food before you can have dessert. You didn't eat all your food, so you that must mean that you don't want any dessert."

Parents need to be unified. When it comes to raising children, parents must be united with one another: they must operate by the same convictions, the same commitment, must demonstrate the same consistency, and have the same understanding of the standards and consequences.

There are two reasons why parents don't agree: First, because they are basing their strategies on their own experience. Unity is the result of a husband and wife who find common ground on the word of God. They both agree to adjust their opinions and priorities and choices on what God says.

Second, the reason they don't have any common ground is because they haven't taken the time to create it. Discussions that are held in the heat of the moment are more likely to divide you than to unite you.

Unfortunately in this age of divided families, it is often not possible to find common ground. If you are a single parent, make every effort to find common ground with the other parent, but when that is impossible do what God says regardless of what the other parent says or does. You have a very difficult row to hoe, and you will need to lean heavily on the Lord in prayer. But know this: You are not as alone as you feel.

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

If you are remarried, make every effort to find common ground with the other parent, but regardless of what they do you need to be unified with your present spouse, and together you must do what God says regardless of what the other spouse does.

How do you deal with an uncooperative or even hostile ex-spouse?

1 Peter 3.15-16 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Children are extremely perceptive. They know when any of these five elements is not in place, and they are masters at exploiting these gaps. Once your foundation is in place, it is time to turn your attention to your method...and it helps to think of discipline as a set of tools. Each tool has a purpose, and there is nothing worse than using a tool for a purpose for which it was not intended.

Imagine that your little angel has just done something they shouldn't have done. You have several tools to choose from:

Encouragement - At all times catch them in the act of doing the right thing, or at least attempting to do so... and acknowledge it. Beware of rewarding them for good behavior - good behavior should be the norm, it is expected. If you reward good behavior you will end up teaching them to sell their good behavior in exchange for the reward.

Instruction - It may be that the reason they did the wrong thing is because they don't know what is expected of them. Especially when they are young, don't assume they know. If they don't know, then rehearse the standard, the reasons for it, and the consequences....then give them the opportunity for a do over. But if they do know, then move on to the next....

Correction - Remember that children are still developing, still getting to know themselves, their capabilities, and their world. Despite their best efforts they are going to make mistakes. They are also immature - it comes with the territory. Never a punish a child for acting their age, or for making a mistake. This is the time to patiently correct their behavior. Come beside them and show them how to do what needs to be done, then let them try. Be positive. Be encouraging. But if they persist in doing wrong, then it is time to....

Rebuke - when a behavior involves willful acts of disobedience, it should be treated as sin - because that's what it is. They are not just disobeying you, they are disobeying God. It is important for children to learn that sin is dangerous and that there are consequences to sin. At this point the issue isn't just how to change their behavior, they must also learn how to resolve sin and its effects. The pattern is found in 1 John 1.8-9

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

- Identify their behavior as a sin, and show them how it violates God's standard.
- Help them understand why sin is so dangerous.
- Encourage them to confess their sin, to accept full responsibility for their actions. No excuses. No blaming others. Do not fall into the trap of spitting blame. Everyone is always 100% responsible for their own choices.
- Give them the opportunity to ask those they have sinned against to forgive them - people as well as God.
- If harm has been done, require them to make amends.

If the sin persists, then you they should be given appropriate consequences. Consequences do two things: First it teaches them that sin always comes at a cost. Second, consequences apply pressure to help motivate them do what they don't want to do.

Physical punishment - a.k.a. spanking. Yes, spanking. It is here that the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God go their separate ways. It is clear that God advocates physical punishment, the application of physical pain as a consequence.

Proverbs 13:24 He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

Proverbs 22:15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

Proverbs 23:13-14 Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.

Proverbs 29:15 The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.

In this day of rampant abuse we are shocked by such statements. Why would God advocate spanking?

First, spankings are reserved for blatant and persistent acts of defiance and disrespect. As such it is the punishment of last resort, when all else fails. The fact that this kind of behavior is occurring is evidence that sin is taking root, that their young heart is starting to harden. This is an extremely dangerous situation for them.

Because their young hearts are beginning to harden, the lesser forms of discipline will become less and less effective, and will not penetrate to reach the heart. In such cases pain is the only thing that can penetrate to reach into a hardened heart.

Second, in the face of blatant defiance and disrespect, spanking can have a cleansing effect on the heart. It is not the pain itself that cleanses, but the fact that pain can provide a tangible way for them to measure the cost of sin, and so can lead them to repent of their sin.

A few ground rules:

There is a window in time when spankings are useful. Must be old enough to understand expectations and consequences. Too old and it will certainly backfire and created bitterness and resentment.

Spankings should never be administered in anger. Calm down. It is not a form of vengeance.

A parent should not administer spankings if they were subjected to abuse as a child.

Any child who has been abused should never be spanked (e.g. adoptive situation)

Spankings should be administered on the behind with an instrument other than the hand...."the rod".

Spankings are supposed to sting / hurt, but not bruise or cause welts.

The parent should surround the spanking with clear explanations and affirmations of love.

Once the punishment has been administered and the child has been affirmed, it is over. Don't dwell on it.

There are no guarantees that discipline will change the heart of a child - they have their own will. But the lack of discipline is certain to lead to a bad end.