

CHILD DISCIPLINE AND THE PROVERBS (Part 2)

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Child expert Dr. Thomas Gordon writes, **“If parents could learn only one thing... I wish it were this: Each and every time they force a child to do something by using their power or authority, they deny that child a chance to learn self-discipline and self-responsibility.”** Later he adds, **“The problem is who is to decide what is in the best interest of society. The child? The parent? Who knows best? These are difficult questions, and there are dangers in leaving the determination of best interest with the parent. He may not be wise enough to make this determination.”** He also goes on to claim, **“It is paradoxical but true that parents lose influence by using power and will have more influence on their children by giving up their power and refusing to use it.”**

The book in which these excerpts are contained is called *Parent Effectiveness Training*. (PROJECTOR ON--- PAR. EFFEC. TRAINING) Dr. Gordon died in 2002, but his Gordon Training Institute continues to promote Parent Effectiveness Training seminars around the US and in 53 other countries. His seminars promote something called the “no lose” method of conflict resolution. There are some helpful thoughts in this for parents of teenagers. But Dr. Gordon says that this methodology is appropriate for parents to use with children of all ages. He is wrong. His overall advice, which is typical of the advice of far too many supposed child education experts is seriously flawed. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Why? Because it contradicts the Biblical principles that we considered last week as we began our study of what Proverbs has to say about child discipline. His advice is also contrary to what children are really like and what they need. The foundational determination that we have to make is: What kind of moral nature do children have? Last week I pointed out that the proverbs in this book tell us two things about the nature of children that need corrective discipline. First, they have sin natures. They are precious creatures who are gifts from God and who are created in His image. But they are also self-centered. Their initial desire at birth is to have the world revolve around them. Second, they are prone to destructive behavior. Left uncorrected they will harm themselves and others.

Last Sunday we also considered the proper motive for corrective discipline. We saw that love is the key element. Love will be reflected in a concern to do what is right for the child rather than in a desire to express our own anger or frustration as parents.

I also pointed out two principles that are found in Proverbs about corrective discipline. The first is that we need to begin early. Children will be more manageable later if we start corrective discipline early. If we simply pass off defiance and meanness as something that they will outgrow, we are in trouble. Those selfish attitudes will only

become more ingrained and harder to break. At the same time we need to recognize a distinction between defiance and childishness. Time will normally overcome proneness to accident, a short attention span, and inability to sit still.

The second principle had to do with diligence in the application of discipline. I talked about the need to follow through on warnings, the importance of consistency, and the need to deal with direct, willful disobedience.

Most of us are beyond the age of parenting young children. But corrective discipline is a major theme of the Book of Proverbs. Then also we have children and grandchildren who may be raising younger kids, and they are living in a world which has increasingly lost common sense in how to raise children. So as we have opportunity to influence them, we need to be straight on what is true and right and Biblical about how best to raise children.

I.

This is our last lesson in our brief tour through the Book of Proverbs. Next week we will return to the New Testament and take up a study of Titus. Today we are going to look at what Proverbs has to tell us about THE METHODS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE METHODS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE) How should corrective discipline be carried out? The book does not give us a complete picture of the methodology, but we have enough information to help us to develop a philosophy of parenting in this area.

Let's look first at #23 vv. 13 & 14. (I. THE METHODS OF... 23:13-14...) This proverb says, **“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.”** Last week we looked at this proverb primarily in terms of the danger of destruction that may come to a child who receives no corrective discipline. I also pointed out that the cries and protests of a disciplined child may keep us from carrying out further discipline. Loving parents get no joy from the tears of their kids. But we need to do what is best for them.

When our boys were younger, they disliked going to see the pediatrician. They did not like to get shots. In the early years they cried. We took them anyway because it was best for their well-being. So it is that we need to exercise corrective discipline of our children.

US News and World Report carried a story years ago about a survey taken of American parents with kids at home. The survey found that 55% of parents say that they are strict with their children. At the same time 91% of the participants agreed with the statement that “most parents today are too easy on their kids.”

The approved method of discipline described in this proverb is striking with the rod. That sounds harsh in our current cultural setting. The word “rod” was used in the Bible to describe instruments of wood that included staffs, scepters, weapons, and sticks that

were used for beating out cumin, a plant in the parsley family. We don't know the size of the rod that the author of this proverb had in mind for use in child discipline. The assumption seems to be that parents used some kind of rod in correcting their children.

Some interpreters of these verses say that the rod then is the instrument of discipline that all parents should use. Others conclude that the stress in the Proverbs is not on the tool but on the purpose of corrective discipline and the need for application of it.

I have heard some parents say that the hand should never directly be used for discipline, because it should be associated in a child's mind with hugs and pats and waves and giving. But I find from God's example of discipline in the Scriptures a number of times where it says that He stretched out His hand in the discipline of His people---speaking symbolically of course. So I am inclined to think that there is nothing sacred about use of a rod.

I also don't think that there is anything wrong with using a rod of some kind in child discipline, as long as we are not actually causing physical injury, and as long as we are not using it when we have lost our temper. I never used one with my kids. Some Christian parents find that a wooden spoon is effective.

The primary point of these verses is that parents need to bring the pain to bear which is necessary to produce correction. They need to inflict the amount of pain which is necessary to produce respect for authority and to stop defiant behavior. For some children that pain will be a small amount. For some children verbal reproof is sufficient. Other kids need a sterner approach.

Look also at #15 v. 10. (I. THE METHODS 15:10...) **“There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way;/ whoever hates reproof will die.”** Focus on that first line: **“There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way.”** “The way” seems to be referring to the right way, or the way of wisdom. Strong discipline is required for actions that are especially bad and for individuals who are especially wayward. The thing that I want you to see is that the Proverbs recognize that there is to be variation in the severity of corrective discipline according to the situation and the personality of the individual involved. Children who are especially defiant and who have extra strong wills may need a stronger dose of corrective discipline. They may also need extra love and attention.

Consider also #17 v. 10 (I. THE METHODS 17:10...) That verse says, **“A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding/ than a hundred blows into a fool.”** This proverb is addressed to a general audience, not specifically to parents with children. But there is a good application here to parents in regard to child discipline. Some people are more receptive than others to a word of rebuke or a wise piece of advice. This includes children.

At the time of Jesus' arrest the Apostle Peter denied that he knew Jesus after he earlier assured the Savior that he would never let Him down. In Luke #22 vv. 61 & 62 (LUKE

22:61-62) the gospel writer says, **“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”** Simply a look from Jesus was enough to cause Peter to recognize his wrongdoing and to regret what he had done.

Some children take warnings and rebukes to heart. Words alone will penetrate deeply. For other children warnings and rebukes are like water rolling off the back of a duck. They have little effect. (PROVERBS 17:10)

The goal of child discipline is to change negative behavior, to stop wrongdoing, to bring about recognition of sin, and to develop respect for legitimate authority. For some children and for some situations a word of rebuke is enough to accomplish that.

There are a few supposed Christian authorities who don't understand this, who go overboard with the rod thing. A pastor by the name of Bruce Ray writes in his book *Withhold Not Correction*, **“God has given us the rod, and that is the means by which we are to discipline.”** He goes on to say that the rod is just as appropriate for disciplining teenagers as it is for disciplining three year olds. It seem to me that the important thing is not the means of discipline. It is the correction of wrong behavior, especially defiant behavior. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our older son as a little kid never needed much physical discipline. He had a compliant personality, and usually a warning or verbal reproof was enough to bring him into line. At times we had to be careful not to speak too sternly, or he would become more upset than was necessary.

Our youngest as a little tike had a stronger will and a bigger temper. Part of it in retrospect may have been due to allergy problems that he had which we didn't recognize right away. But he needed more physical discipline more often to be brought into line.

A.

The basic point that I would like to make in Letter A in the outline is that (I. METHODS... A. PARENTS NEED TO BRING...) PARENTS NEED TO BRING ENOUGH PAIN TO BEAR ON THEIR CHILDREN TO PRODUCE RECOGNITION OF WRONGDOING. When little kids exhibit defiant behavior, parents need to bring enough pain to bear to produce recognition of wrongdoing. Sometimes words alone will bring enough pain to correct behavior. At other times, especially in situations with younger children where they are defiant and mean and directly disobedient, physical pain will be required. There are other kinds of corrective discipline that can be used for other kinds of negative behavior.

James Dobson gives five guidelines for consideration in the spanking of our children that I find to be helpful and consistent with Biblical principles. (PROJECTOR ON--- DOBSON'S RULES #1) First, he says that parents should establish the boundaries in

advance. Tell the child before he breaks the rule just what the rule is. Make sure he knows what you expect. I would also add that it is good to minimize the number of rules.

(DR #2) Second, when your child defiantly challenges your authority by disobeying your instructions, he will expect you to act. Don't disappoint him. A spanking, therefore, is to be reserved for that moment of conflict when the child dares you to defend your right to lead.

(DR #3) Third, do not spank the child for mistakes and accidents. Also do not spank him for something today that you ignored yesterday. We need to strive for consistency.

(DR #4) Fourth, after the spanking, your child will probably want to be loved and reassured. By all means, open your arms and let him come!

(DR #5) Fifth, by the time your child is eight or nine years old spanking should not be a part of discipline. Never spank a teenager since adolescents usually struggle with low self-esteem. Teens see a spanking as the ultimate insult, and it makes them feel like a baby.

Let me add a Biblical reference that reinforces this last idea. In Ephesians #6 v. 4 (EPHESIANS 6:4) Paul writes, "**Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**" Kids will never jump for joy at a spanking, but Dobson would make the point that spanking older children may produce deep seated resentment.

Again, the Book of Proverbs does not pretend to be a complete guide to child rearing and methods of child discipline. (PROJECTOR OFF) In the Lord's discipline of His children we see that He uses a variety of other techniques--- things like allowing people to experience the natural consequences of wrong actions, reward, withholding of blessing, etc. At times these methods are also appropriate in the discipline of our children.

Consider one other verse from Proverbs about this bringing of enough pain to bear. (I. METHODS A. PARENTS NEED... PROVERBS 29:15) Proverbs #29 v. 15 says, "**The rod and reproof give wisdom,/ but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.**" The rod and reproof are both necessary. Use of the rod without reproof is tyranny. It may be simply venting of a parent's anger. It may not involve focusing on the need of the child.

Reproof without the rod may sometimes be sufficient. Sometimes it is not. There needs to be a recognition of wrongdoing and a change of behavior on the part of the child. Eli was the prophet in the Book of 1 Samuel who preceded Samuel. He was a godly man in many ways, but he failed to bring enough pain to bear on his children to cause recognition of their wrongdoing. Both sons strayed severely from the right way. In their adult years they messed up badly in their priestly duties. Eli did not do anything more than say, "You shouldn't do that, boys."

Reproof involves an explanation of the nature of the wrongdoing and the reason for the necessity of discipline. It is an opportunity to bring in a Biblical perspective and to explain the basis for our authority as parents.

This verse also points out that the object of discipline is to keep the child from always getting his or her own way. The child has a sin nature that expresses itself in selfishness. That selfishness needs to be confronted. Selfishness alone is not a grounds for spanking. The grounds for physical discipline is selfishness that expresses itself in a defiance of the parent's will, a challenge that is made to the parent's authority.

Failure to discipline, the author says, will result in shame for the mom. Often it is mom who is more involved in the child raising process, especially when the kids are younger. More of her identity is typically wrapped up with the kids. When the kids don't turn out because of a failure to use the rod and reproof, it may be a special shame to the mother. Some commentators have also suggested that moms often have a softer temperament and may be more inclined to indulge children. That may come back to haunt her. That, of course, is not always the case. Dads sometimes are inclined to indulge their daughters.

There was a family in my church in Massachusetts years ago which had problems with their children. The parents were the sweetest, nicest, gentlest, most humble people that one could ever meet. But they were also like that toward their two children. I was around the family on several occasions, and I never heard mom or dad even raise their voice with their children. The children needed that, and more. When the kids got into their teen years, they had major problems. They were often out of control. The daughter even physically beat up on the mom on a couple of occasions. **"The rod and reproof give wisdom,/ but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother."**

Last week I pointed out that there are at least 53 countries around the world which have outlawed the corporal punishment of children. Sweden was the first country to enact that legislation. Since Sweden passed that law the country has experienced a six-fold increase in criminal assaults, major increases in juvenile delinquency, and a rapid rise in juvenile drug abuse. (*National Review*, 4/21/2008)

B.

The point that I would like to make from Proverbs 29 v. 15 in letter B of the outline (I METHODS. B. IN THE DISCIPLINE OF OUR CHILDREN...) is that IN THE DISCIPLINE OF OUR CHILDREN PARENTS NEED TO TALK TO THEM. In disciplining our kids we need to talk to them about what has happened and why discipline has been required. We need to reassure them.

My father did not always do that with me. His way of being initially carried over with me in my parenting. My wife was helpful in getting me to tune in to our boys' feelings, and to reassure them when that was needed.

Reassurance is important. If we are just angry when we carry out our discipline, we communicate an attitude of rejection. That attitude of rejection can be devastating to a child's sense of self-worth. God doesn't treat us like that. He accepts us when we do wrong, and He forgives us. So we need to strive for that attitude with our children also.

Too often we parents ask the "why" question in our discipline. "Poopsie, why did you do that?" Often our younger children may not be able to figure out, or verbalize, their motives. Asking too many "why" questions may only encourage rationalizing and lying. Usually the basic reason has to do with the fact that they have sin natures and just want to have their own way. If there is a good explanation that justifies seemingly wrong behavior, we usually hear about it quickly without having to even ask. Our focus of attention should be primarily upon what has happened.

II.

(II. THE BENEFITS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE) Let's consider for a few moments THE BENEFITS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE to which we can look forward when we do a decent job of child discipline. Look at #29 v. 17. (II. THE BENEFITS... A. PROVERBS 29:17) **"Discipline your son, and he will give you rest;/ he will give delight to your heart."** The author is saying that a pattern of consistent discipline will give the parent rest. It will cause his or her mind to be at ease, especially in the long term. That kind of parenting will lead to freedom from worry and anxiety and shame.

A.

Expressed more positively, (II. A. PROVERBS 29:17 HE WILL GIVE DELIGHT TO YOUR HEART.) HE WILL GIVE DELIGHT TO YOUR HEART. Such a parent will eventually have physical and emotional happiness with his children. They will be a delight to have around. They will make us proud. They will give us joy. It will be a pleasant experience to have the family together. Again, these are not absolute promises. These are wisdom principles which generally hold true.

Last week I cited a twenty year study of different parenting styles that concluded that firm discipline is most likely to produce children who are high achievers and get along well with others. There was another study conducted by a psychology professor from the University of California-Davis. Dr. Stanley Coopersmith studied 1700 middle class boys for a number of years. He found that family ties were strongest in homes where discipline and self-control were a way of life. He also found that the children with the highest self-esteem came from homes where they were loved and appreciated and where the parents' approach to discipline was more strict. In these homes parents required accountability, responsibility, and self-control. **"Discipline your son, and he will give you rest;/ he will give delight to your heart."**

B.

The last proverb that we are going to look at is #22 v. 6. (II. THE BENEFITS B. PROVERBS 22:6) It is familiar to many of us. It goes like this: **"Train up a child in the way he should go;/ even when he is old he will not depart from it."** All of the other proverbs that we have dealt with the last two weeks have been specifically about

corrective discipline. This one is about child raising in general, although corrective discipline is part of that.

There are a number of different interpretations of this proverb. The Hebrew word for “train up” basically means “to dedicate.” Sometimes it is used in the sense of “initiate” or “start” or “set aside.” In the Old Testament it is used of the dedication of a house, a temple, an idol, and an altar. The word in Hebrew is *chanak*. From it the Jewish people get the word “Hanukkah,” which is a feast that celebrates the rededication of the altar in Jerusalem in the second century before Christ. The parallel word in Egyptian with the same consonants means “to give to the gods or to divine service.” So in #22 v. 6 it has been variously interpreted as meaning “to dedicate to God,” “to prepare a child for future service,” or “to exercise and train for childhood.” The best thing to do is to simply read the rest of the first line: “Dedicate a child in the way he should go.” The dedication has to do with “the way.”

So what is “the way” that the author has in mind? Some think that it has to do with the child’s future career. Some think that it has to do with the child’s individual personality or talents. Some think that it has to do with the child’s stage of development. But the best thing to do is to see how the term “way” is used in the rest of the book.

It is most often used in the sense of one’s direction in life, especially in terms of morality. Thus we find these phrases in the Proverbs: the way of good men, the way of life, and the way of wisdom. Then we also find negatively the way of evil, the way of the wicked, and the way of darkness. In the verse just previous to this one (PROVERBS 22:5) the text says, “**Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked...**” So most likely “the way” in v. 6 has to do with the proper way, the path of wisdom, that is so often stressed in the book. (PROVERBS 22:6)

Looking at this proverb in terms of corrective discipline, which is certainly an important part of the way of wisdom training, it is telling us this: Initiate a pattern of correction and discipline, and continue in it so that the child will learn obedience and correct behavior. When he is grown up we can then have a high degree of confidence that he will live righteously. So I would describe this second benefit of corrective discipline as THE CHILD WILL STAY ON THE RIGHT WAY. (II. THE BENEFITS B. PROVERBS 22:6 THE CHILD WILL ...)

Children have a will of their own. But generally this pattern of upbringing will produce adults who live rightly. There may also be some basis for encouragement in situations where kids do seem to go astray. Usually they will get back on track if they have had this kind of training.

With all of the proverbs that we have looked at on the subject of child discipline, it is clear that corrective discipline is a key part of the process. That foolishness bound up in the heart of a child must be confronted. Children need to learn obedience and respect for authority. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As we parents and grandparents consider the future for our kids and grandkids, we worry about things like sexual involvements, alcohol, and drugs. Dr. Gene Smith led a study years ago sponsored by Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston to determine a method of finding out how to identify children in their early years who were likely to become involved in drug use later in their teen years. Children in four Boston suburbs were given psychological tests in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. Years later Smith went back to look at the tests of those teens who got involved with illegal drugs. He found that these young people described themselves on the earlier tests as willing to lie, cheat, hurt others, break rules, and disobey parents. Their classmates described them as disobedient, rebellious, impulsive, irresponsible, untrustworthy, disorganized, insensitive, and lacking in motivation.

According to *The Boston Globe*, **“Even though specific taboos may change---** in other words we might also be upset by things like alcohol or sex or cult involvement--- **Smith says that he believes that measuring youngsters’ early attitudes toward authority will foreshadow their actions as they grow older.”** The respect, or lack thereof, that young children display toward authority figures, especially parents, will determine the kind of behavior that they exhibit when they are older. The guidance that parents need to raise their children has been here all along.

Now corrective discipline is not the whole story of raising children. The Bible recognizes that there are other parts to the process that are vital--- things like love and acceptance and listening and encouragement and forgiveness and the quality of the parents’ marriage and spiritual instruction. But the author of the Proverbs saw fit to stress the need for corrective discipline. In our often permissive generation, it is what we need to hear.

So we need to encourage the young parents in our sphere of influence to follow the Biblical pattern of corrective discipline. Start early. Be diligent. Bring enough pain to bear on children to cause recognition of wrongdoing. Talk to them about it. Love them. Then trust God to do His sovereign and gracious work of drawing young people to Jesus.