

Sermon Summary #9

Loving and Leading our Children through Discipline Proverbs 13:24

Over the years many things have led me to fall ever more in love with Scripture and to grow in my respect for what God has provided for us in the pages of this book. One of those things is the way in which the Bible, at one moment, reverberates with profound theological truths and, in the next, reaches down into our everyday existence with equally profound practical guidance on how to live. It's really quite amazing to be elevated, as it were, to the lofty heights of glorious and majestic transcendent truths about God, only then to be planted firmly back on the ground with clear instruction on how to cope with the numerous problems and challenges we encounter every day.

Would you like an example of this? It's right here in the subject matter of our study today. Scripture, as you know, is filled with descriptions of God's providence, his grace, his sovereignty over the affairs of humanity, together with portrayals of his unapproachable majesty and glory. But then we turn to a book like Proverbs and are confronted with something as down-to-earth and relevant as how to discipline our kids! Some might suffer from spiritual whiplash as they feel themselves taken from one extreme to the other, but I find it exhilarating and incredibly instructive.

So, today we are going to turn our attention to a subject that strikes very close to home: how to discipline our children. I hardly need to tell you how important or how controversial this topic is. A few years ago I came across an article in Parade magazine in which a prominent child psychologist was quoted with regard to whether or not parents should spank their kids. This is what he said:

"The way to stop violence in America is to stop spanking children." Spanking, he went on to assert, promotes the thesis that violence against others is acceptable. And now I'm quoting again: "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 [and sends this message]: 'I will resort to violence when I don't know what else to do.'"

So, does the Bible support this idea that spanking is the first step that will eventually lead to rape, murder, and assassination? What we will soon discover is that precisely the opposite is the case. Proverbs will tell us in a variety of ways that the *failure* to apply loving but firm, and often physical, discipline to our children may well set them on a path of personal destruction and eventual death. Do you find that difficult to believe? Then come with me into the wisdom of Proverbs. There are six texts we'll examine.

(1) Proverbs 13:24

"Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov. 13:24).

This passage is the human or horizontal version of the truth we read in Proverbs 3:11-12. There Solomon says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."

How often have you heard a well-meaning mother or father say, "I just can't discipline my children. I love them too much!" I don't question that parent's love, but I certainly have concerns about their understanding of human nature. They probably have a deficient view of original sin and the inborn disposition toward rebellion and unbelief. They also likely have a misinformed view of the nature, purpose, and ultimate fruit that comes from the sort of discipline that the Bible recommends. More on this below.

When Solomon says that to "spare the rod" is to "*hate*" a child he does not mean the parent has emotional disdain or revulsion for his child or that he consciously hopes for his destruction. He is referring to *the unintentional*

consequences for the child, not to some deliberate dislike or animosity a parent might feel in their heart. His point is that if you genuinely care about the long-term welfare of your children, you will take steps to redirect their path away from sin and destruction and towards God and holiness, and it is the aim of loving but firmly applied discipline to do this.

Take note that the phrase “diligent to discipline” is more literally rendered, “seek him *early* with discipline.” The verb is related to the noun which means “dawn” or “early morning,” thus pointing to the importance of not delaying discipline but setting a pattern for your child early on in his/her life. But how early? I make no claim of being a child psychologist, but both personal experience and the wisdom of others more skilled than myself, suggest the following:

When the child is 1-7 months old – No physical discipline should be used. At this age the child is incapable of understanding the moral nature of their actions or of making a connection between their behavior and the disciplinary consequences that follow. Unless a child is truly exceptional, it is unlikely that they are capable of willful defiance of acknowledged authority at this age. Tragically, many instances of child abuse come when a parent spanks a baby for crying or for merely being fidgety.

When the child is 8-14 months old – We now begin to see the first signs of willful rebellion and defiance. At such an age, a slap of the hand or on the back of the legs might be appropriate.

When the child reaches the age of 15-24 months, watch out!

We need to address one other question. Some say the word “rod” means in Proverbs what it means in Psalm 23:4 – “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; *your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*” A shepherd does not hit the sheep with his rod but instead guides them gently along the path they should take. But you cannot simply assume that because the word “rod” means one thing in a psalm that it must mean the same thing in Proverbs. Also, in Proverbs 23:13-14 it refers to “striking” the child with a rod.

(2) Proverbs 19:18

“Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death” (Prov. 19:18).

There is a dispute among translators here. If it should read “*while*” there is hope, the point would be that you should discipline now; don’t wait another day, lest through your undue leniency the child be set on a path of disobedience from which they may never recover. If “*for*” (ESV) is the correct rendering, this is a word of encouragement. The point would be: continue to discipline even when it seems that there is no response, “*for* there is (yet/still) hope” that the rod will bring him/her to their senses and set them straight. This is an important word for parents who are discouraged, due to the fact that they have a strong-willed child who treats discipline like a walk in the park. Nothing the parents do seems to have any effect. The encouragement is: Be persistent! Don’t give up hope!

But what about the second half of the verse: “*do not set your heart on putting him to death.*” Some take this as a warning against excessive physical discipline lest the parent carry chastisement to the point of killing a child. That’s a much-needed warning, but it’s unlikely what the text means. Surely the second half of the verse must be compatible and in keeping with the first half. The point is this: However sinful and seemingly incorrigible your child may appear to be, don’t give up; continue your discipline of him; do not say in despair, “I can’t do anything more with him/her; sooner or later he’ll die for his behavior.” In other words, the phrase does not mean don’t chastise him excessively lest he die, but rather, don’t contribute to his premature death by failing to chastise him sufficiently. As one commentary has put it, “Don’t indulge him to his own destruction.”

In either case, we can rightly say: “*Either by too much discipline you may kill him, or by too little discipline he may kill himself.*”

(3) Proverbs 22:6

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).

This is surely the most famous passage in all of Proverbs on the subject of child-rearing and discipline. But there is considerable dispute as to what it means!

Before I jump into the options, I want to point out that the verb translated “*train up*” comes from the Hebrew word that means to initiate, or to begin, or to inaugurate. It was often used of the dedication of objects, such as the Temple. In fact, it is the word from which the Hebrew term *Hanukkah* is derived. You will recall that Hanukkah is the Jewish festival commemorating the re-dedication of the Temple following its defilement by Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century b.c. Some conclude from this that parents are therefore to consecrate and dedicate their children to God from a very early age, committing themselves from the start to raise them for the glory of God.

(a) Most take this as a *promise*, or at least as a general rule (admitting of some exceptions). There is but one way that every child “should” go and that is in the path of obedience and righteousness and truth as a disciple of Jesus. In other words, the “way he should go” is *God’s way* of holiness and trust in Christ. If you are faithful to do this, rest assured that even in old age he/she will not depart from it.

But what about the second half of the verse? What precisely are we being told? Some take this to mean that if you raise your child in the way Scripture prescribes God will save him/her. But we know this isn’t always true. It is true, of course, that God most often works through means. Being raised in a Christian home with parents who discipline and educate their kids according to God’s Word more often than not results in those children eventually coming to faith in Jesus. But we all know of exceptions to this. And what about those kids who are raised in ungodly homes by abusive parents? Some of them have wonderful stories of conversion to Christ.

Others take this to mean that although they may not be saved they will retain in large measure the moral influence of their upbringing. Or perhaps if they are raised properly, but then go astray, at some point in the future they will return to the lifestyle and moral principles instilled in them by their Christian parents. Even if this is the correct meaning of the text, we must remember that it isn’t an iron-clad guarantee. Remember: ***proverbs are principles, not promises!*** Thus there are always exceptions. I can’t count the number of parents I’ve spoken with who live in paralyzing guilt, as they’ve watched their children spin out of control well into their adult years. They then blame themselves, concluding that it’s all due to their failure as parents. Sometimes that’s true. But definitely not always. You may well be nearly the perfect parent who established and maintained a godly, biblical atmosphere in your home. You may well have applied discipline precisely as God would have it. Yet your child or children rebelled and they give no signs of repentance. The bottom line is this: You cannot control their choices. You can control your will, but you cannot control theirs. Your kids are not computers who can be programmed to behave precisely as you want of them.

(b) There is another interpretation. The passage literally says, “train up a child according to *his* way.” Some say this means, show respect for his/her individuality and vocational aptitude. Training and childhood education should be tailored or modified to make room for and to help develop the child’s own unique gifts and capacities. Others take the words “his way” to mean the nature of the child as a child. In other words, train up the child in accordance with what we know about the nature and behavior of children as children. But that seems so obvious and common sense that I hardly think Scripture need tell us.

(c) There is yet another interpretation that takes this verse not as a promise but as a ***warning***. When the verse refers to “his way” it means the way or path or manner of life and behavior that the child desires. Here is how one author put it:

“Allow a child to have self-expression, allow him to pick and to choose what he will and will not do, and as that habit is formed in his youth he will not change when he is older. If he does not learn discipline from you as a child he will never learn it as an adult. . . . If you let your child run over you, if you withhold the rod, if you fail to discipline them, if you fail to diligently and meticulously instruct them in the little things as well as the big, . . . look into the future and you will see those same children unbridled, undisciplined, and unable to bring their bodies into submission to the commands of God. . . . To allow the child to go his own way, to allow him to take things naturally as they come, is to assure the destruction of his soul” (Bruce Ray).

Another put it this way:

“Children are born sinners and when allowed to follow their own wishes they will naturally develop sinful habit responses. The basic thought is that such habit patterns become deep-seated when they have been ingrained in the child from the earliest days” (Jay Adams).

This interpretation may find support from what we read in Proverbs 29:15 - *“The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (Prov. 29:15).*

So which view is the correct one? I’m inclined to embrace the first option, so long as we understand that ***the second half of the verse is not an iron-clad guarantee. It is a general rule that articulates what most often will happen, but a rule to which there are obvious exceptions.*** If we raise our kids based on good and godly principles derived from Scripture, and we should, but at the same time assume this means they will *never* depart from what they learned as children, we are setting up ourselves for disappointment and disillusionment.

(4) Proverbs 22:15

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (Prov. 22:15).

The words *“bound up”* mean that sin and foolishness are inherent and innate in every human child. ***There is no such thing as a blank slate or a morally neutral infant. All are conceived in sin and all will go astray at the first opportunity.*** Simply put, it takes more than merely words to dislodge sinful foolishness from the human heart!

But we must also distinguish between *“foolishness”* (“folly”) and *“childishness.”* ***There is a difference between childish immaturity and willful defiance.*** Forgetfulness, occasional accidents, lack of knowledge about how life works, and physical mishaps are often the result of childish immaturity and do not warrant discipline or any sort. Instruction, yes, but discipline, no. There was a huge difference between those times when my daughter accidentally spilled her milk at one year of age and when she willfully took it in hand and threw it at me when she was two! By “folly” the author means that disposition in every child that eventually manifests itself in deliberate, conscious, defiance of established authority.

A child is to be disciplined not for being a child, but for being wicked. The innate tendency of all children is towards folly, not wisdom; towards selfishness, not self-sacrifice; towards rebellion, not obedience; and towards defiance, not submission. And if you think otherwise because your baby is so cute and cuddly and precious and their eyes seem so innocent . . . just wait!

(5) 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” (Prov. 23:13-14).

The word “sheol” simply means the grave. Nothing is being said here about your child’s eternal destiny. The point is that rather than leading to his death, physical chastisement will save him from it! The child will not only survive in spite of the spanking; he will survive precisely because of it. He/she may sound as if their dying; but they aren’t.

(6) Proverbs 29:15

“The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (Prov. 29:15).

Consider that phrase, *“a child left to himself.”* This happens when a parent mistakenly and tragically thinks, “Oh, they’ll grow out of this. It’s only a phase. His misbehavior is only a momentary blip due to his youth. Time will mend her defiant attitude.” No, ***time only serves to strengthen their sinful resolve.*** Again, you don’t have to teach a child to be sinful. Just “leave him to himself” and you will surely reap the horrible consequences.

We must also be careful to avoid two extremes. Some apply only the rod with no reproof. Parents say nothing to their children before they spank them and then say nothing afterwards. This is incredibly confusing to children and renders the discipline largely worthless. Kids need to know why they are being disciplined and how much you love

them both before and after it's over. Discipline is designed to instruct. The rod without words teaches them nothing. Words without the rod are empty air. There must be verbal reassurance of your love, together with a conversation about what rule they violated and why it justifies a spanking. The child needs to confess their wrongdoing and to acknowledge the need for discipline. The other extreme is to apply verbal reproof with no physical consequences. As much as you might wish this were sufficient, thus sparing you the emotional pain of having to discipline your child, almost always it isn't.

Concluding Principles

(1) Never forget that your own childhood experience will often shape your opinions and beliefs about disciplining your own children. Some of you were abused by mean and over-bearing parents and you've made up your mind you'll never treat your kids the way your parents treated you. They spanked far too hard and far too frequently. The idea of physical force in any expression or to any degree is repellent to you. Others of you had parents who were so lenient and indulging and never disciplined you for anything that you are determined not to let your kids suffer the consequences of an undisciplined childhood. Your tendency may be to spank too much. Others of you had wonderful Christian parents who spanked well. It was always in love, always in proper proportion to the nature of your misbehavior. ***As much as you are able, let biblical principles and not your own personal history govern how you raise your own children.***

(2) Parents who brutalize and abuse their children cannot hide behind the word "rod" in Proverbs. If there is in your mind even the slightest degree of doubt about whether you may have gone too far in disciplining your child, stop. Get counsel from close friends. Better to suspend discipline altogether, at least for a season, than ever to go too far and cross the line into abuse. And remember, you don't have to employ physical spanking to abuse your kids. Emotional and verbal abuse can be just as damaging.

(3) Should we use only an instrument such as a belt or switch or paddle and never the hand? Some argue that the rod or a device of some sort is neutral, whereas the hand is associated with the person. Their point is that a child will associate spanking with the hand as personal rejection. You are certainly free to make up your own mind in this regard. For me personally, my dad always used his hand and I never sensed any personal rejection. I always felt it was being administered in love.

The word "rod" need not be taken to mean that an object must be used. It is simply a way of referring to discipline. We see a similar example in Romans 13 where Paul says the state "does not bear the sword in vain" (v. 4). The word "sword" is symbolic of its authority to punish criminals, just as "rod" is symbolic for the authority of parents to discipline their kids.

(4) Do all children need the same kind and frequency of discipline? No. Every child is different. Our firstborn daughter, Melanie, was strong-willed and required considerably more discipline than our second daughter, Joanna. With Joanna, a stern glance in her direction would almost always induce in her the fear of God and of me and would result in the appropriate behavior on her part. Melanie, on the other hand, most often needed a bit more persuading! The same was true of me and my sister. As difficult as this may be for some of you to believe, I was incredibly compliant as a child. Of course, that changed as I got older, but as a child my parents had to be careful in saying No to me about anything because it would virtually paralyze me from ever doing anything at all. My sister on the other hand was incredibly strong willed. In fact, I think she was just more sinful (and probably still is! I'm certain I'll hear from her about this when she listens to the podcast!).

(5) If you should spank your child or discipline them in any way and later discover that you were wrong about their behavior, be quick to apologize and ask for their forgiveness. Don't be afraid to demonstrate to your children what true repentance is.

My earthly father is now with my Heavenly Father. He was not only my father, he was my best friend. Our relationship was very special and I miss him dearly. One thing about my dad, to which my sister will also testify, is that he was a firm disciplinarian. Like most godly parents, prior to the moment of truth (and pain), he would say something like: "Sam, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." I never said so, but I distinctly remember thinking: "Who does he think he's kidding? It's my bottom that's getting whacked!" Being the father of two daughters myself, I now know what he meant. I got physically nauseated every time I had to spank one of my girls.

The author of Hebrews says that our fathers “disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (v. 10). My dad did what he thought “best.” But unlike God, his discipline wasn’t perfect. If he were here he might want to argue that point, but I am convinced he erred on at least one occasion.

It happened one night during dinner. I couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old. My mother had the audacity(!) to serve squash that night. I hate squash. I detest and loathe squash. When God pronounced the curse on Adam, He said: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat squash all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field [again, squash, I’m sure]. By the sweat of your brow you will eat squash” (Genesis 3:17-19; author’s paraphrase!).

I don’t care how you fix it or in what other food you try to hide it, squash stinks. It is the curse of God that has befallen earth for Adam’s sin. We are all being punished.

Getting back to the point, I refused to eat squash the night my mother served it. My dad tried to persuade me that it was most certainly in my best interests if I did. I refused. He took decisive and disciplinary action. Ouch! I have nothing but the highest regard and respect for my dad. But this time he blew it. To spank a child for refusing to eat squash is simply indefensible! Right?

Let me say this one thing in conclusion. I strongly urge young parents to speak often with a variety of older, more mature, more experienced Christians about principles and practices of raising and disciplining children. ***Don’t yield to the assumption that you always know what is best for your kids.*** It may strike a blow against your pride to admit that you’re no expert, but your children will reap a great blessing when you seek counsel from the community of faith.

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