

Bible Counsel  
For  
Raising Children

Dr. Steven Waterhouse

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### Preface

This book is an excerpt from *Holy Matrimony; The Image of God in the Family* (available for free download from [www.webtheology.com](http://www.webtheology.com) or in hardback from Amazon.com). The first part (pp. -15) gives a Biblical philosophy on parenting by a study of the nature and value of children; the second part (pp. 17 - 36) presents Biblical principles concerning child emotional development and behavior.

God is the ultimate heavenly Father. To have a full relationship with God the Father we must place our faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ paid for our sins on the cross and rose again. He would never lie, and made this promise; "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

If you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, you can best do this in a prayer that expresses faith in Him and His death on the cross as a payment for your sins. "Whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Please contact Dr. Waterhouse for counsel on this important decision.

At the time of this publication all our children are adults. We praise God for our granddaughter Olivia Grace Currie and dedicate our lives to bless her by being godly grandparents.



## Parental Philosophy

### The Image of God in Parenting

On a starry August night I gave the message of salvation to a stranger sitting on a bench overlooking Lake George, New York. I quoted John 3:16 and said, "God the Father loves us so much he gave His Son." The man snarled that his own father had given his son up also. He cursed and said he wished his father's grave was in the park so he could urinate on it. I had only experienced exemplary parents and grandparents. This conversation caused a new realization of the connection between parents and the development of theological views about God's nature.

In the course of life, children should begin to develop their views of God from God's image reflected in their parents. It is not without reason that God calls Himself "Father." Obviously, parents who model (in a limited sense, of course) the attributes of God give their children great advantages in life. Such parents make it easier for their children to understand and relate to God.

From a child's perspective, a good father and mother seem omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. They are ever present attending to every need with superior wisdom. To a child, parents seem "ancient of days." They might even be thirty, which is close to eternity from a toddler's perspective. To a child, good parents have a moral system of right and wrong. They are holy and just. Yet, mom and dad give mercy, grace, and unconditional love. Children especially need to know their parents love them with unconditional love, as does the Heavenly Father.

When parents do not reflect the character traits of God, they will cause their children to have a distorted view of God the Father. Often these children regard God as vindictive and cruel without any grace. Such children can ultimately overcome their disadvantages from bad parental experience through Bible study, fellowship with loyal people in a church family, and mentoring by substitute father/mother figures. These may be relatives (godly grandparents, uncles and aunts) or older role models from a church family.

However, God's plan is that **parents model God's traits** even before a child can read. Then a child sees that the perfect attributes of God revealed in the Bible have already been made familiar by his or her family experience. At an age of increasing spiritual awareness and ability to read, a child with godly parents more easily relates to and responds to the true God of Scripture. He or she discovers God is like his or her parents, only more perfect. **The most important truth for life (including marriage and parenting) is the admiration and imitation of God.** The best parents can do for children is to reflect God's attributes to them. Specific techniques as to discipline and instruction are vital. However, behavior begins in beliefs. Actions spring from the heart. The Bible teaches children of the righteous have many blessings (Psalm 37:25-26, 112:2; Proverbs 11:21, 12:7, 14:26; Jer. 32:39).

A righteous man who walks in his integrity - How blessed are his sons after him (Proverbs 20:7).

#### Unity on Parenting or a House Divided?

The imitation of God's attributes should be a basic practice in child rearing. How is this possible in a mixed marriage? **God forbids a believer to marry an unbeliever in order to save us from troubles,** including difficulties in raising children in homes with arguments over views and values. In such cases the believing parent will have to do his or her best to seek those outside the home who can reinforce Christian truths. Raising good children in spiritually mixed homes is possible but not easy.

Even in homes where both parents have placed faith in Christ, it is possible that one or both of the pair has a life that does not reflect God's image to a child. Jesus said, "A wise man builds his house upon the rock" (Matthew 7:24, paraphrase). He defines the rock as His own teaching and authority. The Lord also taught that a *house divided against itself* will topple (Matthew 12:25). Both phrases may be applied to the need for unity of father and mother in the matter of raising children. The best foundation for parents occurs when both have faith in Christ and when both admire and imitate Him. They may not agree on every detail in parenting, but unity on fundamental truths causes foundational strength. Both parents should have a conviction that **children are precious**, but that **children also have sin natures**, that God gives **parents, not children, authority in the house**, and that **God's truths**

**give the ultimate wisdom** for raising children and the standards by which excellence in children should be measured (not the latest secular magazine article or talk-show).

Children are precious

The Bible teaches the infinite value of children (see Psalm 127:3-5, Matthew 19:13-15). Christian parents believe children are a **priority in life**.

*Behold, children are a gift of the Lord. The fruit of the womb is a reward* (Psalm 127:3).

Yet, a contrasting truth about children also reinforces the need to work very hard on parenting. The Bible teaches children are a blessing. It also teaches they are born with a propensity toward sin. If parents neglect God's Word in matter of raising children, the natural outcome will not be good.

Children have a sin nature

The entire human race with only the exception of the Lord Jesus Christ is born into sin.<sup>1</sup> Children are born relatively innocent compared to adolescents and adults, but the capacity and tendency to sin begins at conception. David said, *Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me* (Psalm 51:5; see also Psalm 58:3).

Both a father and mother should agree that the imitation of God's character gives the background for parenting. Both should agree that no effort is too much because children are precious. If further motivation is needed, parents should fear the outcome if they disobey God's Word about instructions for the family. **Children are born with a propensity to sin!**

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 14:2-3, 53:3, 130:3, 143:2; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:9-10, 19, 23; Galatians 3:22; James 3:2; 1 John 1:8, 10. For a discussion of the doctrine of sin see Steven W. Waterhouse, *Not By Bread Alone; An Outlined Guide to Bible Doctrine* (Amarillo, TX: Westcliff Press 2010), pp. 67-69.

### Authority in the home

Who is in charge? Children or parents? Father's Day and Mother's Day sermons can be tricky. It is certainly appropriate to aim a message at parents reminding them of God's commands on child rearing. However, there can be danger of increasing needless guilt among parents who are striving to the limits of human ability to sacrifice for their children. A sermon strictly for neglectful and unspiritual parents usually is not on target for couples that have dedicated themselves to raise children God's way but still make mistakes common to imperfect humans. In order to encourage faithful parents and avoid false guilt, it is wise to direct part of every Father's Day or Mother's Day message to children. There are at least as many Bible commands directed at children as there are commands for parents. While father and mother have many obligations to excellence in child rearing, nowhere does the Bible command, "Honor your father and mother only if they never make any mistakes." Mom and dad will make mistakes, but a teen will make far more mistakes if he or she rebels against good parents. Parents can be doing an excellent job without being supernaturally perfect. Children must honor parents despite human limitations and flaws.

Families where the parents cede control and authority to the children end up teaching dishonor to both parents and ultimately the Heavenly Father. God's Word teaches parents to love children without conditions, to instruct, to discipline, to provide. No Bible verse says, "parents obey your children."

Parents fail when they turn all attention and authority in a home over to the children. Part of love is imposing safe limits (Hebrews 12:5-11; Revelation 3:19). Part of loving a child is teaching him to honor and obey parents and thereby teaching him to honor and obey the authority of God (presuming the parents are enforcing God's standards).

I observed a church service in which a mother simply would not control her son. He was running between the seats screaming and then hanging over the balcony. The woman sat motionless with her eyes glued on the pastor, evidently thinking no one would notice. One interpretation of this psychology was that she was afraid to stand up to her disruptive son. Maybe she felt that control and domination would turn his love away. Whatever her thinking and motivation, parents do not help their children by fearing to stand up to their bent to sin.



Two biblical characters displeased God and failed as fathers for not restraining their children. Eli raised two sons whom God described as "worthless men." They *did not know the Lord* (1 Samuel 2:12, see also 2:17). God asked Eli *why do you ... honor your sons above me?* (1 Samuel 2:29). Because Eli knew of his sons' wickedness, *and he did not rebuke them* (1 Samuel 3:13), the high priesthood was transferred from his family line (1 Samuel 2:35-36; 1 Kings 2:27, 35).

David also made the mistake of not insisting that his sons obey him as father. Of spoiled-rotten Prince Adonijah it is written, *and his father had never crossed him at any time by asking, why have you done so?* (1 Kings 1:6).

**The Bible gives parents authority** for the welfare of children. Parents who love their children will not be afraid to cross them or honor God's standards above childish demands. Good fathers and mothers will insist children give them honor and will not be afraid to take charge. Allowing children premature autonomy without loving guidance is the cruel option, and also the option that allows them to turn against parents. Insisting on obedience actually increases the bond of love between parent and child. Parents who love, care enough to insist upon respect for the long-term sake of the child. Children have a way of understanding the parental intent for taking control is for their own good and displays love.

### Honor Your Father and Mother

Parents must obey God and strive to measure up to His character traits. Having done so (even imperfectly), the Bible commands children to honor their parents. Jesus Himself set the example in Luke 2:51.

*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you* [Exodus 20:12].

*Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching; indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck* [Proverbs 1:8-9].

*And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart* [Luke 2:51].

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth [Ephesians 6:1-3].<sup>2</sup>*

In addition to the many commands to honor father and mother, Scripture gives many warnings about disobedience to parents. We are not under the Law of Moses, but in extreme cases (e.g. serious domestic violence) the Law allowed the death penalty for rebellious adult children (Exodus 21:15; Deuteronomy 21:18-21). Solomon predicted disaster for those who rebel against godly fathers and mothers *í* . *He who curses his father or mother, his lamp will go out in a time of darkness* (Proverbs 20:20, see also Proverbs 15:5a). Perhaps Proverbs 30:17 gives the strongest warning:

*The eye that mocks a father and scorns a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it [Proverbs 30:17].*

Paul believed that one of the signs of depravity in the Roman Empire was widespread disobedience to parents (Romans 1:30). He also taught that disobedience to parents would be a sign of the last days (2 Timothy 3:1-2).

Parents have great responsibility to God. So do children and teens. In teaching and counseling, Christian leaders should stress both. It is possible for parents to fail. It is also possible for children to disobey God and rebel against very fine parents. When both parents and children have a sense of accountability to God's authority, the outcome will be safety from foolish sins, increased blessings from God, and love between parents and children.

#### Nature, Nurture, or Choice

Psychologists study whether children are most influenced by nature (genetics) or nurture (society and family environments). I believe

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<sup>2</sup> See also Leviticus 19:3a; Deuteronomy 5:16; Proverbs 23:22, 25; Matthew 15:4; Luke 18:20; and Colossians 3:20.

both factors influence children. One might have a genetic tendency to a hot temper or alcoholism, or to a calm disposition with patience and sobriety. Genetics are a factor but are usually not dominant over the fundamentals of behavior in life.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, society and family deeply influence child development. Those born in the 21st Century will be different from those born in 1500. Those born in the United States will be different from those born in Kenya. Those raised in atheist or Buddhist homes will be different from those raised in Christian homes. Both genetics and social influences help shape a child. The many commands to parents, children, and even churches presuppose that family environment is an important factor in the outcome of children. The very reason for including a chapter on parenting is that parents have a huge influence on their children.

However, in order to be balanced, something must be said about change and choice. Those who did not have godly parents can still totally change their lives. They may have disadvantages and/or even emotional pain, but by God's grace, they have hope.

People can also change for the worse. The father of the prodigal son was a good father (Luke 15:11-32). The son alone bore responsibility for his sins as a young adult. In time the son returned to the views and ways of his father. Proverbs 22:6 teaches that older children who rebel against good parents tend to return in time. This means parental efforts have value even if there can be times parents wonder whether they have done any good.

**At a certain point children become morally accountable to obey God without parents forcing compliance.** The entire perspective of the Proverbs is that a father must teach his children. However, having done his best, the father warns he can no longer control his child's choices.

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<sup>3</sup> My brother has severe schizophrenia. I still regard him as morally accountable (especially when improved by medicine) because he exhibits the traits of moral understanding. He covers up wrongdoing. He blames others. He has a temper when he is the victim of sin. In some cases, medical problems do blunt or can even remove moral accountability, but for most people and for most of the time, they do not. However, biological factors do influence behavior even when they do not predestine it.

A child might choose foolishness and come to harm. Even after the father has instructed, the child must choose obedience. It is now his responsibility to guard his or her own heart (compare Proverbs 4:20-21 with v. 23). The father instructs. The son should heed the call to obey, but ultimately the son must realize he himself is accountable to God who observes his life (compare Proverbs 5:1-2 with vv. 11-13, 21-23). The father pleads with his son not to forget his father's lessons, but the father also warns and limits his own responsibility if the son should choose foolishness (see Proverbs 1:20-33).

*... fools despise wisdom and instruction [Proverbs 1:7b].*

*Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof .... because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD. They would not accept my counsel, they spurned all my reproof. So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way and be satiated with their own devices .... but he who listens to me shall live securely and will be at ease from the dread of evil (wisdom personified, but wisdom comes from God often through parents) [Proverbs 1:24-25,29-31,33].*

*Now then, my sons, listen to me and do not depart from the words of my mouth .... And you say, "How I have hated instruction! And my heart spurned reproof! I have not listened to the voice of my teacher, nor inclined my ear to my instructors!" .... For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, and He watches all his paths. His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin. He will die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he will go astray [Proverbs 5:7, 12-13, 21-23].*

*My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to all their body. Watch over your heart with all diligence (Proverbs 4:23a).*

Even with the best of parenting, children eventually make their own choices.<sup>4</sup>

In the historical books of the Bible, a godly king could have a spiritually sick son or grandson; but a spiritually sick king might have a son or grandson who led a spiritual revival. Hezekiah, a good king, was followed by his son Manassah, a bad king. Amon, a bad king, was followed by Josiah, a good king. Josiah in turn was followed by three sons and a grandson who were spiritually bad.

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<sup>4</sup> The age of accountability is a topic that usually overlaps with the criminal/moral liability of young people or the salvation of an infant/child upon death. Here the idea arises in the context of parenting. When does child become accountable for his or her own relationship to God?

Modern cultures vary. The Jewish culture expects accountability at age 13. Secular society marks age 16 as the age to drive, 18 as the age to vote, and often 21 as the age to drink. The Bible never gives a precise age of accountability. Perhaps in God's omniscience it varies with each person. Several verses give the concept that small children do not yet know right from wrong (Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 7:15-16; Jonah 4:11). Yet, Jeremiah said that King Jehoichin at age 18 was accountable for having refused to listen to God since his youth (Jeremiah 22:21, see also 2 Kings 24:8-9). Many Bible characters were godly at an early age (Joseph, Daniel, his 3 friends who went into the fiery furnace, young David who fought Goliath, probably Joseph and Mary, see Ecclesiastes 12:1). Yet, God did not record Hebrews in the Mosaic census until the age of 20 (Numbers 1:1-3).

The age of personal accountability before God is unknown. Yet, the concept seems to be true. At an early age children do not know right from wrong. When Bathsheba lost David's child, the king expected to see the baby again in the after-life (2 Samuel 12:23). Also, Jesus taught young children have guardian angels and that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them (Matthew 18:1-6, 10-14, 19:13-15). Infants are not born saved, but should they die, they seem to die saved. See Lightner, Robert, *Heaven For Those who Can't Believe*, (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press), 1977, and Steven Waterhouse, *Not By Bread Alone: An Outlined Guide to Bible Doctrine* (Amarillo, TX: Westcliff Press, 2010), pp. 64-67, (see in particular footnote 4, wherein the author's section on inherited sin from Adam is part of his reasoning for believing God can and does save children under the age of accountability).

Nature influences us, but we are still personally accountable to God. Nurture, (societal or family culture) influences us, but every individual is still personally accountable to God. The Bible makes each generation responsible before God (Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; Jeremiah 31:29-30); and forces individuals to choose for themselves.

*See, I have set before you this day life and prosperity, and death and adversity .... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants [Deuteronomy 30:15, 19].*

*Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word [1 Kings 18:21].*

Joshua's command in Joshua 24:15 presumes responsibility for his own household but also that even the mighty general Joshua had limits to controlling the choice of others. Thus, these words can apply to adult children of godly Christian parents *í choose for yourselves today whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

## Chapter Summary

Mothers and fathers must imitate the character traits of God. They are responsible to believe both that children are precious and worthy of unconditional love but also that they are sinners and need to be taught respect for God's authority. When parents have disobeyed God, they must confess sin and begin obeying biblical teaching about raising children. When parents have long obeyed these teachings, they should remain free of false guilt if adult children have wandered away from God. Children eventually become personally accountable for their choices to God (Galatians 6:4-5). Personal choice is typically the dominant factor in what a person becomes. Nature (genetics) and nurture (culture and family) do influence us. Thus, parents must raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), but children also have an obligation to obey God by honoring this type of parents (even if they are not perfect). When children refuse, the parents may feel pain but

need not feel guilt. They may also hope that eventually disobedient children will come to their senses as did the prodigal son (Luke 15:17).

Whatever the future, parents can do no better than following God's wisdom on raising children. Obedience of the parents greatly improves chances for a better outcome. A strong Christian upbringing will at least give children truths to which they can return, and many children will choose to follow their heritage without any periods of rebellion. They will pass from parental example and instruction right to personal choice. They will choose the faith of their parents. They will honor the doctrines and ethics of their parents by realizing they originate in a higher authority. The image of God in parents leads to a clearer idea of the image of God coming from Bible study. Honoring father's and mother's commands grows to honoring God who is the ultimate source of the most important of parental commands.





## Parental Practices

### Unconditional Love or Trial Acceptance

In a game with a close score a young athlete made a mistake that caused his team to lose in the final seconds. The game itself is completely irrelevant. After the loss, however, the father of an eight year-old boy ran out on the field and publicly berated the child. I overheard words like, "No son of mine would ever try something so stupid." I was unmarried at the time. Yet, I instinctively knew the father was worse at parenting than the son ever would be at sports.

Previously we argued that the image of God reflected in parents gives children the basis for emotional and spiritual strength. God the Father is the model for parents. There is no need to determine which of God's characteristics is the most important in raising children, but giving unconditional love must be at the top of anyone's priority.

When one trusts in Christ as Savior, he or she becomes a child of God. God wants his children to behave and achieve. As a Father, He rewards and blesses virtuous behavior and efforts that lead to service and achievement. However, God loves His children even if they fail. We might fail by rebellion, or we may have human limitations. Regardless, God loves us without conditions. *See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us that we would be called children of God* (1 John 3:1). It is obvious that parents have a moral responsibility to love their children. However, some do not love them in any sense of the word. Many others are confused as to the Scriptural definition of love. It is important that children feel the security of unconditional love. **Christian love is not based upon performance, ability, or behavior. It is a commitment to do what is best for the object of love whether the person deserves it or not.** Parents who mirror this type of love (God's love) instill security in children, teach them to love, and display a model that will generate an attraction to God. It is a major mistake to give the impression that the continuance of love depends upon the child's academic performance, talents, appearance, athletic ability, or even behavior. Children need to know love will be there even when there is failure or sin. This is exactly the way God treats His children. He urges righteousness and good works, but we have confidence that He continues to love even when we are unrighteous and fail to achieve. God expects

parents to love their children as He loves His children, with unconditional love.

The father who embarrassed his son for an athletic blunder was basing love upon achievement and success. Later we will see that the world's standards for measuring success in children (academics, athletics, artistic talent, and appearances) may be off base. God looks into the heart to measure success; beliefs, ethics, attitude (see 1 Samuel 16:7).<sup>5</sup>

But the present point is even deeper. Even when there is a proper standard for measuring true success, parents should never base love on achievements. Yes, the emotional type of love (*philos*) rises and falls with children's performances in situations that please or displease parents, but *agape* love continues even if a child fails. This is how God loves His children.

Parents giving unconditional love not based upon performance may actually bring about greater achievement in their children. Security in parental love may give children confidence and the freedom to attempt optional endeavors that are difficult. Children unsure of parental love may feel that pursuing a difficult dream is unsafe, a risk to parental love. Children with unconditional love can dream big, precisely because failure would not be a threat to parental acceptance.<sup>6</sup> Children should be

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<sup>5</sup> God's own view is that His ways are simple (Luke 10:41-42) contrasted with the twisted and complex way of sin (Proverbs 22:5). His commandments are easy (Matthew 11:28-30; 1 John 5:3) compared to the crushing load of sin. Gaining the acceptance of most in modern society is virtually impossible. Its standards for measuring success are often off base. Frequently, our culture creates a celebrity, and then ultimately destroys that same person just as fast without ever giving any unconditional love or acceptance. There is more than one definition of worldliness. Christians often think of worldliness as various common sins, but a false standard for success and pleasing people above God also is a form of worldliness.

<sup>6</sup> In high school, I felt secure enough to try athletics though without natural ability. Suppose my parents had based love on performance basis. Perhaps I would have feared to try, and maybe this would have carried over into fear of trying difficult things in academics or Christian leadership. Unconditional love by parents, not based on achievement, may actually result in achievement.

taught their motivation for achievement should be to please and honor God (or even please parents) but never from any need to earn love from either God or parents. This type of heart, with an honest and faithful effort, is in itself a success by godly definition, regardless of the objective level of actual skill or performance. The Bible gives the true standard for success stressing character and relationship to God. If societal ways of measuring excellence arise from pride and seeking status independently from God, they do not amount to a true success even if the world judges the performance with high marks.

Parents should approve achievement that arises from a godly heart. However, the love of father and mother must never become something that is earned (or lost!) by performance. It is possible to convey unconditional love to children and teach true standards for measuring success and still tell children that achievement pleases mom and dad. Good parents want performance but will always love limited, imperfect, failing and even sinful children.

### Child Support

**God requires parents to provide materially for their children's needs.** This obligation does not seem to be universally acknowledged in the world as a whole. However, the Bible expects that even non-Christians know enough to be responsible for their children. Among Christians there is perhaps a greater danger of going to the other extreme and giving too much to the children. It is helpful to remember that need and unfulfilled desire can be a basis to teach gratitude and work ethics. Parents must support children, but we do them no favor by spoiling them.

*But if any one does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever [1 Timothy 5:8].*

*... for children are not responsible to save up for their parents but parents for their children [2 Corinthians 12: 14b].*

### Teach the Children Well

The frequency with which the Bible gives teaching responsibility to parents or details parental example is amazing: Genesis 18:19; Exodus 10:2, 12:26ff., 13:8,14; Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-9, 11:18-

20; Judges 2:10; Proverbs 1:8, 2:1-2, 3:1-2, 4:1-4, 10, 5:1-2, 7:1-2, 24, 8:32-33, 12:1, 13:1, 22:6; Luke 2:52; Ephesians 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:11; 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:15.

God called Abraham in part so that he would ðcommand his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lordö (Genesis 18:19). Moses in Exodus and Deuteronomy commands parents to make God known to their children and grandchildren continually.<sup>7</sup>

*These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You 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 [Deuteronomy 6:6-7].*

Despite such commands and warnings it took just one generation of failure for another generation to arise that did not know God (Judges 2:10). Disobedience in the matter of parents teaching children can lead to temporal and eternal disaster. The Proverbs give many pleas by a father to a son to heed the father's and mother's instruction (see above list). The most familiar text among them gives hope, *Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it* (Proverbs 22:6).

Paul commanded fathers to ðbring them (children) up in the discipline and instruction of the Lordö (Ephesians 6:4). He also mentioned Timothy's mother and grandmother as praiseworthy models for teaching Timothy in childhood. ðAnd that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesusö (2 Timothy 3:15, see also: 2 Timothy 1:5 which credits Timothy's good background to his mother and grandmother).

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<sup>7</sup> Moses' own biological mother became his nurse to raise him on behalf of Pharaoh's daughter. She must have taught Moses well in childhood for as a man Moses chose downtrodden Israel over the power and luxuries of Egypt (Exodus 2:1-10; Hebrews 11:24-28). Daniel must also be an example of early training by parents. As a youth, he refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols. This choice was right and beneficial but risked possible insult to his Babylonian captors. Only diligent teaching at an early age explains Daniel's dedication to God (Daniel 1).

Both Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11, 24-28, 2:11, 18, 3:1) and the Lord Jesus (Luke 2:21-24) were dedicated by parents to God in their infancy. Whether in public and formal or private and informal settings, parents should dedicate themselves to raising children to trust Christ as Savior and serve God. The old adage *“you can’t take it with you”* is true of material possessions, but humans have eternal souls. Children who trust in Christ as Savior will be in an eternal relationship with God and believing parents. The most basic parental instruction is to teach *“wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15). The essential truths in Christianity are the Trinity (One God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the Virgin birth and Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, His death on the cross for our sins, His resurrection and Second Coming, the existence of heaven and hell, the authority of the Bible as God’s Word, and the need to place faith in Christ as Savior. In addition to basic doctrines, parents should instill basic morality including, the sanctity of life, marriage, and God’s commandments.<sup>8</sup> Given the hostility in our world to the things of Christ, instruction on apologetics also helps (intelligent design in creation, fulfilled Messianic prophecy as evidence the Bible is true, and historical/archaeological proofs for the Bible’s trustworthiness).<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes secular articles may give insight into child rearing. However, when the philosophy of the world clashes with the Bible, it is wrong and probably dangerous. *“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men”* (Colossians 2:8). Vital truths for teaching children are in the Bible which gives everything needed for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), makes us equipped for every good work, including raising families, (2 Timothy 3:17) and gives sufficiency for wisdom and life (Colossians 2:3,10; 2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Philippians 4:13). Some aspects to child rearing not in the Bible are matters of common sense or the wisdom of previous generations (naptime, manners, potty training). Not everything

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<sup>8</sup> Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament. We no longer need to worship on Saturday but are still commanded to assemble and worship (Hebrews 10:25).

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 13 of *Holy Matrimony* gives some information defending the trustworthiness of the Bible. Deeper research on apologetics is beyond the scope of this book. *Jesus and History* (especially Chapter 12) and *Messianic Prophecy* give more information.

advised by secular experts need be rejected as foolish. However, all the points that are vital and true are either already in the Bible or matters of common sense. 1 Corinthians 3:11 concerns the local church but applies to a family. This verse asserts there is no other foundation than Christ (see also Matthew 7:24-28).

### Ways of Instructing Children: Example

Parents teach by example, by informal instruction through conversation, by formal devotions and lessons, and by involvement in children's ministries. All these methods are important.

Parents constantly instruct their children by example. Unspiritual parents can unknowingly teach their children about complaining, backbiting, slander, lust, cheating, anxiety, unhappiness, etc. Parents who never admit to mistakes might also rear children who always feel they are right. Parents who must have their own way in everything might also rear children with similar expectations. It is ironic that some parents wonder why their older children no longer attend church. If children hear talk of joy in the Christian life and yet listen to their parents incessantly grumble about the miseries of life or the defects in the local church, then it should not be too surprising that they obtain a negative view of Christianity and churches. If these same parents are materialistic, it is even easier to understand why the children reject Christian values. If a home school mother who teaches Sunday School later commits adultery, gets an abortion to cover it up and divorces her husband, all her teaching is worthless. Example makes a deep impression.

Children will tend to adopt parental values and lifestyles. If parents are giving, kind, pure, persistent and disciplined, punctual, honest, dependable, appreciative, courteous, and concerned about others, they tend to instill these traits in their children. It is difficult for a non-motivated parent to teach a child to be persistent in finishing tasks. It is hard for a spendthrift to teach stewardship, for a tardy person to teach punctuality, or for an unethical father to teach morals, or for a cold-hearted mother to teach about Christian love for others. Parents do not need to be perfect, but they should realize that consistency and credibility are among the best teaching tools, and more importantly are required by God. Wise parents will want their children to observe them in prayer (including prayers for the children), Bible study, acts of charity and/or outreach, and service in the church. It is also instructive to have

parents admit mistakes and sins when they occur, and for the parents to express affection for each other in front of the children.

God is a Heavenly Father. If children have good parents for a model, they will find it easier to relate to the God of the Bible. If their own parents are unlike God, they will have a harder time understanding God or even desiring a relationship with Him.

A story goes that someone asked which translation of the Bible is the best. The answer was, "my mother's translation." She lived it. Examples of honesty, generosity, service in the local church and fidelity/love in marriage will influence deeply and must accompany verbal teaching. The main purpose for God creating the family seems to be a deeper experience of His character. Parents will only imperfectly reflect God's attributes. They cannot measure up to God's infinite degree of perfection but must at least live in the direction of godliness. **Children need to see the admiration and imitation of God in their parents even before reading about God's nature in the Bible.**

#### Ways of Teaching Children: Conversation

Life presents teachable moments. If parents have the presence of mind to realize and use such occasions, they will increase the chance of a child understanding and retaining truth. It is probably true that most effective instruction can be done informally and can occur in the normal course of life's activities. Whenever a Christian teaching applies to a situation a child faces, wise parents will teach the Christian perspective. A young person's life is full of opportunities for the application of Christian beliefs and behavior. There are many moral choices. Times of fear, sickness or need provide occasions to teach faith, prayer, and the attributes of God. Times of prosperity and blessing give occasions to teach gratitude. Confrontations with death can be the ideal situation in which to teach about eternal life. Holidays should be used to celebrate Christian truths. Parents should in general be continually thinking about how the Christian faith applies to their children's experiences.

The Bible envisions that often instruction for children will not occur in a classroom or formal lesson period. Parent-child discussions take place along the road, at home, morning to night. Instruction can take place even in home décor with Christian symbols and Bible verses (see Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and 11:18-20) and in the explanation for holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

### Ways of Teaching Children: Formal Studies

Modern times bring animated and visual instruction for children. Children should be exposed to memorable music, poetry, and particularly books of a spiritual tone. Examples of the latter might be a book that goes through the alphabet with a Bible verse for each letter. Another might include the beatitudes or Ten Commandments. Even in a media-filled world small children still love to read with a personal parental presence. Books appropriate to children's age level allow for instruction in the Bible with a graduation to actual Bible reading from an easy-to-understand translation. Other ideas would include a bulletin board with missionary prayer cards; an excellent opportunity to learn geography. A prayer book with pictures of relatives, the local church, the flag, the school, and so forth can be used as an aid to prayer. Beyond the Bible itself, books on creation science (see [icr.org](http://icr.org) or [answersingenesis.org](http://answersingenesis.org)), Christian biographies, and exposure to traveling students and missionaries can be helpful instruction. We must remember that Christian instruction also involves limiting exposure to false teaching and evil through television, the Internet, or printed material.

**The Bible gives primary responsibility for teaching to parents.** However, it requires parents to assemble in a local church (Hebrews 10:25) and gives pastors responsibility to equip all for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). Wise parents will view a local church as reinforcing their own efforts to teach children. If a church no longer teaches the Scriptures, parents should find one that does. Children need relationships with people their own age for a good kind of peer pressure. They also need to have older church family ðuncles,ð and ðaunts,ð and ðgrandparentsð to endorse parental example and instruction. It helps them to see the true scope and size of Christianity and, thus, its importance. Sometimes children grow inattentive to parents, and the same truth taught by others in a church will gain acceptance. Parents should teach about God by all means: personal example, conversations, formal lessons at home, and involvement in a church, including its children's ministries.

### Parental Discipline

Someone has said that ðdiscipline without love equals crueltyð but that ðlove without disciplineð is not love at all. Discipline without unconditional love will lead to crushed, bitter, angry children. ðLoveð



without discipline is love misdefined because children will become spoiled and reckless with life. Such may also develop anger for a different reason. Their parents did not care enough to take the responsibility of setting safe and beneficial limits for behavior. Solomon, the author of Hebrews, and the Apostle Paul teach that God's discipline is an aspect of His love for us. Discipline means God cares enough to control us from harming, maybe even destroying ourselves by foolish sin. God is the example of ideal parenting.

*My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights [Proverbs 3:11-12].*

*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD, nor faint when you are reproveth by Him; for those whom the LORD loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness [Heb. 12:4-11].*

*Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent [Revelation 3:19].*

We should adopt the attitude that discipline is an act of love. It is never loving to condone sin. God loves us. Yet, He does not approve of any wrongdoing, and He will Himself exercise discipline. It is ultimately in our own best interest that He disciplines us. Likewise, we are not doing children any favor or expressing love to them by allowing sin to go uncontrolled and unchallenged. The end results can be so disastrous that a loving parent will gladly endure the unpleasant aspects of discipline in order to spare children from the tragic consequences of sin.

The old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is applicable. It will help if discipline is viewed as something done for a child - not something done to a child. The purpose is not to cause pain but to promote safety and righteousness. Does the approach which leads to righteousness or the approach that leads to misery from sin exhibit more parental love? God says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19).

The absence of discipline can create insecurity and ultimately disrespect in children. They need guidance, and initially they know it. The limitations imposed by parental discipline cause security and actually give a sense of freedom to develop within "safe" parental boundaries of behavior. One "bright" psychologist thought that fences around playgrounds inhibited the freedom of small children. When they were removed, the children huddled in the middle of the playground because they did not know the limitations of safety and wisdom; and therefore, were insecure and fearful to explore. Without any discipline and direction, children can react initially with fear, then frustration, and then eventually disrespect toward parents. Why should they respect parents who do not seem to know or care enough to guide?

If discipline is an expression of love, it is just as much an expression of faith. Parents discipline not because it emotionally feels good, but rather because they believe in God's wisdom for the home. He tells us what is wise and best. It is an expression of faith to follow His leading.

The order of material in this chapter reflects the conclusion that unconditional love must precede discipline and that caring enough to protect a child from evil is part of the definition of love.

### Corporeal Discipline in the Bible: Interpretation and Application

All who have read the Proverbs know that it contains references to corporeal discipline. The derived English proverb is "spare the rod, spoil the child." Here are the actual verses:

*He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently [Proverbs 13:24].*

*Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death [Proverbs 19:18].*

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

*Do not hold back discipline from the child. Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die [Proverbs 23:13].*

*The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother [Proverbs 29:15].*

*Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; He will also delight your soul [Proverbs 29:17].*

There are two ways to interpret these teachings from Proverbs. However, the applied result to modern families comes out the same with either view. In Proverbs 1:10 ff. Solomon warns his son not to associate with murderers and thieves. Later on in the book he frequently warns about the consequences of immorality (e.g., Proverbs 2:16, 5:1-6, 6:23-35, 7:6ff, 23:26-28). He also speaks on various other points that seem to concern young adults (e.g. co-signing for a loan, Proverbs 6:1ff; work ethics, Prov. 10:1-5). Thus, a case can be made that the statements in Proverbs concern the discipline of a man who is an adolescent or young adult. The rod can be likened to a form of punishment for extremely deviant, even criminal behavior. This is similar to Paul and Silas being beaten with rods and thrown into prison (Acts 16:22). Solomon tells fathers not to worry about sons dying from a beating (Proverbs 23:13).

Perhaps Proverbs is not at all concentrating on discipline for small children. It rather concerns the more serious sins of the wayward prodigal. In a strict interpretation Solomon probably refers to very severe punishment for the equivalent of criminal behavior. The nation of Singapore has beaten with canes those convicted on drug charges. Perhaps the words in Proverbs refer to a similar punishment for sins that are virtually crimes.

This interpretation of Proverbs would still recognize that basic applications can be made from Proverbs to parental discipline of small children, i.e. spankings. The Bible gives the principle of corporeal discipline being a God-approved and effective means of discipline.

However, the common view of Proverbs is also very much a viable option. Perhaps even though Solomon warns against sins of older children, he is speaking to a younger child who must be warned against future temptations. The sins may be those committed by teenage children or young adults, but Solomon may be speaking to smaller children to prepare them for adolescence. Also, the rod could obviously have different applications. It could speak of a severe beating that would be administered to young adult criminals but also have a range of meaning broad enough to cover swats to a toddler.

The practical difference is negligible in the two approaches to the precise interpretation of Proverbs. If Solomon is speaking to teenagers and the rod speaks of severe criminal punishment, then the principle of corporeal punishment for younger children would still be established (though, of course, not to the same severity as the adult child engaged in criminal behavior). On the other hand, if Solomon is speaking to a small child and the rod refers to spanking and not beatings; then the principle for corporeal discipline for kids is even more clearly established. Proverbs 22:6 can be paraphrased to say, "Train up a child according to the way that is best appropriate for him." Thus, both views of Proverbs establish the basic principle of corporeal discipline. Both views would contend that such discipline should be administered with a reflection upon the age and temperament (natural bent) of the individual child.

In its context Proverbs warns of major sins (joining a gang, visiting prostitutes, stealing, and violence). Thus, one must apply the principle of corporeal discipline differently to small children whose sins need correction but hardly are the deep sins actually mentioned in the book. The proper level of corporeal discipline is the least amount needed to change the behavior.<sup>10</sup> Given the actual sins in the context, one may not use Proverbs to justify beating small children with canes or whips to a degree short of death! Pre-schoolers and elementary children as a rule

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<sup>10</sup> The purpose of discipline is to train not to harm. Therefore, Christian parents should try to refrain from outbursts of anger and frustration that result in a punishment far out of proportion to the wrong behavior. The proper amount of pain is the amount that causes a forsaking of the behavior. Cruelty will result in resentment, not maturity. Discipline should be fair and in proportion to the degree of wrongdoing.

do not commit the types of sins under consideration in the Proverbs. Thus, the Proverbs approve the use of corporeal discipline, but it must be applied wisely (less severely) to small children with lesser sins.

God allows parents discretion on the application of discipline. Scripture gives a general principle but not detailed instructions. Given the commands *do not exasperate your children so that they will not lose heart* (Colossians 3:21) and *do not provoke your children to anger* (Ephesians 6:4), there is a middle ground between never employing corporeal discipline and using it constantly for every sin or mistake in life.

Dangerous behavior (putting hands under a lawn mower or getting into the medicine cabinet) simply must not happen. Corporeal discipline seems wise for behaviors that are dangerous.

In addition to danger, we simply would not tolerate lying, stealing, or the attitude of defiance to parents. Long-term parental concession to lying, stealing, and defiance would have allowed habits that destroy children. Such commandments as prohibition of stealing, lying, and dishonor to parents really involve enforcement of God's core commandments, not just parental preferences.

Children must honor their parents. A child should be able to communicate anything including views that parents have made mistakes. However, they must do so with a tone of respect, not defiance. During the pre-school years, each of our children hit us in a tantrum about being buckled into a car seat. Though this "violence" caused no harm, we reasoned that if such were tolerated, the long-term effect would be a first-rate discipline problem. Therefore, we established a no-tolerance policy of the children hitting their parents. Through the use of corporeal discipline for this offense the attempt was tried once, but never again. Parents are not perfect, but tolerating defiance in children brings harm to them.

Readers will develop their own family policies on corporeal discipline. Balance is in order. The Proverbs clearly teach a general principle of its value, but the situations in the original context are far more serious than splashing water over the edge of a tub or forgetting toys in the backyard before it rains. Long-suffering and mercy are also godly characteristics. Somewhere between never spanking and always spanking is parental wisdom. Situations involving danger or breaking

any of the Ten Commandments (lying, stealing, dishonor to parents) give prudent guidelines for nipping attitudes and actions that bring grief later in life if not prevented in childhood. Even with corporeal discipline we all raise children with sin natures. In our experience, few applications of spanking were necessary. It virtually stopped the worst behaviors early in life.

While on a trip with a college professor, I observed his parental dealings with his eight-year-old son. Whenever the boy behaved well or gave an intelligent remark, he was praised (positive reinforcement). This excellent habit follows God the Father's example with all of us.<sup>11</sup>

When the boy engaged in questionable behavior, he received warning of future corporeal discipline if there was another occurrence. Since the purpose of child discipline is teaching (not venting anger or pain) instruction before discipline is wise, especially if the given behavior has never occurred before or rarely occurs.<sup>12</sup> A preventative warning gives instruction and also tests submission or defiance.

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<sup>11</sup> God uses positive reinforcement with His children. Salvation is never earned nor deserved. God's endless love has no conditions. We are forgiven through faith by God's grace. Yet, our Heavenly Father praises and rewards good behavior and diligent service. Heaven itself is not earned, but rewards (crowns, positions of service, and probably even the level of glory in the resurrection body) will come from behavior. Even in this life God gives earthly praises and earthly rewards which reinforce good behavior.

Parents should follow God's example of reinforcement for good behavior. Children should not have to misbehave to obtain their parent's attention. Often verbal praise alone is sufficient to ensure the repetition of good behavior. Sometimes a tangible reward may be appropriate, but the main reward should simply be the happiness of fathers and mothers.

We need also to mention that it can be easy to reinforce negative behavior that might be amusing. If we laugh at a food fight, we might have another food fight. Parents will want to avoid reinforcing bad behaviors by words and extra attention.

<sup>12</sup> God as Father has certainly given teaching as to His expectations for His children. Earthly fathers and mothers should make every effort to explain a wrong so that a child remembers and knows what is expected.

The only time this college professor used corporeal discipline he sandwiched it between before-and-after reassurances of unconditional love and forgiveness and also gave instruction both before and after the discipline.<sup>13</sup> His son clearly knew how to correct his misbehavior and that his father accepted him as a person even if he did not accept a given behavior.

Every home and even every situation varies, but a combination of positive reinforcement, warnings with instruction (especially upon the first occurrence), discipline (for danger and Ten Commandment issues), and discipline always followed by repeated instructions and expressions of unconditional love, seems to give prudent policies that others may consider.

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<sup>13</sup> God in His role as Father gives assurances of forgiveness (Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 6:9, 12; 1 John 1:9). Children should fear wrongdoing but never fear mistreatment or loss of parental love. Parents should direct anger at bad behavior more than the person. The focus should be upon the issue of wrong rather than humiliating the person by name-calling or embarrassing tactics.

Verbal cut-downs end up eliciting anger, not respect. Parents should not ridicule or make fun of weakness. It is best to discipline in private and not to discipline unnecessarily before a child's friends. (This does not eliminate discipline for misbehaviors that occur in a public place. Most would advise the child be promptly disciplined in a private spot within the public place or taken home.)

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### Additional Angles to Child-rearing

Both parents should enforce their standards and application of discipline. Commonly, a child will appeal to the parent who most yields to the child's desires. Sometimes it may be father. Sometimes it may be mother. Children should not be allowed a "favorite" parent who is lenient and a "mean" parent who gets stuck with all the dirty work of discipline.<sup>14</sup>

Also, it is not wise to compare children with each other: "Why can't you get good grades like your sister?" God's standards are ultimately the measure for excellence, not a sibling's performance. Each can measure self against past behaviors and God's commandments (see 2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 6:4-5 NIV). In non-moral issues the standard of achievement should be the child's own full potential and progress compared to that child's own past level, not whether a sibling can play the piano better. Measurement of progress should be individual, not competitive. Parental comparison of children may foster a superior feeling in one child and resentment in another. Rivalry to get parental love is unhealthy. The Bible alone gives the measure of excellence. We do not need to put that burden on another child in the family by making him or her the comparison.

The Bible tells us to keep our promises (Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Ecclesiastes 5:4-5; Matthew 5:33 and 37; James 5:12). This means parents should make realistic promises to children and honor them. Regarding discipline, this principle means parents should follow through on any warnings about punishment for misbehavior. If a child is undeniably guilty and parents have threatened discipline, they had better keep their "promise" to act, or they risk losing credibility. If parents frequently back off from discipline, children become skilled at manipulation.

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<sup>14</sup> Parents should not discipline their children just to meet the supposed expectations of peers who are also raising children. Keeping up appearance is not a cause for different standards of right and wrong or acceptable and unacceptable behavior. This may be a good time to include the reminder that grandparents have wisdom and honor (Leviticus 19:32; Proverbs 17:6), but not complete control over how their adult children raise the grandchildren (see Genesis 2:24, where marriage involves independence from father and mother).



Finally, if corporeal discipline occurs at all, it should take place soon after the infraction in order to increase the learning potential and reduce expectation of "getting away with it." Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, "Because the sentence of an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are fully given to evil." This statement refers to crimes and punishment by the courts but can apply to families. Any discipline should occur soon after wrongdoing. If it does not, a small child may forget the actual infraction. He or she may not learn as deeply the nature of the infraction and view parents as being mean for no reason. The purpose of discipline is to teach and correct harmful behavior. The Bible teaches corporeal discipline for children but prohibits harshness in its application. Tenderness should exist between father/mother and children. Parents who love their children will discipline them, but children should "fear" parents only in the sense of respect not in the sense of feeling threatened. A father once made a comparison of training children to training guard dogs. He wanted both to fear the master. These are definitely not the conditions Christian parents should create in the home. Sufficient discipline to alter harmful behavior is the proper frequency and amount. The goal is not the most discipline possible. The goal is to raise children who trust, love, and serve God and who value their parents when they are grown. God's Word teaches child discipline but also gives boundaries.

### Encouragement

The same truth can be phrased positively or negatively. Either way can be beneficial. Children are baby humans, and all humans need massive doses of encouragement. Verbal and even corporeal discipline is actually one aspect of "encouragement" to do better. Praising children for ethically good behavior or for achievement follows God's own pattern of blessing His children when we do well. 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 says, "For we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ" (by application see 3 John 4).

God limits discipline that crosses the line of squashing children emotionally. The second part of Ephesians 6:4 commands teaching and discipline. The first part commands, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger of the Lord." The parallel text commands, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart" (Colossians 3:21). What kinds of child-rearing habits could lead to grown children who are embittered, exasperated, or so discouraged they become

indifferent to trying to please parents? These texts do not elaborate, but Bible stories and reflection on Bible truths give some ideas.

In Genesis 27 the father, Isaac, favored Esau. The mother, Rebekah, favored the twin brother, Jacob. This relationship led to trickery in the family. Favoritism of one child over others is one parental failure that could lead to resentment.

Unrealistic parental expectations could also discourage children as they try to meet the impossible, which can also be the unnecessary. The most important factor in parenting is the admiration and imitation of God. What standards are the parents trying to instill in their children? It is essential that parents know the virtues of God and the morals of the Bible and that they acknowledge the Biblical standard of excellence and maturity not so much societal standards. God cares more about our character and beliefs than He does athletic skills, academic achievement, talents, number of college degrees, position, or status. The goal of discipline, therefore, ought to be godliness and Christian maturity. This may indeed involve great achievements, but it is an achievement that is a secondary effort to the main goal of parental discipline, dedication to God and His Word. God's Word itself does not require any child to be good at football, to score the top on the SAT, to become a CPA, lawyer, or doctor, to enjoy music or become famous. Parental demands for morality are essential and encouragement to obtain one's highest potential is good. Expectations and demands that go further may cause frustrations to the degree a child no longer cares to please parents (even in the important matters).

Additional aspects to discipline also cause potential for anger or discouragement in children. Inconsistent discipline (verbal or corporeal) can come in several ways. Inconsistent discipline is haphazard and spontaneous (without forethought). It occurs when each parent emphasizes a different standard of behavioral expectations, or when a given behavior is acceptable on one occasion but regarded as a serious wrong upon the next occurrence. Partiality overlaps with inconsistent discipline because it tolerates in one child what is forbidden in another. Any of these types of inconsistent discipline (again verbal or corporeal) would leave a child confused as to parental expectations causing potential anger and loss of heart.

Another closely related source of frustration for children would be discipline without clear instruction as to the behavior that needs correction or without any expression of unconditional forgiveness and love. Discipline without rational instruction is pointless. Discipline without expression of forgiveness and unconditional love can lead to children giving up on trying to meet parental expectations. Children must know how to avoid disapproval in the future and that parental acceptance can never be lost by any misbehavior.

No doubt Paul has cruelty in mind when forbidding fathers to crush their children's hearts or cause bitterness. Parental authority exists to make choices in the best interest of children. The severity of discipline should be proportionate to the infraction. This means correction, verbal or corporeal, should never cause anything more than temporary pain and only to a sufficient degree to alter behavior. Temporary discomfort can prevent behavior trends that will become dangerous. Permanent scars, physical and/or emotional, are prohibited by the very command not to cause bitterness and discouragement (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21).

Finally, children should honor parents even if they are imperfect, but parents need to admit to being human. If we err or sin, it is better to make amends than to give the ridiculous impression of perfection. Children should be able to communicate their feelings as long as they do so with respect. Parents should at least be open to the possibility of having made a mistake. Otherwise, at some point children will be frustrated.<sup>15</sup>

### Hope for faithful Mom and Dad

A father and mother cannot improve upon following God's wisdom for raising children. Parenting is a long-range endeavor. Galatians 6:9 is applicable, "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary."

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<sup>15</sup> A pastor gave his children a "free bad behavior" when he corrected them by mistake. By contrast my father always said, "that's for what you did when I wasn't looking." The pastor told me his children would hold on to their "free bad behavior" like a valued treasure. Not wanting to squander such fortune they tried to behave extra-well to keep their "free bad behavior" credit with dad. Still, my father's approach also worked - I later discovered his line was a quote from the Three Stooges and laugh every time think I about it.

When parents attempt to live out the imitation of God's character traits, teach fundamental truths, discipline in a balanced way to alter damaging behavior, and avoid anything that causes children anger and disillusionment, then a good result can be expected. Either the children will personalize the heritage they received, or they will have Christian roots to which they can return. Personal choice ends up being the greatest factor in what a child becomes, but parental efforts have deep influence. Solomon observed the tendency that the training from a father and mother leaves a permanent impact on their child's life. "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

### Final Thoughts

Those reading this material love their children and want the best for them. They also have an interest in God's truths given in the Bible. The main message of Scripture is that our Father loves us and wants us to have eternal life by placing our faith in His Son as our Savior. Jesus Christ paid for our sins on the cross and rose again. Please make certain that you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. If you would like counsel on this decision or other pastoral counsel, please contact Dr. Waterhouse.

