



FAMILY LIFE

Parenting

Lesson #6 January 14 & January 21, 2001

Lesson Teacher: Nate Atwood

Lesson Title: “Discipline”

Introduction

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Heb. 12:7-12)

Whenever I mention that I’m going to teach on family, almost immediately I am bombarded with requests to teach on discipline. Clearly, it’s a topic that people need some help on. Before we begin I’d like to point out that “discipline” has been a bit delayed. In fact, this is now the 19th class in this Family Foundations Series, and we are only now beginning to talk about discipline.

The delay has been intentional. To engage the topic of discipline and our children before we’ve covered the subject of building a strong marriage (the first semester), winning our kids’ hearts, teaching our kids, and building a peaceful home is simply to put the cart before the horse. Discipline is an expression of our homes, marriages, and parenting relationships with our children. Discipline begins, not as a separate topic in itself, really when we build stable and loving homes that are built on Truth. Children that are habitually out of control generally are symptoms of an out-of-order home.

Just the other day our children were at the zoo with Helen. One mother was there at the same time with twin 2-year-old boys. She spoke to them in crisp and even slightly harsh terms. She directed them around the zoo with simple words like “Come,” “Stop,” “Stay,” and “Quiet.” She had almost no other verbal or non-verbal contact with her children. Our children were a bit stunned by her parenting style. Wesley’s comment (unsolicited) to Helen was, “Mom, she’s talking to her kids as if they were pet dogs.” Helen’s question to Wesley was, “Son, how do you think they will respond to her when they are teenagers?”

From one perspective you would say that her children were well disciplined. They came when she said “come” and they stopped when she said “stop.” Yet, things are likely to change when those children are older. Perhaps what I am saying in all of this is that discipline cannot be treated as a separate topic from the entire atmosphere of our home life and relationships. I have said in the past, “I discipline my children with a

baseball bat.” After the stunned silence sets in I add, “That is, I play lots of baseball (and other games) with my kids. We laugh together. I teach them. I win their hearts. Then, when it comes time to discipline them their general disposition is that they want to please me. My correction and/or punishment are received from a loving father rather than a harsh taskmaster.”

When you think about it, this is how God disciplines us. God’s prescription for discipline includes lots of love, acceptance, forgiveness, fellowship, and teaching. Most certainly He disciplines. God’s discipline can be intense. Yet, His discipline is no more intense than His love, compassion, and tender guidance. When God disciplines, He does so in the context of a larger relationship as our loving father (Hebrews 12:7).

The Necessity of Discipline

To say that discipline must take place within the context of a loving relationship still affirms that discipline must take place. I once heard Elisabeth Eliot comment that if a child did not know the meaning of the word “no” (and respect it) by the time they were 18 months old, trouble was surely coming. Helen and I both agree with her comment. Not only have we sought to teach our very young children the meaning of affection and warmth, we have also sought to teach them the meaning of “no.”

Discipline is necessary for our children’s good. If they fail to learn the meaning of obedience and the basic principle that God’s disciplines, then their lives will be filled with sorrow. Ironically, it is discipline that leads to freedom. I best grasped this in a study I once heard of regarding boundaries and children. Pre-school age children were placed on a wonderful playground with the latest of toys. All that was missing was a fence. As a result, the children remained huddled close to their building.

Sometime later a fence was added. Everything else remained the same – the toys, the children, and the building. The addition of the fence had a surprising effect on the children. They now roamed the playground freely and explored it even to its limits. They enjoyed every square foot and all of the toys it had to offer. The meaning is not hard to miss. The fence provided a sense of security. Ironically, it is in boundaries that we human beings find our greatest chance at freedom.

When we fail to set appropriate limits on our children’s lives we make them prisoners rather than setting them free. The undisciplined child will find fewer and fewer opportunities as they grow into adulthood. Conversely, it is the child who is well able to discipline himself that is given the greatest opportunities in life.

A Thumbnail Study of God’s Discipline Method

1. **BEGIN WITH RELATIONSHIP** . . . note that in Ex. 20:1 God first affirms His relationship with Israel before instituting the 10 Commandments. The point? Discipline is far more effective in the context of relationship. The first rule of disciplining our children is to love them . . . actively. Note Isa. 66:12-13). Discipline must take place within a relationship of blessing, otherwise it will generally be received as a curse. To discipline our children apart from a loving relationship tends to harden their hearts and puts in place the foundation for rebellion.

In reality, discipline takes place long before a spanking. The word “discipline” actually means “to teach”. Philip Keller, in his book *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*, notes that the Shepherd’s rod was more than a means of discipline. Yes, the shepherd might strike an errant sheep with his rod but he would also use the rod as a means of guiding his sheep down the path. The shepherd would lay his rod upon the back of a sheep and gently guide them one way or another.

2. **REMEMBER THAT DISCIPLINE AFFIRMS RELATIONSHIP . . .** The Scriptures teach us that lack of discipline (including punishment or chastisement) suggests lack of relationship. If we fail to discipline our children then the Bible would say that we fail to love them (Prov. 3:11-12). We are reminded that God proves His fatherhood and our sonship via discipline (Heb. 12:7-11).

Helen and I remember one young mother who left our Sunday School class in tears when we taught on discipline. We reviewed our notes and talked to our friends. It seemed that we were anything but harsh and yet the brokenness in this young mother's life made it difficult to listen to any conversation on the topic of discipline without reacting. In her mind, discipline equaled anger and could only be harsh.

Her unease with discipline showed in her young daughter. We found it difficult to let our children play with her. The daughter was a little tyrant. She had little if any concept of boundaries. We withdrew our children from playing with her as many of our friends did as well.

The effect of this mother's refusal to even consider the place of discipline was, ironically, a lack of love on this young mother's part. Her daughter was growing up without boundaries and already consequences were beginning to take hold. We were worried as to what the teen years might look like.

3. **BE LIBERAL WITH REWARD AND PRAISE . . .** God not only warns us of consequences, He also again and again affirms the rewards of obedience . . . the Scriptures on this are too numerous to mention here, but as an example note the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12) and Malachi 3:8-12). See also Lev. 26:1-13. Not also how time and again God encourages us in His Word with regard to doing His Will (Deu. 31:6).

Remember that God also "disciples" us through unending promises of rewards for obedience and encouragement. Positive guidance to good behavior is far superior to negative punishment for poor behavior. We should liberally praise our children. And we should offer specific and descriptive praise to channel our children's behavior in positive directions. We should especially be careful to praise for character qualities.

A wonderful example of this is the book of Philemon. Notice how often Paul the Apostle describes Philemon (and Onesimus) in positive terms. He describes their behavior and then praises it specifically. You might think of this as "holding the crown over your child's head." That is, through descriptive praise you are speaking of them in terms of royalty. It is amazing how often a child (or an adult) will seek fulfill positive, descriptive praise.

We also have used praise on a comparative basis. For example, when two young children are in the room and one is behaving well and the other not so well, we'll say something like, "I am really proud of Sarah for the way she is cleaning up her room." We continue to be amazed at how often Hannah will suddenly start the cleaning process.

It's also important to remember that God gives rewards. God liberally rewards obedience. Why don't we do the same thing? One practical tip on this would be to place an empty jar in your kitchen. Whenever the children do spontaneous acts of kindness or service we place a bullion cube in the jar. Why a bullion cube? They are wrapped in gold paper and look like little presents. Their act of service is thus defined as a "present to Jesus." When the jar is full, the family goes out for ice cream.

So many battles can be avoided if you fill your home with praise and tangible rewards. Idle hands are the devil's playground. Therefore, if we fill our home with praise and service, there is much less time and energy available for the devil to pervert.

4. **WARN OF CONSEQUENCES . . .** We must remember that the root of the word "discipline" means "to teach." God taught his people up front about many things, including the cost of disobedience. God is more than willing to warn of consequences (Lev. 26:14-43).

Part of the reality of discipline is that we are reminded that we are sinners by nature. Our first impulse is not to do good. Discipline is God's means of correcting our natural inclinations. When we fail to discipline our children we are in reality revealing a fairly significant theological weakness in our parenting. We are saying that we think our children do not need correction or punishment. Quite simply, this is not the case.

Foundational to a healthy life and a mature Christian is "the fear of the Lord." We must become convinced that God will punish sin. Even more so, we must become convinced that sin is not worth it (Galatians 6:7).

One of the constant refrains heard in our home is that, "If you do such-and-such, you will be choosing discipline." We put the burden on our children's shoulders. They have a free will. The Bible affirms this. They can choose to obey the Lord's Will or they can choose not. If they choose not to obey, there will be discipline. And their discipline is their choice. By framing our moments of discipline in these terms we are seeking to internalize their moral choices. They choose. We have seen that putting the emphasis on their choice has shifted the focus from us as bad guys to them as having made a poor choice. This is essential to teaching self-government. After all, our goal is that they grow up and learn self-discipline.

5. **BE ABSOLUTELY COMMITTED TO CARRY OUT YOUR WORD . . .** Perhaps the biggest problem we have in disciplining is that we do not do what we say we will do, whether positive or negative. In so doing I believe we encourage the spirit of the mocker in our children. Note that God carries out discipline relentlessly (gal. 6:7)--though in this we must be careful to avoid impossible demands (1 Cor. 10:13).

Do not fail to discipline (Proverbs 3:11-12). To do so is a great sin. The rebellious spirit must be dealt with (1 Samuel 15:23) . . . we must view rebellion with no less seriousness than witchcraft. We must instill in our children an understanding of God's attitude towards sin . . . this begins with an honest appraisal of what our own attitude towards sin is. If we fail to discipline are we saying that we fail to take sin seriously. God be merciful is this is true.

I remember with great clarity driving through Charlotte one day, and two of our children were bickering. I warned them that if they continued there would be discipline. They continued. I immediately pulled off the road and disciplined them. (Vinegar wasn't available so they got a quick spanking.) Helen and I were both amazed at the effect of immediately making good on our word. There was no bickering for a long time after that incident. Furthermore, any warnings we gave were immediately taken seriously. Our children know that we will interrupt whatever we are doing to discipline them.

We must teach our children that our "no" really means "no." If we fail to do so, two things will happen. Our home will become unruly and in the long run our children will not take God seriously. The price tag on the latter can be quite high.

If our children do not respond to our requests or warnings we must ultimately ask ourselves the question if whether or not we are parenting well. Some of our friends taught as the principle of "first request." If our children do not immediately comply with a request we will simply say, "first request." It's a reminder that obedience delayed is disobedience. If they do not act in the moment they will be disciplined. It's amazing how effective "first request" has been as a tool for us.

6. **BE CREATIVE IN MAKING THE PUNISHMENT (AND THE REWARD) FIT THE BEHAVIOR IN ORDER TO TEACH . . .** Haggai 1:2-13. God is a master at punishing in the precise way to drive home His point. If our solution to everything is spanking (or yelling), then we are

lazy and missing our opportunity. Constant hitting or harsh words create a violent atmosphere in our homes. This is not Biblical discipline.

Perhaps the first step in punishment is to discern your child's motive. Did your child willfully intend disobedience? Punishing a child for accidentally spilling milk or for an act that they in no way intended as sin grieves and can crush a child's spirit. (Though it is appropriate to have the child clean up the milk; they'll learn to be a bit more careful next time.)

Many years ago, one morning Wesley put shaving cr me on Lauren's face while she was asleep. Lauren awoke in tears. Wesley meant it in fun but he had upset Lauren. He had a debt to repay. Rather than dealing with him in discipline, we pointed out to him that he needed to reaffirm his love for his sister and demonstrate to her that he meant no harm. Our suggested solution was that he serve Lauren breakfast in bed. It was a great morning. Wesley (probably age 4) fixed breakfast for Lauren and served his sister. All ended well. The key was to discern his motive and then act accordingly.

Helen also remembers Wesley walking down the hall early one morning with a cup of coffee for her. She heard the cup clanking and the coffee spilling on the carpet. Her flesh wanted to cry out, "The carpet!" She managed to restrain herself, recognizing that Wesley's intent was to serve her. She dealt with him on the basis of his motive and thanked him. She knew not to crush Wesley's spirit.

When there has been sin, corporal punishment is appropriate. In fact, it is Biblical (Prov 23:13; 29:15; 13:24). What is critical is that our homes do not simply become reduced to places where there is a lot of hitting going on. Corporal punishment should be used but it should not be done in anger or in a spirit of violence.

Yet, punishment as a means of discipline need not be limited to corporal punishment. For example, for sins of the tongue we discipline the tongue. If our children whine or complain, we place vinegar on their tongues (it is a reminder that their words have been "bitter"). If they speak a profane word, we wash their mouths out with soap. If they delay in bedtime, they go to bed early the next night. If they fail to pick up their room, we sweep through the room and pick up their favorite toys or clothes that then disappear for a period of time. If they scribble on the wall, they clean the wall.

We also use "time out" as a means of discipline. We will sit a child in a corner for a period of time if they cannot interact constructively with others. The message is this: when you can be nice you can return to the setting.

7. **ALWAYS REASSURE AND FORGIVE . . .** Even in punishment God reaffirms relationship (Lev. 26:44-46) and is careful to forgive (Isa. 1:18). Never discipline your child by emotionally withdrawing from them. God does not do this. Even when the discipline is intense, God still draws near and we must do the same. We discipline our children. And then we hold them while they cry. For those who are older, we discipline them, and then we play a game with them. We affirm the relationship.

Miscellaneous Thoughts

- ***"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline . . . for the Lord disciplines those he loves."*** (Proverbs 3:11-12)
- ***"The better disciplined a child is, the less discipline will be required."*** (Ross Campbell)
- ***Step-by-Step Discipline from James Dobson:***
 1. Define the boundaries before they are enforced.
 2. When defiantly challenged, respond with confident decisiveness.
 3. Distinguish between willful defiance and childish irresponsibility.

4. Reassure and teach after the confrontation is over.
 5. Avoid impossible demands.
 6. Let love be your guide.
 7. Include forgiveness (yours and God's) in all discipline.
- Choose your battles carefully (be sure it's worth the fight). For example, we have chosen not to get into a big fight over what our kids wear to church. Our guide is that their choices must be neat and clean. If they want to wear a tie, they are free to do so. If they choose a sport shirt, that is fine as well. Dad draws the line on t-shirts (they aren't fair game). We want the emphasis on the attitude of their hearts rather than the choice of their clothes.
 - Use humor to avoid unnecessary conflicts.
 - Use distraction when your child is headed in the direction of a willful confrontation.
 - Use removal from a situation to cut down on the number of conflicts.
 - Encourage liberally – a discouraged child is more prone to misbehave.
 - Make it clear that you too are under God's discipline. All of us have to live by God's rules.
 - We must ourselves be obedient, repentant, and disciplined. If we discipline our children and do not discipline ourselves, we are heading towards disaster.
 - Make the rules clear (that's what God has done with us).