

THE DISCIPLINES OF GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor lose courage when you are punished by him.
For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled; that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. {Heb 12:3-17 RSV}

We have been ranging through the Scriptures, seeking the wisdom of the Word about how to raise children, and how to relate to one another as husbands and wives in the home, especially as parents. We have tried to be guided by that great word of Moses found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, in which he points out the great aim toward which all training must move, the great purpose of life -- the reason why any education takes place at all, especially in the Christian home -- that we may learn to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind. This is what Jesus called the first and greatest of the commandments. It is the aim and end and fulfillment of human existence that we may learn to love God -- not merely obey him, but obey him from love; not merely serve him, but serve him because we love him; not merely endure with patience what he sends, but to do so because we love him. That great theme of learning how to love God is the whole purpose of humanity's existence.

The process by which this is to take place, Moses says, is four-fold:

1. First there is parental priority. It must begin with the parents. We must learn to love God. To love God is to become a real person, to be fulfilled as a human being, to understand who you are and to have a sense of identity, to be whole persons in a broken world, to be healed and well adjusted. All this must be begun in the parents before it can be passed on to the children, and that is why Moses starts at that point.
2. Then there is parental responsibility. That is, it is then the task of parents to pass this on. They are responsible to do so. Schools and churches can assist in this but they cannot assume the responsibility. That belongs to parents. It is up to them to see that it is done, one way or another.
3. That suggests the third step, the process of doing this within the home, which is life related teaching. "You shall speak of these things when you sit around the table, when you walk by the way, when you

lie down, and when you rise" {cf, Deut 6:7} -- relating truth to life so that the teaching comes about in natural, unforced, uncontrived ways.

4. The last step is to establish the sign of authority -- the authority of integrity, of obedience to these truths. The fact that parents are committed to the truth and are obeying it is the place from which authority emerges. Without that authority of obedience, these processes and truths can have no real claim upon our children's hearts.

I promised to deal more fully with the subject of discipline, of correction and chastisement and punishment, in this final message of this series. We tried to define some of these words last time, and so I won't go back over that. But we must always remember that when we are dealing with the subject of discipline, of punishment, of correction, admonition, rebuke -- all these factors which are involved in training children and training ourselves -- that we have God as the great example. He is the ultimate Father. Remember that passage in Ephesians 3 where Paul prays, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named [i.e., derives its character]," {cf, Eph 3:14-15}. God is the Father, the great Father, and he impresses his image upon Fatherhood wherever it is found. He is the example, the standard of fatherhood, the essence of it, the model of it.

There are those who claim that men project themselves out into infinity and then call that "God." But that notion cannot explain the perfect fatherhood of God which appears in Scripture. It is really the other way around; it is God who impresses his image upon us. It is he who teaches us what fatherhood is. The Scriptures are full of the fatherhood of God, both in the Old and New Testaments alike. The Old Testament psalm says, "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him," {Psa 103:13 RSV}. And we see God reaching out in tender compassion to his children, and dealing with them in honesty and openness and, at times, in severity. In the New Testament, Jesus' great message is that we do not live in a universe guided by blind faceless forces, nor by an austere, remote Deity perched on the rim of the universe, but by a Father. Around us are a Father's arms, and we live supported by a Father's love, surrounded by a Father's compassion, and he is concerned about us. That is what life is really like. So we take our idea of fatherhood from God, and we take our idea of training from him as well.

In other words, the simplest answer to the question of how to raise a child is, "Raise him just as God is raising you. Handle him as God is handling you." That sometimes needs amplification, and that is what we have been attempting to do in these messages, but, nevertheless, that is the great thrust of Scripture. God is already doing something with you. He is handling you as a son, as that passage in Hebrews 12 tells us. He is treating you not with indifference but with concern. He is ready even to be strict with you, even seemingly severe with you, because you are a beloved son and not just a bastard, an illegitimate child.

Sometimes life goes along too well for awhile and we begin to feel as though we are illegitimate. If things run too well we really begin to question whether we are children of God. That is why he sends some trouble -- in order that we might turn to him immediately and discover once again that we are in his family and that he loves us and is concerned about us. This then is the basis of all child training.

I'd like to amplify that idea in two ways, and that will constitute our message:

First we will take a brief look at the forces God uses to train us. That will give us, as parents, an idea of what to use with our children. Then we will examine the processes which are involved in the words which are employed in Scripture concerning God's training of us.

The forces that God uses are two-fold, as we have seen repeatedly throughout this series. They are law and grace. It takes both. These are not opposed to each other. Sometimes the idea is advanced by mistaken preachers, and others, that law and grace are opposites, and that they never mix. This is not true. It is true that they have separate functions, and, in that sense, they are opposites. Law cannot do what grace can do; grace cannot do what law can do. But both are to be employed, and God uses both with us. Therefore, in our relationships with our children, we are to use both law and grace.

I don't think that I need to define these for you, but perhaps a brief word of explanation may be of help:

Law, of course, is a reflection of the demands which God makes upon us, the requirements he has, the standards he sets up, his insistence that we conform to this pattern or that, that we be what we ought to be -- all that is a reflection of Law. In its most familiar form it is the Ten Commandments. Those are demands which God makes upon human beings because they reflect his own character. And what God is after in human beings is that we might be godlike -- that we may be like him. Therefore the demands he makes are what he is. We are to obey because that is to be like God.

This is the hunger of man everywhere. He wants to be godlike. The only problem is (and, in fact, what sin is) is to attempt an apparent shortcut to that -- to be godlike without God. That is what the Lie is all about. What deceives us so often is that we think we somehow can short circuit the process and become godlike without letting God into the picture at all, and without undergoing the process of redemption which he sees as necessary to the whole proposition. But that is what Law is for. It's to tell us what godlikeness is like. When you read the Ten Commandments you are seeing God described. When you see them amplified in the Sermon on the Mount you again are seeing God described.

Grace, on the other hand, is a word which gathers up all of God's patience, his forgiveness, his mercy, his help, his empowerment, available to us. It isn't demanding, it is empowering. Law is demanding. Grace is what empowers us to obey that Law, what makes it possible to obey in a way other than the one we ordinarily would resort to -- i.e., trying our best. It is by faith in the work of Another that we are to obey -- that is grace.

There are two passages of Scripture which help at this point. One says very plainly what the Law is for, and the other says very plainly what grace is for. The first is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy, where the apostle says,

Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully [i.e., there is a way to use the law which is right, even in the Christian life], understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just [for the righteous] but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. {1 Tim 1:8-11 RSV}

Take that paragraph as a whole. It says that the Law is part of the gospel, a necessary part. It isn't the whole gospel, but it is part of it, and it does something necessary. It is for those who are doing things which are wrong. As you read through this list, don't immediately pick out the extreme forms of lawlessness, like "murderers, immoral persons, sodomites, and kidnapers," and say, "Oh this doesn't apply to me; this is just for a few gangsters and hoodlums and perverts, but not me!" If you look a little closer you'll find some categories which include you, too: "liars," for instance, and "unholy and profane, perjurers," etc. And "Whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" includes us all, doesn't it?

You see, this is saying that we need the Law when we are doing things which are wrong, in order to show us that they are wrong. "The law was added to increase transgression" {cf, Rom 5:20}, said the apostle. It is designed to show us where we do not conform, where we are kidding ourselves, because if it were left up to us we would all see ourselves doing quite well. We all do whatever is right in our own eyes, and then we are always amazed that God should find anything wrong with that. It is the Law which tells us where we are wrong. The Law is our friend. It may seem severe and harsh, but it involves only that kind of severity and wounding which comes from One who loves us and is our friend. And so Paul treats the Law as something which is holy, just, and good. Even though it hurts him, slays him, to find out all that is wrong, nevertheless the Law is the way of discovery of wrong.

Well then, what about grace? There is a great passage in Romans 12 which describes it beautifully -- how it looks and how it acts:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be

haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. {Rom 12:14-21 RSV}

That is a wonderful passage which sets forth the need for forgiveness and patience and trust in the working of God in peoples' lives, and it is a clear description of grace at work.

Parents need both law and grace for their children. Law controls and regulates and changes the actions of an individual. And sometimes we need to control our children's actions. Grace, however, controls and changes the attitudes within. You can't change attitudes by law, by demand, by legislation, by punishment -- you simply can't do it! Nor can you control actions wholly by grace. There must be law, as well, in order to permit the discovery of what is wrong. You need both in the raising of children.

This is what God seeks to teach us by his own life with us. Ideally, God begins with the Law and he controls the outsides of our lives at first. But gradually, by wise discipline, he transfers to the control of grace, which works from the inside out. That is what is meant by maturing. We are growing up to that extent. The more the control is from the inside, by means of the attitude change, rather than by the outward demand, the more we are growing and maturing in Christ.

So parents are to do this with their children. You have to start with law -- you absolutely must. There is no way by which you can change the attitudes of small children; their actions have to be controlled. But gradually grace comes into the picture and replaces law until, by the time they are teenagers, you can control their actions very little; they then have to be controlled by grace, their attitudes must be changed.

That introduces the processes by which God accomplishes this, and now we are going to deal with these great words which you find so frequently in Scripture -- discipline, punishment, admonition, etc.

Discipline is the broadest word of all. It gathers up the whole process of child training. The Greek word in the Hebrews 12 passage which is translated *discipline* really means just that, "child training" -- the whole general process, involving several steps or stages. I want to look at those stages with you. They are the stages which God employs with us.

The first factor in discipline is to assign certain tasks. That is an essential part of training -- give jobs to do, make requirements. This is what God did with Adam in the Garden of Eden, isn't it? The first thing he did when he created him was to give him a task to perform. It was to name the animals. He made a scientist out of him -- just like that -- because the job of a scientist is to observe and classify, and that is what Adam had to do. Here was this whole crowd of animals around him, and he couldn't go on forever just saying, "Hey, you!" He had to name them, distinguish them, determine their characteristics. God assigned that task to Adam because that is a part of training. It teaches us to grow.

God is forever assigning tasks for us to do. "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," {Mark 16:15 KJV}. That is a task. All the exhortations and admonitions of the Scripture are tasks. "Husbands, love your wives," {Eph 5:25, Col 3:19}. "Wives, submit to your husbands," {Eph 5:18, Col 3:18}. "Parents, bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," {Eph 6:4}. These are tasks given by God for us to do. And we are to start with our children by giving them tasks to do. That is an essential part of discipline. Children left to themselves to play endlessly, without any kind of responsibility laid upon them, always grow up wrong. There is no way they can avoid it if there is no discipline, no sharpening or focusing of life.

The second thing God does is to give us directions. He never merely assigns a task and leaves it up to us. And we must not do this with children. You can't just give them a job to do; you must see that they understand how to do it, the steps to take, and how to handle whatever problems may arise. We parents sometimes are not very

faithful at this. We tell our children what to do, but we don't make sure that they understand how to perform it. Then when they don't do it quite the way we anticipated, we are ready to jump on them because they haven't done it right. And that isn't fair. It's we who have failed, not they.

The third step in the process is to set limits. There are always limits -- limits of time, how long it should take; limits of place, where it should occur and how far away; and limits as to what the results ought to be, what is expected in the performance of a task. It is the responsibility of parents, then, to set these limits. Because limits are what avoid dangerous extremes. And yet you must allow for choices. Limits should not be set so narrowly that the child has no choice. The whole process of disciplining is to give him choices and to let him handle them within limits. But you can't do that unless there are some limits. So the parent has to set limits, just as God does with us.

For instance, in the matter of handling our sex drives, he says, "Here is the limit over there; don't go beyond it: no fornication, no adultery. These practices outside of marriage will hurt and harm and destroy. Then there is the limit over here, within marriage. There must be sex. Don't defraud one another. Don't ignore this drive; it's there." But within these limits there are choices to make and freedom to be exercised. That is the way God teaches us, and disciplines us, and trains us.

Then the fourth stage of child training is enforcement. Not only are tasks given, results expected, and limits set, but parents are to see to it that the assignment is done. This breaks down into three parts, three ways of accomplishing that:

The first is by praise and encouragement. Here so many parents fail. I have been guilty many times of not encouraging my children enough, not showing them that they are doing well. But God does with us, doesn't he? He blesses us, he rewards us, he delightfully surprises us at times. All this is an incentive, a way of enforcing, of bringing into being the desired results. And so that is what parents should do. They ought to be free with praise and encouragement to their children and ought to insure that the children understand that they are doing well -- or at least that they are to be commended for struggling and trying and moving in the right direction, and that they have made some progress. Encourage them for that.

The second way is by rebuke. God does this with us. He rebukes us at times. Jesus rebuked his disciples because they were slow in their faith, or because they deliberately did not apply what he had taught them. Sometimes a parent must use a word of vocal discipline, verbal restraint, verbal punishment, if you like. Because a rebuke is never pleasant. But it is necessary in order to sharpen attention. Yet rebuke is a mild form of punishment.

This brings us to physical punishment, or what the Scripture calls in Hebrews 12, *scourging*. The scourge was a whip. You have the whip prescribed in the New Testament and the rod in the Old Testament, and we are told to apply these. There will be times when it is necessary. Sometimes we argue about this. The great question which every parent must face, to paraphrase Hamlet, is, "To beat or not to beat; that is the question." We don't always know, but the Word tells us that there are times when this ought to be done. We can do it wrongly, or we can do it rightly.

I want to be as practical as possible about this and to provide some ways of understanding how and when to do this. We must understand what punishment does, whether the wrong kind or the right, and then we will know how to apply it.

Wrong punishment, of course, is anything which is hasty or harsh or impulsive or inconsistent, i.e., not regularly applied. That can do great damage and it must not occur. There are at least three forms of wrongful punishment:

1. One is to vent the anger of the parent. Sometimes we punish our children just because we are angry with them. We want to hit something, and so we hit them. They displease us, and so we strike them, slap them, etc. And almost invariably that is harsh, impulsive, inconsistent -- it has all the marks of wrong punishment, because we are simply expressing our own anger. And that is unwise punishment.

A few weeks ago I was with Dr. Malcolm Cronk, pastor of The Church of the Open Door. We were discussing this subject and he told me about his father. He said that when he was a boy and had done something wrong, had deliberately gone too far, his father would say to him, "Now, you know that's wrong, don't you?" And he'd say, "Yes." His father would say, "Well, I'm very angry with you, and you know why, don't you?" "Yes, I do." His father would say, "Well, I'm not going to punish you now. I'll punish you tomorrow after school. When you get home from school, come see me." And so the boy would live with this all through the night and on into the next day. But after school he'd come to his father, and his father would say, "Now son, I'm going to punish you for what you did. You understand that I'm not angry with you now?" "Yes, I do." And then he'd turn him over his knee and paddle him hard.

After he'd grown up a bit Dr. Cronk asked his father one day, "Why do you make me wait for my punishment?" And his father said, "Because I can't trust my own feelings." Now that was a wise father! And Dr. Cronk told me how much he appreciated, later, how wise his father had been.

Now, some of us perhaps couldn't wait that long. I think I probably would have run away from home before the time the punishment was due! I'd have built it up to such terrible proportions in my mind. But the point is that parents are not to act in haste or anger, so that their administration of punishment becomes merely the venting of wrath.

2. The second wrongful form of punishment is that which is directed toward arousing fear. Some parents are so insecure that they try to establish a tyranny in their home, mainly to bolster their own egos. They feel so unable to handle life that they act like tyrants. Tyranny always is a result of the insecurity of the individual. And if parents want their children to fear them, and really take some delight in seeing their children cringe before them, and are trying to establish a fear -- tyranny throughout their household, this is always a sign of wrongful punishment.
3. The third form is revenge-seeking. It is wrong to seek revenge. But some parents actually do this. They resent their children, resent the demands they make on them, the time they take, the inconvenience they sometimes cause. And so they punish them and try to get revenge by making the children unhappy. That kind of punishment will absolutely destroy a child!

But now look at God's reasons for punishment. Again, they are three-fold:

1. The first is to create a sense of seriousness in the one being punished. You know that sometimes we aren't serious about what God says, and sometimes our children don't take our words very seriously either. Our warnings fall on deaf ears. They don't think that we mean much by them -- especially if they are repeated again and again and again. It is only when we bring them up short, rebuke them severely, or take a stick and lay it on, that they begin to listen and to understand that we mean what we say. You get their attention by punishment, and they understand that it is a serious matter. That is why the Scriptures say "Spare the rod and spoil the child." If you let a child consistently get away with doing things which are wrong, and never punish him, merely let your admonitions fall on deaf ears, he is being trained to assume that your authority doesn't mean anything. No wonder he will disregard other authorities when he grows older.
2. The second purpose is to distinguish right from wrong. This is the way you shape a conscience in a child. You can teach a child to observe and to recognize the difference between right and wrong by what you punish him for. But be careful that you are punishing him for the correct reason. Otherwise you can twist the child's understanding of right and wrong. You can get him involved in legalism, in which he will think things are wrong which really are right, and he will be shaped by that the rest of his life. So punish only for that which the Scriptures say is wrong, and not on the basis of custom or tradition.
3. The third reason God punishes is to establish justice. We are not alone in life. Our misdeeds affect not only ourselves but others as well. If we don't punish them for wrongdoing, the idea soon gets abroad

in our children's hearts that we really don't care about the difference between right and wrong, and that they don't need to care about it, either. Thus the idea of justice is eliminated. And when you eliminate justice you also eliminate mercy and grace and personhood; a tremendous number of important values hang upon the idea of God's justice.

This is what God taught David in the experience recorded in First Chronicles 21. David sinned, because, contrary to the Word of God, and even against the advice of his generals, he numbered Israel to see how many soldiers he had available. God didn't want him to trust in numbers. And when David did it, he realized that he had done wrong, and he came and confessed it to God. Ordinarily that is enough. When we confess a sin to God, that is what God is after, and he doesn't punish us afterward. But in this case he punished David anyway. And sometimes parents must punish their children even when they acknowledge that what they are doing is wrong, because it involves others, perhaps other children in the family, or because of the effects upon others in general.

This was true in David's case. God said to him, "Look, I'll give you a choice of three punishments: either you will experience three years of famine in the land, or three months of defeat at the hands of your enemies, or three days of pestilence among the people within the land. Which do you want?" {cf, 1 Chr 21:10-12}. That is an interesting account, because it shows that God allowed David to enter into the choice of his punishment, understanding that this would deter him from ever doing anything like that again. But David made a wise choice. He said, "Lord, I can't choose; you choose."

And so God chose. He chose the severest but the most limited form of punishment --- three days of pestilence. As you read the account you see that for the sin of one man, David the king, seventy thousand men died in Israel in three days. And then David understood that what he had done was a terrible thing, despite its seeming unimportance at the time. He had taught the people to depend upon the wrong resource. Therefore the whole nation suffered with him. But God established the integrity of justice in the minds of the people throughout that land, and David was able to continue his reign because God had distinguished right from wrong so dramatically.

So these are the proper purposes of punishment. Its effects reach far beyond the merely immediate results in the life of an individual. It also helps to establish the whole pattern of society and government. The reason we are suffering so as a nation today is that the sense of justice is disappearing in our land, because our homes have lost this concept.

May God help us to maintain our own Christian homes according to his guidelines.

And let us remember God's great admonition to us as parents: "Parents, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the discipline and admonition of the Lord," {cf, Eph 6:4}.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, thank you for this word of wisdom from your Word to us. Help us to understand these great principles, and to be able to apply them in the lives of our children and in our own lives. Thank you, Lord, for your grace which works in concert with your Law and enables us to change our attitudes as well as our actions. Teach us, Lord, to be wise parents. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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