

A Biblical Approach to Discipline

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible gives parents the responsibility of bringing up their children which in Deuteronomy involves regular and daily teaching as part of everyday life and in Ephesians involves bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (See Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and Ephesians 4:6). In the Ten Commandments God indicated that honouring parents has a foundational place in how his people should live. It is one of the four positive statements found in the Ten Commandments and in that sense has priority over the six negative commandments which include the prohibition of murder, theft and adultery. The commandment to honour parents is linked with the longevity of the community.

While the Old Testament has a number of statements that are related to bringing up children and each of which teaches us something about how God views this process, there is no one passage telling how parents were to bring up their children. The Old Testament does however give two important views of the person that should be kept in balance by the teacher (and the parent) in disciplining children.

Firstly God made people in his own image (Genesis 1:26-27 and secondly the people he created sinned and that led to a propensity for wrong doing.

Drexler (2007 page 261) explains it thus

All students, teachers, and administrators have two fundamental characteristics that must be kept in proper balance: each person is a unique creation of God who bears the title "image of God," and each person is a fallen, weak, finite sinner who is born in sin—and proves that fact every day! To tip the balance in one direction or the other produces an unrealistic and unbiblical view of human beings and philosophically imbalanced approaches to classroom management. Educational leaders must recognize and appreciate the dignity and uniqueness of each child, maintain a clearheaded view of the realities of sin, and proclaim the promises of redemption in Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament there is more teaching that can guide Christian teachers in their management of the children God has given to them.

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul starts teaching on relationships. In doing so he makes the clear point when he says "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" that all relationships are to be governed by the principle of putting the interests of the other person above our own.

In a Christian school there must be a genuine sense of community where members love and forgive each other and put the interest of the other person above their own. It is in the light of that teaching that in the sixth chapter of Ephesians Paul gives a number of principles that should govern the relationship between parents and their children (Ephesians 6:1-4).

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

"Honour your father mother "-which is the first commandment with a promise-"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

From this passage the following principles can be discerned to guide the teachers and the parent in disciplining children.

Principle No. 1:

It is right for children to obey their parents and so by delegation, their teachers. Obedience is not a favour children do for parents and teachers; rather it is something that God has commanded them to do because it is right for them to do it. Notice it addresses this command to children directly. It does not say 'Parents make your children obey you'. By phrasing the command in this way it outlines the child's responsibility towards his parents, his teachers and of course to God.

It is important that teachers make their students aware of this responsibility.

Parents and teachers who allow their charges to be disobedient are not doing what God expects them to do. They are failing to exercise their God-given authority and role. Sometimes teachers do this because they believe that they have to appear loving and kind to the child if they are to influence him for Christ. They fear that discipline might breakdown the relationship they are striving to develop or they feel that since God is a God of love they must show grace and mercy. But God is righteous as well as loving and a correct balance needs to be maintained. Love and mercy must be held in tension in a godly classroom and there needs to be a proper response from teacher and children. There should be neither legalism nor permissiveness.

God does not overlook wrongdoing as 2 Peter 3:9 says: *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Psalm 99:8 says: *O Lord our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds.*

The Bible indicates that parents and teachers are placed over children for their own good. We must not renege on this responsibility.

Principle No. 2:

Children have a responsibility to honour and respect their parents and teachers.

Honouring refers to both attitudes and acts. The fact that this was part of the Ten Commandments reminds us that it is foundational to a stable society and to proper relationships with others and towards those in authority over us. Without this, society will tend towards anarchy. Disrespect will undermine every home or school. Respect is not based on fear or dread but on the commandment of God. Teachers must expect and demand respect from their children. Not to do so goes against the will of God.

Principle No. 3:

Fathers (and teachers) are not to exasperate their children in the exercise of their authority. Children are likely to be exasperated

- if they are treated arbitrarily.
- if the reason for the rules are not correctly explained to them.
- if they think that we are disciplining them just for our own convenience and/or pleasure.
- if they believe that they are being treated unjustly. God is just-it is one of His characteristics. He condemns strongly through the prophets any injustice that is being done. No one likes to be punished unjustly and we must make every effort to punish as justly as we can.
- if they are being treated unfairly or if we discriminate against them unfairly.
- when we seem to be harsh and unrelenting and lack the quality of mercy. Our God is merciful. If this were not so we would be consumed. We need to remember in our discipline the parable of the unforgiving servant, and the words of the Lord's prayer: Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- if we seem to think more of our rules than we do of them. If we fail to show real love in our discipline Children pick up as much from our tone of voice and expression as they do from our words.

Principle No .4:

Parents (and teachers) are to discipline in love. This is the opposite of exasperating children. God is love and in our discipline we must show the love of God. Hebrews 12:6 reminds us: *The Lord disciplines those he loves*. Discipline and love are inextricably linked. If we do not love our students we really have no right to discipline them. Loving a student does not mean that firm action to correct may not be needed. Indeed if we love a child there may in some circumstances be a need to exclude them from the school community i.e. suspend them if is only through such action that the willful rebellion of the child can be confronted. Love takes the risk of rejection.

To discipline a student in a loving way parents and teachers need to be models of love as indicated in 1 Corinthians 13. Our approach to discipline should be motivated by love. Some implications of this can be summarised below:

- The teacher must show patience and kindness.
- The teacher should display good manners before students.
- The teacher should not be irritable or resentful.
- The teacher is not glad when a child is caught out doing wrong.
- The teacher is glad when a student who did wrong in the past starts doing good.
- The teacher retains optimism for even the worst child and is prepared to forgive and forget wrong which has been done in the past.
- The teacher will not keep a mental list of all the wrong a child has done and bring it out every time he has to speak to him.

Principle No. 5:

Children are to be brought up in the training of the Lord.

The word translated 'training' in Ephesians 6:4 refers to the whole education of the child. This verse states that there are ways of training that are of the Lord, and, therefore, ways that are not of Him, that is, they are worldly or secular. We should examine our ways of training to see if they are of the Lord.

We need to think for a moment about what this training in the Lord involves. Paul could say to his disciples, *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1). This gives us two important clues about proper training.

1. Our own example is going to be most important. Research has shown us the value of modelling. Values are best learnt in disciplined situations where there is a good example to be followed. This was the method Jesus used during His time with His disciples.
2. Children need training. The secular child-centred approach to discipline and life where we are told not to dampen the creativity of the student by imposing set standards and principles should have no part of training in a Christian school.

Our overall purpose in training children must be for them to habitually imitate God and live for His glory. This means that we have to train our children in the knowledge of God. We have to recognise the fact that students are immature and sinful and likely to go in the wrong direction, and be easily led astray by others (Ephesians 4: 14). The humanist presupposes that children are born capable of doing what is right and that they only need to be helped towards self-discovery to determine their own values and they will go in the right direction.

Because children are very impressionable we need to be careful that we do not lead them astray and cause them to stumble (Matthew 18:5-7). We need to make sure that we do not despise any of the little ones that God has given into our charge (Matthew 18:10).

We have to learn to value each child as a member of the body of Christ. Each has important gifts. However small they may seem in their own eyes, in God's eyes each is as important as the other. We also need to be aware of the dangers of overvaluing gifts ourselves (Romans 12:3-6).

Principle No. 6:

Children are to be brought up in the admonition (instruction) of the Lord.

Philip Greenslade says on this subject

Admonition has to do with instruction on a personal and intimate level. To 'admonish' translates the Greek word 'noutheto' which means to set in the mind. In our context it means to set truth in the minds of disciples with a view to changing their behaviour and attitudes in a way that will make them more mature.

Unfortunately admonition has acquired a very aggressive connotation. This ought not to be with case. For to set truth in someone else's mind with a view of liberating them is not dominating them. It (admonition) involves person-to-person confrontation. It is part of what we now fashionably call 'discipleship'. Jesus did this quite naturally when talking with His disciples, being open with them, by turns encouraging, commending and correcting them, but all the time setting truth in their minds. We will never help people achieve maturity by sending memos to them. There has to be a consistent face-to-face brother-to-brother admonition.

Admonition seeks to set Christ clearly in the minds of those being instructed. In this way the preaching of the glory of Christ is broken down and applied practically to the believer's character and attitudes...

Greenslade then goes on to give some important prerequisites for admonition.

- a. There must be a relationship bridge built up first before admonition can take place.*
- b. Admonition is best given in the normal flow of life as people talk together.*
- c. Admonition calls for understanding between each party. It falls on deaf ears if a person is too rebellious to accept it.*
- d. We must never admonish unfeelingly or ungraciously.*
- e. A prerequisite for admonition is goodness.*

Greenslade finally gives a few words of warning:

- *Don't allow the person you are admonishing to become too dependent on you.*
- *Don't admonish lightly or carelessly.*
- *Don't be domineering.*
- *Don't offer unspiritual counsel.*

Admonition and training involve telling children what God expects of them. There is a serious lack in the church today of teaching about how we should live in the light of the Bible in today's society. We are commanded, as those who are teachers, to tell the students what God expects of them. Preventative discipline is better than punishment.

Children should be shown that the behaviour that is expected of them is derived from what the Bible teaches. As well as telling we must clearly show children how they should live. More is caught than taught.

Principle No.7:

Encourage children. Too often teachers are 'the great discouragers', always pointing to what is wrong, and seldom praising what is good. The Book of Hebrews reminds us in two places how we are to be encouragers:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds; let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24,25b.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Hebrews 3:13.

If we look at Paul's discipline of his churches you will note that he usually starts with praising what is good before he points out what is wrong. Not only is this sound psychologically, it is God's designed method. See Revelation 2 and 3 where the Spirit speaks to the church.

Often admonition has to be followed up by punishment. As we have already said this must be done in love.

Some Practical Hints on Discipline

1. Don't discipline in a hurry. If you feel angry it is not a bad thing to give yourself some time out before discipline commences.
2. Don't discipline a student when he or she is angry. Give them half an hour or so to calm down too.
3. Outline very carefully what the student has done wrong. Make sure your facts are straight. Incriminating a student on hearsay is not disciplining in love.
4. Give the student time to state his or her case. Students could be asked to write the position in their own words on the Discipline Report for fairly serious breaches of discipline.
5. The student should own up to his misdemeanour before being punished.
6. The student should understand why he is being punished.
7. Make sure that the punishment fits the crime.
8. Praying with the student is important.
9. If possible talk to the student afterwards. A day or so later you might pass the time of day with him in the playground.
10. A legalistic approach to discipline is not consistent with the love of the Gospel. Whilst the school has rules which need to be obeyed it is wise not to take an excessive legalistic approach to punishment if these rules are disobeyed.

11. Discipline should recognise the age and maturity of the student and should not belittle him, through word or deed.
12. Discipline should be aimed to help the child to correct his or her behaviour. This means that the student must understand why his behaviour is considered wrong.

Issues in Classroom Management

There are two aspects of successful classroom reaching:

1. Well prepared instruction.
2. Good classroom management strategies.

1. Well Prepared Instruction

It does without saying that a well-prepared teacher will have better discipline than one who is unprepared. This relates to a number of factors. Firstly a teacher is confident and assured because he knows his subject matter. Secondly because he has worked at the lesson he brings with him the expectation that all will go well. The teacher who respects himself and his calling will not accept disrespect or rudeness from his students. Thirdly the teacher needs to have a clear idea of what he wants to happen in the classroom. When a teacher is not clear about the behaviour he wants, the classroom is noisy and unproductive. Sometimes if a teacher is questioned about the noise the teacher is likely to explain that it is “busy” noise. While sometimes a busy class room is noisy A class should be noisy only if the teacher has planned it that way.

Planning

Planning involves more than just thinking about what will be said. Careful planning involves the following:

a. Focusing on Christ

The foundation of good discipline is to have a classroom where Jesus is in a real sense, Lord. This will be a classroom where there is justice, where the guidelines and rules are understood and consistently applied. It will also be a classroom where love and mercy abound and the fruit of the spirit are evident in the life of the teacher. It will also be a classroom where the children are encouraged to act towards each other with justice and mercy. This is the worship that God requires. Micah 6:8 says:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

A room where children go through the forms of worship but where injustice, nastiness, pettiness are evident in the relationships is an abomination to God. Drexler (2007 p 270-271) claims it is by the grace of God that changes in behaviour can happen

When an administrator sits across the desk from a student who has been sent to the office, or when teachers confront misbehavior, they must always remember that the child will change his behavior and do what is right only by the grace of God working in his heart. Ultimately, the student cannot change his behavior any more than he can save self. He needs God's grace to save him and to sanctify him. The apostle Paul proclaims this two-sided reality of grace: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12; emphasis added). God's grace through Jesus Christ must be the generative center of discipline efforts. Although it may be tempting to try to manipulate students through guilt, fear, or intimidation, or to use some form of behavior modification to

coerce them into correct behavior, ultimately these methods are doomed to fail. External conformity is one thing. A repentant and changed heart is quite another. Students, teachers, and administrators need God's grace, not guilt. All need God's mercy, not manipulation. The strategy, then, in dealing with students is to focus on Jesus Christ and the need for complete dependence on Him.

b. Individualising

We need to accept students as important in their own right; they are people, just as valued and valuable as their teacher. They are each different and their teachers need to plan to meet each individual's need for help, as far as this is possible. Too many teachers make statements like, 'I have explained this once'. This assumes that one explanation will be comprehensible for all students. This is seldom so. Students work at different speeds and levels and have vastly different interests and some account for these differences needs to be made. Students need to learn to work independently and accept responsibility for their actions. The teacher needs to be neither completely authoritative nor permissive.

c. Group Work

A successful class will develop a sense of cooperation. As the teacher has a genuine desire to communicate to his students, to understand them he will develop a real community of love. This may well be assisted by planned group work. However, for the young teacher this needs to be undertaken slowly to give time to develop rules for group work so that this is not a source of diversion and noise.

Make sure that the class understands the structures that provide the basis for the class work. Have a few well-established procedures and get the students used to these. You need to avoid a legalistic approach to your rules. They are not like the 'laws of the Medes and Persians'. On the other hand you should avoid a 'laissez faire' attitude to class rules.

2. Classroom Management Strategies

Classroom discipline can be made more effective by using sound discipline strategies. Drexler (2007 Pages 264-265) cites promising work by Jim Fay and David Funk in *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom* (1995).

Schools that have adopted this approach report a sharp decline in discipline incidents along with less of the tension, frustration, and loss of time that are often associated with student discipline. The approach is straightforward, emphasizing three basic rules: (1) use enforceable limits, (2) provide choices within limits, and (3) apply consequences with empathy. The authors argue that their approach reduces student misbehaviors, increases students' self-concept, and improves student achievement.

This approach is rooted in strong and positive student-teacher relationships of affirmation and support. Fay and Funk advise teachers to set limits within a framework of compassion and understanding while encouraging them to stay calm and resist the temptation to use strong-arm tactics when students misbehave. By treating students with respect and dignity, they argue, power struggles can be avoided and students can learn to be responsible and accountable. When teachers respond with empathy instead of anger, and offer choices instead of direct consequences, students accept responsibility more readily and experience the effects of their actions. Some "choice" statements—such as the following—reveal that both options actually lead to better classroom control, student responsibility, and teacher control (25-54):

- *Would you rather sit and read, or work on your project?*
- *What would be best for you, to play kickball or watch the others?*

- *You can play either in the block area or in the home living area. Which do you choose?*
 - *Would you rather play by the rules, or learn about the game by watching the others play?*
 - *Feel free to sit in the chair beside me or remain quiet in your seat*
- Classroom management that is (1) rooted in realistic prevention and support, (2) characterized by loving and grace-filled relationships, (3) guided by a level-headed understanding that all people are fallen yet redeemable image bearers, and (4) framed with clearly stated rules, procedures, goals, and standards offers the best formula to prevent many discipline problems so that teachers can be busy with the work of teaching and not policing.*

The following are some other practical ideas for developing good discipline:

a. Discipline Strategies for Minor Incidents

- Use non-verbal signs. Look at the person until he stops the behaviour. Use your finger for direction, e.g. placed over your mouth means to be quiet. Stop reading until there is silence. Use body position by moving closer to student creating the problem.
- Use verbal messages. Call the student's name. Tell the student what he is doing wrong. Raise or lower your voice.
- Move the student to a part of the room where his unacceptable behaviour cannot continue. Sometimes teachers seem frightened to ask a student to move. Remember you are in charge of your class.
- Talk to the student after the lesson and tell him the cause of the problem. This carries out the intention of Matthew 18: 15.
- Many schools discourage the practice of sending students out of the room to stand outside the door. The student is then not under the direct discipline of the teacher. They can sometimes be very disruptive to other classes in the vicinity. If a student is bad enough to be sent out they should be sent to your supervisor for appropriate discipline.
- It is very unwise to discipline a student who is angry. If you do, the problem can be compounded by the student becoming aggressive and cheeky. The technique of giving a student 'time out' is a very good way of solving conflict. After anger has settled, the student is usually willing to talk rationally and accept a teacher's words of discipline.

b. Be a good model to your students

- Always arrive at your class punctually. This avoids opportunity for your class to misbehave before you arrive.
- Develop and maintain appropriate procedure consistently. For example
 - Insist on students being in two lines and quiet before they enter the room.
 - Make sure students stand quietly behind their chairs when they arrive in their room. If students can't move into the class quietly then they should repeat the procedure. If they are still not quiet they should repeat the process in their own time.
- Never publicly humiliate a child.
- Give instructions clearly and carefully.
- Assess the needs of your students. Do the windows need opening? Do the fans need turning on? Have the same standards for all students in your classroom. Have no favourites.

c. Some things to avoid

- Saying things like, 'The next person who talks will be sent out', often causes problems.
- Inconsistency in your discipline.

- Allowing situations to escalate.
 - Try to keep discipline 'low key'.
 - Don't make big issues about small things for example if a student is chewing gum - just ask the student to get rid of it.
- Don't develop a situation where you might become the loser. Asking a question like, 'Who spoke?' means that you may never be able to find out. It is possibly much better to say, 'I don't care for that discourteous behaviour.'
- Don't give unreasonable punishments to your class.
- Do not carry on discussions about discipline between you and a student in the classroom situation. The student has an audience and they will often play up to it. It is much better to talk one to one after the lesson.
- Do not be disrespectful towards a student. It is very difficult for your supervisor to discipline a student for rudeness if you have been rude to the students too.

d. Other practical ideas

- Don't keep a class engaged in one form of activity for too long. Variety is interesting.
- Try to develop in your class the feeling that you like them and are interested in their progress.
 - Be vigilant at all times.
- Make your instructions as specific and concise as possible. Supervise your class by moving around. Check bookwork and encourage.

A Final Exhortation

The word translated 'teach' in Deuteronomy 4:1 is the same word as is translated 'learn' in Chapter 5:1. Our teaching must facilitate learning in our students. As we are responsible for our students' learning we must create in our classrooms a disciplined environment where learning can take place effectively and efficiently.

References

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