

“The Tool of Discipline”

It’s Mother’s Day, and I’d like to think with you about being a parent, and one of the most important roles a mom and dad have – that of disciplining their children.

What do we mean by “discipline”. What’s its purpose? The word “discipline” comes from the same root word as “disciple” – a student, one who learns. So, “discipline” is correcting and curbing a child’s behavior for the purpose of helping our children *learn* – preparing a child for responsible adulthood. Part of the goal is to help a child develop *self-discipline*.

It may come as a surprise that the Bible doesn’t have a lot to say about disciplining our children. There are hardly any specific instructions. The Scripture reading today from Ephesians 6:1-4 does mention discipline: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise — ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4).

This scripture tells children to obey their parents, in the Lord. Fathers should not provoke their children to anger. Parents are to bring their children up in the *discipline* and *instruction* of the Lord. Notice, parents are not just to scold and correct, but to teach and instruct their kids.

Here’s something to note from this Scripture: This is a merciful, progressive word when it says, “don’t provoke your children to anger”. This was written to parents in a *patriarchal* society, where the father had tremendous power. It was the Roman “*patria potestas*” – the law of the father’s power! A father could do anything he wanted to a child. He could sell a grown child into slavery, put a child in prison, disinherit the child, even condemn the child to death. A newborn child was placed at the father’s feet. If he picked the child up, or acknowledged the child, that child was kept. If the father walked away, it could be thrown out! Unwanted children were commonly left in the Roman forum, and became the property of anyone who picked up the baby. These babies were often raised to sell into slavery, or stock the brothels of Rome. Sickly, deformed children stood little chance of survival, and were often drowned.

For first century fathers (and mothers) reading these words, “Don’t provoke your children to anger”, these words of mercy and compassion, were well ahead of their time.

Let’s think today about what I term, “The Tools of Discipline”. What do parents need in order to properly discipline their children? It’s not easy raising children, and properly disciplining them. I don’t have all the answers! But I’ve learned some things along the way – things I wish I had known when our children were small, and still at home. I call it the “3 R’s of Discipline”.

First of all, relationship. May I show you some of the tools I used to discipline our kids? (No, not a paddle). *Show games, puzzles, glove, skates. Show photos of Avalon, Williamsburg, Cooperstown, Disney World.* Doing things together. Relationships!

If we don’t have a relationship with our children, we won’t have healthy discipline! We may be able to keep them in tow for a while, but we’ll eventually end up the loser.

Steve Treat, one of my instructors at (what was then) Marriage Council of Philadelphia, told of speaking to a group of men. He asked whether they knew the last space on the Candyland game! (I remember all those times Nancy and I played Candyland with the kids! Sometimes I got so tired of it, but....). You get the point?

How much time do moms and dads spend with their children – doing things *they* want to do? Like many parents, Nancy and I had our share of long baseball games under the hot sun, of cold, bone-chilling hockey rinks, of school concerts and recitals, cheerleading and baton twirling events. But you know what? I don't regret a minute of it. I've heard a few parents say, with regret, "I wish I had spent more time with my kids growing up...I was so busy...working all the time...". I don't know that I ever heard anyone say with remorse, "You know, I didn't spend enough time at work...I didn't spend enough time in front of the TV...I wish I hadn't spent so much time with my children, doing things together that *they* wanted to do."

By the way, if your kids are grown, and you still feel you never took the time to really *be with them* and get to know them, it may not be too late. Take them out for lunch. Say what you're feeling. "You know, as I look back, I wish I had spent more time with you, doing things together you liked." Tell them you're sorry. And is there any chance now, as 2 adults, to build a closer relationship?

The "tools of discipline", the 3 R's of Discipline. Relationship. Next,

Rules. Setting rules that are *fair* and *age-appropriate* is so important in disciplining.

One extreme is to have few or no rules. The child is pretty much left to do what he or she pleases. There are no clear rules outlining what's acceptable and what's unacceptable behavior. It may seem great to a child growing up in a home without any clear rules: "My parents aren't on my case at all." "I can do whatever I want." But at a *deeper level* a child in this home environment feels *confused and abandoned*.

The other extreme is where there are too many rules, or the rules are too rigid and not age-appropriate. The child feels suffocated - like he or she is in a strait jacket! You have an authoritarian parent, who tries to run the kids' lives like a Major General. So, in this house children are constantly criticized for not measuring up to the rules. Or they are frustrated (and even humiliated) by being expected to obey rules that just don't fit the age and maturity of the child. Like the 9th grader who has to be in bed by 9 o'clock, or the high school senior who can't have any snacks between meals.

This kind of rigid, harsh, overbearing approach can break a kid's spirit. It's kind of like what's pointed out in Colossians 3:21: "Do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart."

In between the extremes of no rules and too many rules are rules that are fair, age-appropriate, and flexible enough to be changed when the situation changes. Another way to put it is to aim for the proper closeness and distance needed in healthy parent-child relationships.

Someone has said that a parent's job is to provide *roots* and *wings*. Young children need *roots*. For instance, with a newborn infant, there is a need for an enormous amount of closeness! At the earliest stages, an infant sees itself as *merged with the mother*! The mother is "inside" the child. This is actually true if the mother is breast-feeding. As the child grows, what's the role of the parent? To slowly back off. Give the children space to spread their wings. To grow and develop into their own separate person – to think and feel and act for themselves.

There is trouble at the extremes of the closeness-distance spectrum. When a parent is in the child's face, what do you think is a normal, healthy reaction? To push away, rebel, feel like "give me some space"! Can't I think for myself? Aren't I entitled to my own feelings?

When parents are constantly in a child's face, I doubt that there is any way to win. Either the child gives in, sort of becomes an extension of a domineering parent (with no sense of being their own person). Or, the child will rebel. A lot of the rebellion in youth is the child wanting to create a healthy distance from the parent.

The other extreme is where there is too much distance. There are no boundaries. When a kid is left with hardly any guidance from a parent, this can leave the child kind of spilling all over the place – no boundaries, little self-control, little respect for other people's space.

Sometimes as parents, our own stuff, our own issues, gets in the way of disciplining. Maybe we had overly strict parents, and we hated it. So, we go to the opposite extreme by being too lenient and easy-going with our kids. Or our parents were so lenient that we felt kind of uncared for, abandoned – and we overcompensate by being drill sergeants with our kids.

I had a family in therapy. One of the parents was concerned about her teenager rebelling and acting out. In this parent's own childhood, she was left to do whatever she pleased, and got into all sorts of trouble. Now, she was smothering her own child, a helicopter mother always hovering over her kid, for fear that this child would get into the same kind of trouble she did. She was in the kid's face too much. I suggested she relax, back off. Her son was basically okay.

A lot of problems with discipline can be alleviated if we just slowly back away as the child grows and matures. Give them more and more independence, as they show more and more responsibility.

Of course, it's not always easy to know when to back off, is it? Should I let my 16 year-old daughter go on a date with a guy who's in college? Should my 5th grader have his own cell phone? Is it appropriate to ask to see my son's homework, or search his room for drugs?

How do we decide? Well, help is available. There are all kinds of good parenting materials: books, videos, online materials. We can talk to other parents, see how they handle these situations. Talk to our son or daughter! Negotiate! It may surprise us that deep down, most children have a sense of what's fair and what isn't fair.

The tools of discipline. Relationship. Rules. And the 3rd R is *role model*. In providing discipline for our children, it isn't only *what we say* that's important, but just as much (if not more), *what we are*.

Gosh knows, we need moms and dads who provide healthy role models for their kids. Being an inspiring role model is important for *any* parent, and it's certainly important if we're Christian moms, or dads, who want our children to grow up to follow Jesus. There is a great verse in the Old Testament that depicts this kind of parental role modeling. It's a word about Uzziah, and his father Amaziah. "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, just as his father Amaziah had done" (2 Chronicles 26:4).

For believers, raising our children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (as it says in Ephesians) involves 2 things. First, teaching them *by what we say*. Talking about Christ, teaching them the Scriptures, discussing faith and Christian values in a natural way. (Every parent who has had their child baptized (or dedicated) has basically promised God to do this).

The other part of raising our children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" is teaching them *by how we live*. Am I becoming more and more a Jesus-like person? Am I modeling how a follower of Jesus should act? It doesn't hurt, from time to time, to ask ourselves: Do I want my son or daughter to be the kind of Christian I am? To be as mature in Christ as I am?

The late Dr. Richard Halverson was the chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He told the story of his small son playing in the backyard with his friends, when the conversation turned to one of those "my dad can whip your dad" routines. Halverson overheard one boy saying, "My dad knows the mayor of our city." Another boy then said, "That's nothing – my dad knows the governor of our state." Then Dr. Halverson heard his own son say, "That's nothing. My dad knows God." Dr. Halverson said that when he heard that, he slipped away from the place he was standing, tears coming down his cheeks, when into his study, fell on his knees, and prayed: "Oh God, I pray that my boy will always be able to say, 'My dad knows God'".

Mom. Dad. Grandparent. God grant that our kids and grandkids will always be able to say that we know God!

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