

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 35 – Parenting: Discipline & Instruction

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Introduction

So far, we have laid a solid, biblical foundation for parenting as we have discussed “The Goal of Parenting (i.e., to glorify God)” and “Father and Mother Roles.” We are to be faithful stewards as parents, keeping in mind that God is sovereign, and children are a gift from God. We should live out and speak the truths of the gospel with our children at all times. As we seek to fulfill our roles as parents, we need to remember to walk in the Spirit, live out the one another’s, fulfill our marital roles, be the unified authority, encourage, and nurture our children.

Paul instructs parents in Ephesians 6:4 to bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This command will serve as the overarching outline for this study.

Worldly or Cultural Approaches to Instruction and Discipline

It is so easy to get caught up in the latest cultural trends for parenting. If we are not careful, we can almost unconsciously move towards the world’s approach to parenting. The reason for this subtle, and almost unnoticeable transition, is due to the fact that worldly parenting is based on what our flesh wants. Having a smart child, an athletic or coordinated child, and a healthy child are not inherently evil. It is when these things, and others like them, become our idol as parents that we find ourselves in the wrong frame of mind and school of thought with regard to parenting. Our lives start to revolve around how to make our children smarter, more athletic, and healthier, and that replaces an eternal perspective we ought to have for the eternal soul and heart of our child.

On a webpage titled “Parenting: Modern Families, Fresh Ideas,” there was a list of the Top 10 Best Books for Thinking Parents. You can quickly see how much of an idol it can become to focus on the non-eternal aspects of parenting:

1. *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*
2. *Nature Shock: New Thinking About Children* – “The authors take the latest science and apply it to parenting in areas like motivation, praise, sibling relationships, sleep...etc.”
3. *Smart Parenting for Smart Kids: Nurturing Your Child’s True Potential* – “It talks about tempering perfectionism and tells us parents to resist giving pointers to our kids.”
4. *Playful Learning: Develop Your Child’s Sense of Joy and Wonder*
5. *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How Our Children Really Learn – and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*
6. *Brain Rules for Baby: How to Raise a Smart and Happy Child from Zero to Five*
7. *No Regrets Parenting: Turning Long Days and Short Years into Cherished Moments with Your Kids* – “A quick read with gifts of wisdom for busy parents about being present in the life of our children.”
8. *Different Learners: Identifying, Preventing, and Treating Your Child’s Learning Problems*
9. *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids*
10. *Fun on the Run!*

By and large, the titles listed above focus on how to have a smarter, more developed child. While this is a noble goal, Christian parents need to reject the urge to simply teach our children intellectual

knowledge at the expense of eternal and lasting truth about God and His eternal purpose. Often it is pride that leads parents down this road since they want their child's development to reflect well on them. Our instruction ought to lead our children to their Creator and their Savior ultimately, and their intellectual development should serve as a means to that end. Once our children have embraced the gospel, our instruction ought then to direct them towards how to glorify God in their everyday life.

When it comes to discipline, the world's approaches typically center on behavior modification and generating "success" for your child. As one child development expert put it, "It's all about setting your kids up for success, so everyone wins."¹ The problem is, "success" is never clearly defined or explained. In this article, entitled "3 Golden Rules for Great Behavior," the three golden rules were: stay calm, set limits, and encourage cooperation. These are great guidelines, but the problem is not necessarily *what* worldly parenting looks like, it's *why* it is done how it is done. Some of the child psychologists who were quoted in the article said things like, "Kids are supposed to test boundaries – that's how they learn," and, "Recasting a directive as an option creates less resistance." The problems with these statements are obvious, but these are the presuppositions that guide the more specific actions in worldly discipline. Godly discipline in parenting must be built on a foundation that will stand, not on ridiculous and changing worldly wisdom and opinions.

Helpful Reminders

Before plunging into what the Bible has to say about discipline and instruction specifically, we must be reminded that parents need to be unified. They need to be unified in their commitment to honor the Lord and in their commitment to work together. Additionally, and more foundationally, parents must be committed to walking in the Spirit. No godly discipline or instruction will occur with parents who are not seeking to walk in the Spirit. The result will be hypocrisy. This is not only detestable in the sight of God, but children detect this and quickly learn to say one thing and do another contrarily, just like you. With a commitment to walk in the Spirit and to be unified as parents, biblical discipline and instruction will lead to glorifying God, which is the ultimate goal in any facet of parenting or the Christian life as a whole.

Punishment or Discipline?

There exists a plethora of misunderstanding regarding discipline. This is often due to the influence of worldly thinking, but mainly to a lack of desire to see what God's Word says about it. Consequently, we will seek to understand foundationally what the Bible says on the topic.

Punishment is not the same as discipline. Punishment is a part of discipline. More specifically, punishment is the negative consequence(s) imposed by the parents when deemed necessary to discipline a child. Consequently, there may be discipline that does not involve punishment (e.g., a conversation to explain something to the child). This distinction becomes evident in Hebrews 12. The author in this chapter is seeking to encourage his readers to press on in their faith and not turn back to Judaism. They had been persecuted and needed encouragement to run the race that had been set before them with endurance. To do this, the author tells them that their hardships were God "disciplining" them (Heb. 12:7). The intent here is not punishment, but training.

⁵ ... "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE **DISCIPLINE** OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; ⁶ FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE **DISCIPLINES**, AND HE **SCOURGES** EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." (Hebrews 12:5-6)

When the word discipline is used in these verses, the word denotes training (*paideia*). *Paideia* means "to provide instruction with the intent of forming proper habits of behavior, of providing guidance

¹ Nancy Rose, "3 Golden Rules for Great Behavior," *Parents Magazine*, 2011.

for responsible living, or rearing and guiding a child towards maturity. It is a broad term, signifying the various things parents do to train, correct, cultivate, and educate children in order to help them develop and mature as they ought to. It includes the idea of correction for wrongdoing. It is the overall training of children, including punishment.”²

The word “scourge” can mean a literal or figurative flogging (*mastigoo*). *Mastigoo* comes from the Greek word for whip *mastix*, and is used to describe the flogging phase of Jesus’ crucifixion (Jn. 19:1). Whether the term is used in its figurative or literal sense, it is negative and as such can safely be called a means of punishment.

So we see here in these verses that there is a distinction made between discipline and punishment, and that punishment is a means of discipline. This is important to know in parenting because not all situations call for “the rod” (i.e., spanking). We are given a clear guideline for when and why it would be wise to punish children in Proverbs.

¹⁵ **Foolishness** is bound up in the heart of a child; the **rod of discipline** will remove it far from him. (Prov. 22:15)

Punishment, and more specifically physical punishment, is to be used to remove foolishness from the heart of a child. This is not a prescription for a “daily foolishness removal beating.” When taking a closer look at how the Bible describes foolishness, it becomes clear that foolishness is not the same as childishness. Children will do childish things often, such as: spill their glass at the dinner table, blurt out embarrassing comments or questions in the grocery store, wet the bed...etc. We should not punish for childishness even when childish acts make our lives terribly inconvenient. Punishment is reserved for manifestations of foolishness. Proverbs describes the foolish one as the one who does not fear God and this is reiterated in Psalm 14:1, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

When a child lives life concerned only with their own agenda, they live out of the immediacy of their lusts, cravings, expectations, hopes, and fears. As Tedd Tripp states in *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, “It is a question of authority. Will the child live under the authority of God and therefore the authority of his parents, or under his own authority—driven by his wants and passions?”³ It may seem harsh to refer to children as being foolish, but consider momentarily how often children from the beginning of their lives resist being controlled by others: resistance to a diaper change, or to wearing a coat in the winter, or to eat the meal that has been prepared for them. This resistance to authority, if left unpunished, leads to a life of rebellion to all authority, including God’s. For a parent not to punish this kind of behavior is actually one of the least loving things they can do.

²⁴ He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently. (Prov. 13:24)

It is important to note that the physical or circumstantial punishment alone you impose upon your child is not what saves them from this life of rebellion. We have to remember that punishment is a part of discipline. The punishment must be administered in a loving and biblical manner. Simply meting out various punishments, or the same punishment, leads to embittered and exasperated children. The big picture of discipline is training a child up to maturity. Therefore punishment needs to be preceded and succeeded with clear warning, instruction, and correction that orient the child back to God and away from their rebellion.

² Randy Thompson, “Topic 34 – Parenting: Father and Mother Roles, www.valleybible.net

³ Ted Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 105-106.

The Rod, the Spoon, or the Hand?

The question must be asked: What constitutes biblical punishment? If we were to follow these sayings from Proverbs word-for-word, we would be punishing our children using a literal rod. Many Christian parents understand these verses to mean that parenting without spanking is sinful parenting. This is just not true though. The most definitive statement that can be made about parenting that does not involve some sort of physical discipline (e.g., spanking) is that it is *unwise*. Proverbs is the Word of God, but it should be read and understood for what it claims to be, and that is a set of wisdom sayings.

Another question that must be asked is: When should I punish my child? Tedd Tripp answers that question in this way: “When you have given a directive that he has heard and is within his capacity to understand, and he has not obeyed without challenge, without excuse or without delay...”⁴ The situation Tripp has described in this quote is a situation that clearly shows a child in foolish rebellion against their parent’s authority. He then goes on to explain the effect this punishment will have.

“Properly administered discipline humbles the heart of a child, making him subject to parental instruction. An atmosphere is created in which instruction can be given. ...[It] renders the child compliant and ready to receive life-giving words.”⁵ What is “properly administered discipline? To answer this question, we must simply remind ourselves of some of the most foundational guidelines for our own personal walk with God.

- Are you walking in the Spirit or are you angry, bitter, anxious, or impatient? If not, take time to pray, confessing and repenting from sin, before administering punishment.
- Be prayerful, for yourself, for your child, and for God’s glory.
- Be clear about why your child is being punished.
- Love your child throughout the process. This needs to be a reflection of how God deals with us.

Naturally, this leads us to consider what instruction of children ought to look like and be about.

Biblical Elements of Instruction

1. *Family Worship*: One of the most basic units of human organization is the family. In a general sense it is essential to the vitality of societies all over the world. Obviously this was God’s intention and He gave His chosen people some very clear, overarching guidelines regarding the implementation of His holy law in their lives. This instruction appears in what has come to be known as the *Shema*.⁶

⁴Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

Here we see that the law of God was to be internalized (“*These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be **on your heart***”) in several ways:

⁴ Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, 150.

⁵ Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, 107.

⁶ *Shema* comes from the Hebrew word for “hear,” the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4. In Jewish families, this is often the first part of Scripture youths memorize.

- It starts with cultivating a deep love for God which is based on reflecting upon who God is. *“The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*
- It was to be taught diligently to their children. *“You shall teach them diligently to your sons”*
- It was to be the topic of conversation in various venues. *“[You] shall talk of them”*
 - o In the home. *“when you sit in your house”*
 - o On the go. *“when you walk by the way”*
 - o Evening and morning (and everything in between). *“when you lie down and when you rise up”*
- It was to be evidently (though figuratively) displayed at various levels.
 - o Personally. *“You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.”*
 - o In the home. *“You shall write them on the doorposts of your house”*
 - o In the community. *“...and on your gates”*

Though this passage was written to the people of Israel thousands of years ago, it is still a description of what God wants His people to do with His Word. We would do well to heed these instructions in our own lives, and specifically within our families.

The principle is clear that God’s truth is to be taught and discussed within the family. We could call this “family worship.” Most people think of a dad with a guitar leading his family in song when they think of “family worship.” However, we must remember that worship is a lifestyle of praising and glorifying God. While singing praise songs as a family can be *a way* to accomplish family worship, it should not be *the only way* a family does so. The reason we know this is because God wants families to be in constant thought and instruction about Him. There are many ways family worship can be implemented in organized ways:

- Reading Scripture at the breakfast table.
- Discussing how the children we able to honor the Lord at school or baseball practice...etc.
- Praying before meals.
- Attending church together.
- Praying and singing praise songs before bed time.
- Acting out Bible stories as a family.
- Taking nature walks to discuss God’s creative power.

However, a family could be doing all of these things, but miss the point entirely. If we return to the beginning of the *Shema* we see the driving force behind family worship. It is the personal worship of the parents. The readers or listeners are told to love the Lord God with all of who they are, and then that same group is commanded to keep God’s Word on their hearts and to teach their children. Families who have vibrant and genuine family worship are led by parents who have vibrant and genuine relationships with God.

A more specific part of family worship is teaching or instruction.

2. *Teaching or Instruction:* While it is clear in the Old Testament that God wants families to live lives of holistic family worship, Paul clearly exhorts believers in the church of Ephesus to nurture their children by bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and **instruction** of the Lord. (Eph 6:4)

In the previous lesson some noteworthy observations were made regarding this verse.⁷

- “But” shows that the opposite of “provoking to anger” is “bringing them up”.
- “Bringing them up” means to provide adequate nourishment, to nurture. It is a present imperative calling for this to be the parents’ lifestyle or habitual practice.
- “Discipline” means to provide instruction with the intent of forming proper habits of behavior, of providing guidance for responsible living, or rearing and guiding a child towards maturity. It is a broad term, signifying the various things parents do to train, correct, cultivate, and educate children in order to help them develop and mature as they ought to. It includes the idea of correction for wrongdoing. It is the overall training of children, including punishment.
- “Instruction” comes from the Greek words for “to set/put” and “the mind/mode of thinking.” It implies the teaching of the Lord’s ways through His Word. It is any word or encouragement or reproof which leads to correct behavior.

When considering exactly what to teach children, it is important to keep our focus on eternity. Once our focus is properly set, the gospel is the most important object of our instruction to our children, and this does not cease to be so after they have chosen to follow Christ. Parents should be intentional and thoughtful about how they present the various aspects of the gospel to their children. It can be easy to convince a child that they should believe in Jesus and ask Him into their heart so that they don’t go to hell when they die, but that is not the whole story of the gospel.

- Children should be taught about their Creator, and all of His incredible attributes.
- They should be taught about sin and should be shown their own sin, and that it is an offense to God.
- Children should be taught about the Lord Jesus, the Christ/Messiah.
- Finally they should be taught what genuine saving faith means and looks like.

The gospel is not the only part of God’s Word we should teach our children. They should be taught the whole counsel of His Word since “all Scripture is inspired by God is profitable for” all the things parents should be doing with their children as a part of disciplining them: “teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Age-Appropriate Guidelines Regarding Discipline⁸

What follows is an opinionated framework put together from a parenting conference held at Valley Bible Church in 2011. It is meant to be a guideline and a resource arranged by godly, seasoned parents. As such, it is not to be raised to level of God’s holy Word, but to be considered as wisdom.

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| 0 – 1.5 Years | Get child used to hearing your voice inform them that they are either in danger or being defiant. Physical punishment is less effective, but can begin to be implemented very gently. |
| 1.5 – 4 Years | Children now know what you mean when you say “No.” Correctly administered physical punishment can be implemented as a regular form of discipline. Have simple rules (e.g., don’t say “no” to mom and dad, don’t hurt siblings). Teach, |

⁷ Randy Thompson, “Topic 34 – Parenting: Father and Mother Roles”, www.valleybible.net

⁸ Adapted from appendix on discipline from VBC Parenting Conference, 2011

remind, and discuss motives when your child is entering an area of temptation. Children who are allowed to disobey without consequences or who live in homes where the rules change daily, learn to read emotions/moods rather than learning to choose to obey even when they don't want to (self-control). Fair, simple rules consistently enforced cause children to realize their own sinful heart, that God exists, and their need for the Gospel.

- 5 – 9 Years With a good foundation of the previous principles, children at this stage have now developed patterns of obedience and hearts that want to please God. Physical punishment can be used still, but typically only for serious disobedience. Teach basics of God's Word and the importance of thinking of others as more important. Discuss choices and consequences, and how to think biblically about temptations. Learn their strengths, weaknesses, motives, and desires; then offer biblical instruction on how to deal with those. Christian children this age should be encouraged to seek God's help to put off sin and put on righteousness. Discipline may include teaching, verbal correction, rebuking sin, physical punishment, taking away privileges, etc. Thought and prayer should be given to consider which will deal with the heart most effectively.
- 10 – 13 Years Knowing and understanding your child is more important than ever. Keep lines of communication open and active as much as possible. Use these conversations to guide them through their struggles and experiences. Sins become more serious at this age. Physical punishment can still be implemented along with lovingly helping the child use biblical truths to avoid further wrong choices. Typically physical punishment comes to an end at this phase. It is good to communicate when that has taken place and why. Instead, discipline consists mainly of training by reasoning through what God's Word says and how to live it out in real life situations, teaching them to prepare for upcoming issues and choices, verbal correction, rebuking sin, and removing privileges or freedoms.
- 14 – 18 Years Don't stop teaching, training, loving and disciplining children here. Critical issues like relationships, sexual temptation, money work ethic, college and/or career direction, and cultivating a relationship with God are all issues that need to be discussed and dealt with at this phase. It is good to spend extended one-on-one time with them. Freedom can be granted more liberally or restricted based on their responsibility with it. Communication is critical! Ask heart-level questions in order to understand your child and then impart biblical wisdom. Openly discuss God's Word often. The family dynamic is becoming a group of equal sinners, saved by grace, loving each other, and working together to become doers of the Word.
- Adult Children Children who are not under your authority (i.e., living independently) are not required to obey you any longer. Keep communicating with them and offer biblical and practical wisdom when it is asked for or when you feel that they need it. Remember, your advice may not be heeded and that is not wrong.

Concluding Thoughts

The world has much to say about discipline, but no real hope to offer since their presuppositions about parenting and what children need are off. Thankfully, God's Word provides the presuppositional foundation needed to discipline and instruct in a way that honors God and serves

our children well. Punishment, as a part of discipline, needs to be carried out in the same way we should live the rest of our lives (i.e., Spirit-filled and loving). Biblically administered discipline provides soft soil for instruction of the Word. However, biblical instruction should not just take place in these discipline moments but at all times. The discipline and instruction of the Lord Paul exhorts his readers to live out with their children in Ephesians 6:4 is a rich, exciting, and God-honoring path for parents to seek to follow.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself: Your 8 year old child has just clearly disobeyed a directive you had given them. You are angry and offended that they would disobey you so defiantly. They have been sent to their room and are waiting for you to come “deal” with them. What needs to happen before you go into their room? What needs to happen when you go into their room?

Yourself #2: Your 15 year old wants to date. What questions would you ask of them? What biblical truths would you share to guide their thinking?

Someone Else: A friend of yours from church has had problems with their rebellious children (ages 3, 6, and 8). For months they have told you how they just don’t understand why their children are so disobedient, but they have never asked for your advice. Then the day comes when they finally break down and ask you what they need to do to have well-behaved children. What do you say?

Topic 35 – Parenting: Discipline & Instruction – Additional Study

As best as you can, write out your presuppositions for the following items:

- Children
- Behavior of children
- Parenting
- Discipline

Consider: How biblical are the presuppositions above?

In what ways can you see that the world's approach to parenting has influenced your own approach to parenting?

How can you begin to make the necessary changes to be more biblical in your parenting?

What are your sinful tendencies when you go to discipline/punish your children?

How should you approach discipline/punishment biblically?