

CHILD DISCIPLINE AND THE PROVERBS (Part 1)

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We live in an age and culture where it is increasingly difficult to raise children. University of Chicago sociology professor James Coleman noted a number of years ago, **“I think we are becoming the first species in the history of the world which is unable to care for its young. Overall, child bearing is one of the biggest casualties of the modern age, which is being ushered in by this generation.”** For the most part we are able to meet the physical and material needs of children. But to help them to develop morally and spiritually and emotionally has proven to be more difficult.

Dr. Jacob Azerrad wrote in *Psychology Today* magazine (October 2001), **“I have been a child psychologist for 35 years, and each year I see parents dealing with more and more severe problems. Their children are not just ill-mannered, they are whiny, selfish, arrogant, rude, defiant and violent.”**

It seems to me that there are at least two basic factors which play into this state of affairs. The first is that we have a culture that has become less supportive of the child-raising task. Central to this is parents who are unwilling to stay together. According to recent statistics nearly a quarter of US children live in single parent homes. (World, 5/18/2024) This is the highest of any country of the world. The world average for children living in single parent homes is 7%. The result is that 24 million children live without their biological fathers in the home, largely in black and other minority communities.

This culture in which we live which is less supportive of the child-raising task also tends to downgrade the role of moms or dads who stay home to raise kids. It tends not to control the access of children to social media. It doesn't know how to restrain the sexual impulses of kids. Public schools are too often working at cross purposes with parents. In November of 2022 the National Education Association issued this statement: **“Educators love their students and know better than anyone what they need to learn and thrive.”** If public school teachers are so much wiser than parents, we might wonder why all of the testing data indicates that the basic educational knowledge of our kids has been declining in recent years.

Not only is our culture less supportive of the child-raising task but also our culture has lost a basic understanding about how to raise kids. Years ago I went to the public library and looked over most of the book on parenting to see what supposed experts were saying. I found almost every viewpoint on parenting imaginable supported by someone who had a Ph.D. after his or her name. Many of them gave advice that was in direct conflict with that given by other supposed experts. Sometimes even those calling themselves Christians have significant disagreements with each other.

If we want the best advice, we have to use the Bible as our foundation. The Book of Proverbs, which we have been studying in recent weeks, gives us helpful principles that pertain to raising kids. Since the theme of the book has to do with wisdom, or skill in daily, godly living, application from most of the proverbs could be made to raising children. But this book seems to single out one area of child raising for special mention-- that of corrective discipline.

Today we are going to look at what the Book of Proverbs has to tell us about the need for discipline of children, the proper motive for discipline and a couple of basic principles of discipline. Next Sunday we will look at the methods and benefits of proper child discipline according to Proverbs.

I. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- THE NEED FOR DISCIPLINE) So the first thing which the Book of Proverbs tells us about child-raising is that children have THE NEED FOR DISCIPLINE. There are at least a couple of reasons for this. One is that CHILDREN HAVE A SIN NATURE. (I. A.. CHILDREN HAVE A SIN NATURE)

There is a key verse in the book that teaches that. Many of you are familiar with it. It is Proverbs #22 v. 15. (PROVERBS 22:15) That verse says, **“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,/ but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.”** This proverb tells us that foolishness is something that is inherent in the nature of a child and that it needs to be removed. Foolishness is not the same thing as childishness. Children, especially young children are forgetful and immature and accident prone. They have short attention spans, and they have a hard time sitting still. It is not these qualities that need to be removed by discipline. Physical maturity will change these things.

Foolishness has to do with a child’s self-centeredness. It is in the nature of infants to want the world to revolve around them. If every need, every want, every whim is not met, there is crying or frustration or anger. The extent of this does vary from personality to personality. But there is an underlying problem which theologians call original sin. It is that tendency which, left unchecked, will lead to lying and deceit and willfulness and rebellion against authority.

The most crucial factor in determining a philosophy of corrective discipline is the understanding that one comes to about the nature of children and human beings in general. Are we basically good? Neutral? Or sinful?

Back in 1690 an Englishman by the name of John Locke suggested the notion that the minds of children at birth are blank tablets that need to be written upon by experience. Children are morally neutral, certainly not sinful. Over the years that understanding became increasingly popular and has been influential in American education.

(PROJECTOR OFF) It is reflected in the views of a Kansas psychologist by the name of Dr. John Valusek, who says, **“The way to stop violence in America is to stop spanking children. Spanking is the first half inch on the yardstick of violence. It is**

followed by hitting, and ultimately by rape, murder and assassination. The modeling behavior that occurs at home sets the stage.” Children, in his thinking, are good, or at least neutral, and spanking is evil. There is no need for forceful corrective discipline.

The Bible takes a stand contrary to most of modern thinking. It says that while children are of great worth and created in the image of God, they are also sinful. The verse before us says that strong leverage is necessary to break this sinfulness away from the heart of a child. The term for “discipline” in Hebrew is *musar*. (PROJECTOR ON-MUSAR) It refers to correction which results in education. It is the responsibility of parents to become involved with their children in this corrective discipline process.

The object of this discipline, the proverb says, is the “child.” (PROJECTOR OFF) The original word for “child,” which is used in the other proverbs that we will examine, has a broad field of meaning. It is used in the Old Testament to describe everything from infants to adult men. So knowing Hebrew doesn’t help us here to get a more precise picture of the age of the children who are in view.

What may help us is to remember the audience that King Solomon had in mind when he compiled these proverbs. It seems that he was addressing young men preparing for government service. If that was so, it seems most likely that the author would be picturing the children of these young men. These children would probably have been very young if their dads were just in training for government service. So perhaps there is special application in these verses to parents with children who are quite young.

Proverbs 22:15 teaches them and teaches us the foundational truth that children have sin natures. These sin natures are going to require corrective action from parents. We should not tolerate foolish, sinful, rebellious behavior in our little ones, expecting such behavior to go away by itself. Some kids have more compliant personalities. Some are more challenging. The point is not physical discipline. It is correction and training for a respect for proper authority.

B.

(I. A. B.. UNDISCIPLINED CHILDREN HEAD DOWN A DANGEROUS PATH) A second reason for the necessity of corrective discipline for children is that UNDISCIPLINED CHILDREN HEAD DOWN A DANGEROUS PATH. Negative behavior and even death can result from the lack of discipline. Look at Proverbs #23 vv. 13-14 (PROVERBS 23:13-14): **“Do not withhold discipline from a child;/ if you strike him with a rod, he will not die./ If you strike him with the rod,/ you will save his soul from Sheol.”**

Next week we will look at this proverb and focus on methods of discipline. Notice now the last line of these verses. Corrective action will deliver the child’s soul from Sheol. “Sheol” is a Hebrew word for the grave, or death. Failure to curb a child’s sinful actions may lead to behavior that results in death. Corrective discipline is needed to keep a child from destroying himself as well as hurting others. As we have all heard in recent years there is a disturbing rise in deaths among young people from fentanyl overdoses.

Experimentation with illegal drugs can indeed be deadly. It is a tragic result of rebellion against authority.

When we parents act firmly, it may sound like our kids are dying. Their cries and wails and pleadings and objections may tempt us to lay off, to overlook wrong behavior. The author is not condoning child abuse. But if we do not discipline our children, we are heading them down a path that can lead to destruction.

The prevailing view in our western world has become that any physical discipline of children is bad. According to a group called "Save the Children," at least 53 countries now ban the physical discipline of children. The extent to which this ban is enforced varies. Sweden was the first country to ban corporal punishment. That was in 1979. It is interesting to me to find recently that a European agency called Eurobond has examined rates of depression among children in Europe. It has found that Sweden has the highest rate of depression among children in all of Europe. It found that about 41% of Swedish children tend toward depression. How could that be if parents never physically discipline their children?

Back in 1926 the governor of Minnesota appointed a commission to examine crime and its causes. In their report the commissioners concluded, **"Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it--- his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist."** These commissioners recognized the sinful nature of children and their need for correction.

The people in the Ancient Near East had a better understanding of these truths than modern man does. Mesopotamian law said that a child was to be flogged or fined for striking an adult in anger. The Code of Hammurabi said that if a son struck his father intentionally, his hand was to be cut off. The Old Testament (EXODUS 21:15) says in Exodus #21 v. 15, **"Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death."** Whether that was ever really done is unknown. The important thing is that the Bible recognized the reality of sin and the necessity of dealing firmly with it in children.

David Marcus from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York point out, **"...this is precisely the opposite of our modern concept where lack of criminal responsibility by reason of age is a defense, and where one covered by a 'juvenile delinquency' law could receive a less severe sentence than would an adult..."** The Bible and the ancients did not see it this way. (PROJECTOR OFF)

When I was a youth pastor there was one family in the church with three children. The family was very active in the church, but Suzy and I came to recognize that the parents

did not understand the need for corrective discipline. The kids were often behavior problems. Frequently when we would bring them back into line, the parents would back up the kids rather than the youth leaders.

When we discovered that the oldest daughter was making out in the wood with her boyfriend and reprimanded them, the attitude of the parents was that we need not interfere. The daughter could be trusted. When this daughter was 16 or 17, the parents trusted her to be at their house alone with her boyfriend, and she got pregnant. Her life became increasingly complicated. The young father of the baby lost interest in parental responsibilities, and she was left to raise a baby boy with little prospect of finding a Christian husband.

It is good to develop a relationship of trust with our children. But that trust has to be based upon reality and upon a foundation of Biblical discipline. From what I could tell these parents in the early years had been lax in exercising corrective discipline. The result eventually was big problems. The youngest daughter in the family was suicidal for a time. The son was rebellious. The last that I heard he had become a hard drinking womanizer who like to drive fast cars.

We need to understand that our children are valuable gifts from God, but that they also have sinful natures which require corrective discipline. If we become lax and tolerate rebellious behavior, we may be helping them to head down a road that leads to destruction.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PROPER MOTIVE FOR DISCIPLINE) The Book of Proverbs also tells us about THE PROPER MOTIVE FOR DISCIPLINE. That motive is LOVE. (II. THE PROPER MOTIVE FOR DISCIPLINE: LOVE) The model and example for us is the motive of the Lord in His discipline of us. Look at Proverbs #3 vv. 11 & 12 (PROVERBS 3:11-12): **“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline/ or be weary of his reproof,/ for the Lord reproves him who he loves,/ as a father the son in whom he delights.”**

This proverb suggests to us that the Biblical description of God’s discipline of His children is a model for us to follow in the discipline of our children. The word for “discipline” here is *musar*. (MUSAR) It is placed first in this original Hebrew sentence for emphasis. It is the same word that we saw used earlier for corrective discipline of children.

The first thing which this model and this proverb (PROVERBS 3:11-12) teach us is that love for our children will result in corrective discipline. C. S. Lewis points out that an artist does not spend much energy drawing a picture to simply amuse a child. But he does expend great energy and effort to make a great work of art that he loves and of which he is proud. So it is with our children.

The Book of Hebrews quotes this proverb and says that people who claim to be Christians and continue in evil conduct without any problems are illegitimate sons. They are not really God's children, because God disciplines true Christians when they mess up. He does it because He loves them. In the same way if we really love our children, we will correct them.

This proverb also implies that we ought to be motivated by love in the actual discipline itself. Too often we correct our children because we are angry or frustrated or tired. The ideal for which we should strive is love. If we are motivated by love, the focus of our concern will be doing what is best and wisest for our child. Our focus will not be doing what is best for us, what will best relieve our anger or frustration. Discipline is hard work, and it is only love that will carry it through in the way that we shall see that it ought to be carried out.

III. A.

(III. PRINCIPLES OF CHILD DISCIPLINE) Let's consider a couple of principles of child discipline that are prominent in Proverbs. (III. PRINCIPLES OF CHILD DISCIPLINE A. DISCIPLINE THEM WHEN THEY ARE YOUNG) The first is that we need to discipline kids when they are young. If we wait until they are teens before we decide that we need to begin implementing some rules, we are in trouble.

Consider then Proverbs #19 v. 18 (PROVERBS 19:18): **“Discipline your son, for there is hope--- many translations say ‘while there is hope’--- ;/ do not set your heart on putting him to death.”** The proverbs in this book are generally written in the form of declarative sentences. This proverb is written in the form of a command. There is a special urgency surrounding this proverb. The implication is that a time will come when a child may be beyond hope. A time may come when it is too late to correct wrong behavior. Foolishness will have become ingrained in this individual.

The second line indicates that the failure to correct the son when he is young could result in his untimely death. He may become the victim of his own destructive behavior. Perhaps the author also has in his mind the warning that we have considered from Deuteronomy 21:18 that children were to be stoned for flagrant rebellion against parents.

Parents need to exercise corrective discipline of their children when they are young. Some psychologists say that 85% of a child's personality is formed by the time that he or she is six years old. A crucial part of that personality development is the child's attitude toward authority. His attitude toward all authority in life, including his attitude toward God, will be based upon his attitude toward the authority of his or her parents. Children learn respect for authority through our corrective discipline. We need to start early. I realize that most of us here are beyond that stage in our own parenting. But to the extent that we have influence on our kids or grandkids or other relatives, we should encourage them in the right direction.

Children need to have boundaries established for them when they are young. Christian author Larry Christenson points out in one of his parenting books, **“A child’s character needs adequate structure, and to begin with these controls must come from without. Only when the external controls have been adequate can the child take them into himself, make them part of himself, and thus have the necessary internal structure to allow growth to proceed fully and well.”**

Infants have an inborn desire to explore and experiment. So it is good to minimize the number of things to which we need to tell our little ones “no.” But eventually we need to establish reasonable boundaries. I remember distinctly the first time that I did that with our youngest son. He ate at a high chair and developed this habit of throwing food on the floor. So when he was only about a year and a half, I told him one evening, “OK, Scotty, no more food on the floor. No throwing food.” He was beginning to learn the meaning of “no.” So he gave me this startled look. Then he proceeded to pick up a pea, stick out his little hand, and drop the pea on the floor, all the while looking me right in the eye with this look that said, “What are you going to do about it, Dad?”

So I gave him a little tap on the hand and said, “No throwing food on the floor, Scotty.” He had this look of frustration and anger on his face. Immediately he picked up another piece of food and let it fly. This time I slapped him a little harder on the hand and repeated the warning more firmly while looking him right in the eye. “No throwing food on the floor.” He started to cry. I hugged him and talked to him. And he did not do it again--- at that meal anyway. But at each of the next two meals, fairly early in the meal, he did it again. All the while looking me in the eye, as if to say, “Dad, you aren’t really going to be serious about this are you?” But after being corrected, it did not happen again.

My point is, and the point of this proverb is, that we parents need to establish reasonable boundaries for our children when they are young, and we need to enforce them with corrective discipline. That is how they learn respect for legitimate authority and that is how they learn self-discipline.

B.

(III. A. B. BE DILIGENT IN CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE) A second principle that I find in Proverbs in regard to child raising is that we should BE DILIGENT IN CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE. We need to be consistent and diligent. That is a message I find coming out of Proverbs #13 v. 24 (PROVERBS 13:24): **“Whoever spares the rod hates his son,/ but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.”** We are not only to begin corrective discipline when children are young, we are also to be diligent in applying it.

Professor Bruce Waltke points out that there are at least four assumptions involved in this proverb. First, the home is assumed to be the basic unit for transmitting values. Second, parents should be in possession of absolute values, not just preferences and

personal opinions. Third, folly is bound up in the heart of a child. Fourth, it takes more than just words to dislodge that folly.

The main point of the proverb is that parents need to be diligent in discipline. They must be consistent. They need to work hard at it. To fail to do so is actually a sign of hatred.

There are at least three things that will be characteristic of diligent, consistent discipline. The **first** is that parents will follow through on warnings. When we fail to follow through on warnings, kids lose respect for us. They begin to learn that warnings of authorities are not necessarily to be believed. They are not to be taken seriously. We need to be careful about what boundaries we establish for our children and the consequences that result from overstepping them. But then we have to follow through on our word when misbehavior happens.

The **second** thing that we need to strive for is consistency in the application of corrective discipline. We can't let our child get away with something one day and then nail them for it the next day. Kids need to know what the boundaries are and what to expect when they misbehave. It gives them security, and it helps them to develop their own self-discipline.

US News & World Report several years ago contained this news note: **“Several recently completed studies that tracked more than 100 children for nearly 20 years have provided the first objective test of which disciplinary styles work best, and all point in the same direction. Parents who are not harshly punitive, but who set firm bounds and stick to them, are significantly more likely to produce children who are high achievers and who get along well with others.”**

A **third** thing that will characterize diligent discipline is firmness in dealing with direct, willful disobedience. The best book outside of the Bible on corrective discipline, in my opinion, is James Dobson's *Dare to Discipline*. He writes, **“In my opinion, spankings should be reserved for the moment a child (age ten or less) expresses a defiant ‘I will not!’ Or ‘You shut up!’ When a youngster tries this kind of stiff-necked rebellion, you had better take it out of him, and pain is a marvelous purifier. When nose-to-nose confrontation occurs between you and your child, it is not the time to have a discussion about the virtues of obedience. It is not the occasion to send him in his room to pout. It is not appropriate to wait until poor, tired old dad comes plodding in from work, just in time to handle the conflicts of the day. You have drawn a line in the dirt, and the child has deliberately flopped his big hairy toe across it. Who is going to win? Who has the most courage? Who is in charge here? If you do not answer these questions conclusively for the child, he will precipitate other battles designed to ask them again and again.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

The proverbs in this book are not absolute guarantees. Children and adults have the freedom to choose to obey or disobey God. Children can disobey their parents. But these principles generally hold true in life. When we go to work with our kids at an early

age to apply firm but loving discipline, they usually are going to turn out to be decent, self-disciplined human beings, of whom we can be proud. None of us will do the job perfectly. But let's not give up hope. Let's do the best that we can with the Lord's help to apply firm, loving, consistent discipline to our children. And for the majority of us here, may we have opportunity to encourage the younger generations to follow the right principles in raising their kids.