

“Withholding Discipline”
Proverbs 29:12-21
July 12, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

Several weeks ago in our series on the “little” sins of Proverbs, we considered the sin of despising reproof, a sin on the part of the person being disciplined by someone’s rebuke. We can infer from that sin the presence of a duty God places upon us, the duty to bring discipline. That’s where today’s “little” sin fits in, the sin of withholding discipline. In order for there to be a rebuke that is despised, there must be someone willing to bring a rebuke. Specifically, it is those in leadership who are given the task of bringing appropriate discipline, whether through rebuke or through other measures.

The passage we have just read speaks of the duty of leaders to bring discipline. Three kinds of leaders are mentioned: the ruler or king (the one with civil authority), the master (analogous to an employer) and the parent. God gives to all these leaders the duty of bringing appropriate discipline, and the withholding of discipline is a sin with far-reaching consequences, both in the family and in society as a whole.

Though much of what we are going to consider today has application to leaders in government, in the workplace and in the family, we are going to focus mostly on the last of those and look at the need for parents to exercise appropriate discipline upon their children. Let’s consider the need, method and benefit of discipline as it is presented in our passage.

I. The Need of Discipline

Discipline is needed because the natural course of a child is to head in a direction of declining morals. Verse 15 says it like this: **“The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”** Even more famously, an earlier proverb said, **“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him”** (22:15). Have you ever seen a grapevine? The natural state of it is to grow out and not up. But as it grows out, gravity takes over and the branches, laden with fruit, bend low and touch the ground. The fruit, in contact with the ground, is ruined. Left to its native state, it will be destroyed. But if the farmer builds a trellis and makes the branches grow where they will be supported, the fruit will be in a position to grow and to flourish. Discipline functions like the trellis, delivering the child from his native condition of self-destruction.

Interestingly, in the other two examples in our passage of those who need discipline, folly is their native state as well. Notice verse 19 and its portrayal of the servant. **“By mere words a servant is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not respond.”** He has a heart problem, not an intellectual problem. He understands exactly what he should do, but fails to do it because his heart is impure. He must be corrected not merely with words, but with more painful punishment.

The same native corruption is true of the officials of the king. **“If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked”** (v. 12). When I first read that verse, I wasn’t sure who it meant to fault, the ruler or his officials. Is the ruler’s error of listening to falsehood being faulted, or is it the dishonesty of the officials that is being highlighted? In the context, I think it is the ruler’s sin of withholding discipline that is being faulted here. He has failed to establish a clear boundary that condemns dishonesty. He refuses to impose the discipline of sanctioning dishonesty, with the result that his officials grow in their level of wickedness. Folly is bound up in the heart of the officials, just as it is among the servants and children. It is this native folly, existing in the hearts of each one of us, that makes discipline necessary.

We don’t have kings or masters and slaves anymore, but we do have employers and employees today. One of the applications for those of you who are employers is to bring discipline by establishing clear boundaries, because you know that folly is bound up in the hearts of your employees. I had an application of this at the church just this week. As we gain more and more part-time hourly employees, all of whom need the discipline of clear boundaries because of the native foolishness in all of our hearts, it occurred to me that we have been too lax in the way we ask them to report their hours. I have no knowledge of anyone misreporting hours, but we bring appropriate discipline when we put in place systems that make it more difficult to cheat. We love people by the discipline of clear boundaries.

This point about the need for discipline because of our native folly brings the biblical view of discipline in direct conflict with the current view of our society. The Bible clearly asserts the innate evil of the human heart, while the modern view of man believes in his innate goodness. If man is innately good, then he doesn’t need discipline to correct a tendency to stray off course, but he needs instead affirmation that encourages his inner goodness to be expressed. The focus then becomes telling children how good they are. Everyone gets a trophy no matter their performance.

The destruction done by this view of childrearing was brought closer to my home several years ago when my brother and his wife participated in the television show “Wife Swap.” That’s a misleadingly provocative title, and it would be more accurate to call it “Mom Swap.” My sister-in-law traded places with a mom in Boston whose philosophy of parenting was never to be so cruel as to set

boundaries for her three young boys. She wanted to love them by letting them express themselves in whatever way they chose. Since the Bible is true whether people believe it or not, and since folly is in fact bound up in the heart of a child, her children became little tyrants. The television show filmed them going into a grocery store and just running wild, becoming a three-boy wrecking crew. Finally, the store manager came to my sister-in-law, who had to live for a day in the shoes of the other mom (meaning she couldn't correct these boys), and the store manager told her that these boys would not be allowed ever to return to that store. My sister-in-law, who has a more traditional and biblical view of childrearing, was eventually able to impose some discipline, with the result that the kids themselves were much happier by the end of her week with them. The mother had thought they would be most happy doing whatever they wanted, but they weren't.

II. The Method of Discipline

Verse 15 outlines the two components of biblical discipline. **“The rod and reproof give wisdom.”** The rod speaks of physical punishment and reproof of a verbal reprimand. Good discipline includes both elements. The verbal part of discipline focuses on establishing clear boundaries and making sure they are understood, while physical punishment enforces those boundaries. Both are necessary. Physical punishment without first establishing clear boundaries is cruel and arbitrary. Verbal reprimand without physical punishment is ineffective. Verse 19 speaks of the limitations of verbal reprimand without physical punishment in the case of servants. **“By mere words a servant is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not respond.”**

Of these two elements of biblical discipline, it is clearly the notion of the rod that is most widely rejected today. Many parents reject any notion of physical punishment, seeing it as inherently abusive. Without question, there have been many parents who have abused the rod and disciplined their children in anger, and such a practice should be condemned. Parents should not apply any kind of physical punishment out of anger. But physical punishment should be applied to children. Some parents say, “I just love my child too much to spank him.” Proverbs 13:24 unmasks such a statement. **“Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.”** The Bible's view is that the central problem with a parent refusing to discipline a child is not too much love for the child, but too much love for oneself.

Let's consider two questions related to the application of the rod. How should it be applied and what is the alternative to applying it? I think it is a mistake to apply this too literally by saying that the only way to obey this command is for parents to procure a literal rod and practice the caning of their children. Rather, I think it is the practice of some kind of physical discipline that is meant here. The principle is that the discipline of children must find some appropriate way to

bring disciplinary pain to our children in order to direct them in the proper path of obedience and submission. You must know your children and know the appropriate pain to be brought. But discipline, if it is to be discipline, must hurt. So if you have a child who loves to read, you wouldn't want to discipline them through a timeout in their bedroom for a couple of hours. They will relish the opportunity to go and read, and no pain will be felt. Spanking almost always works with very small children. Wendy and I began spanking our children as soon as they learned the word "No." So when they would misbehave on the changing table, they would receive a little smack on the bottom, which would inevitably bring tears but also proper behavior. But children are all different, and parents must labor to know what motivates and what hurts their children, and then apply discipline accordingly. A common analogy used for child-rearing is that of the gemologist cutting the diamond. Children are like a diamond in the rough, with the potential for great beauty and value. But skill is necessary in order to bring forth that value. Parents must do what the gemologist does. He studies the diamond, noticing its grain and its flaws. But at some point he must take out the cutting tools and give the diamond a skillful whack in order to cut it properly. Parents must do the same.

What happens if parents fail to include physical punishment as part of the discipline of their children? Some kind of physical punishment is inevitable, and if the parents don't punish the children, the children will punish the parents. The family will become a child-centered family. Another of my relatives believed that children should never be punished. If her children were doing something inappropriate, her method was to distract them with something else they would find interesting. Such a strategy leads to child-centered families in which the parents become focused on doing whatever the children want in order to keep them from too much mischief. I was talking this week with someone in the church who told me about their young child singing along with a Steve Green children's song that featured the quote from the Bible, "Children, obey your parents." But this child reversed the lyrics and sang, "Parents, obey your children." The fact is that it must be one or the other. Parents who don't teach their children to obey, through both verbal means and through physical punishment, will live out the bitter reality of a family where the parents obey the children.

III. The Benefits of Discipline

Three groups benefit from proper discipline. One of the surprises of this passage is that emphasis is given here to the benefits of discipline upon the ones exercising discipline, rather than the ones receiving it. Discipline benefits the parents. Notice verse 17, which lists two benefits of discipline upon the parents. **"Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart."** The 'rest' that is meant here is probably the financial provision children make for their aging parents, which was the primary means of providing for

parents before such things as Social Security. Verse 15 acknowledges the benefit brought to children who are disciplined, but then goes on to list a benefit for the parents. **“The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”** The disciplining of children is never easy work. No normal parent enjoys the process of bringing pain into the lives of their children. But a healthy response is to recognize the good it does, both to our children and to us as parents. In speaking of the benefit discipline brings to the parents, the Bible is encouraging us by giving us this additional motivation.

But discipline also brings blessing to our children, and the book of Proverbs speaks of this repeatedly. **“If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol”** (23:14). I do think it important to inject here that discipline of children is not an automatic avenue to great children. Though discipline is necessary in order to impart wisdom, the child must still choose wisdom, and some don’t, even among those who have been well-parented. Derek Kidner summarizes this caution like this. “A good home may produce an idler (10:5) or a profligate (29:3); he may be rebel enough to despise (15:20), mock (30:17) or curse (30:11; 20:20) his parents; heartless enough to run through their money (28:24), and even to turn a widowed mother out of doors (19:26).” As parents, we must depend on the Lord, not on our discipline.

Third, discipline brings benefit to society. Verse 18 is a difficult verse to translate, and it is often misunderstood. **“Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the laws.”** Bruce Waltke’s translation is helpful. Instead of “cast off restraint,” he translates this verb, “fall into anarchy.” The goal of discipline is to teach others to keep the law of God, to be faithful to the prophetic vision. The failure to do so leads to anarchy throughout society, including families, schools, businesses and all institutions.

CONCLUSION:

Parenting is a difficult undertaking. Think of parenting as steering a car down a road while avoiding the ditches on either side. The ditch on one side is that of harsh parenting which is often done in anger. The ditch on the other side is permissive parenting which rarely corrects and disciplines. If we are to avoid the ditches, what we need as parents is to remember the way God has parented us. Our memory verse for the week, though it speaks of shepherding rather than parenting, is helpful. Parenting is very much like shepherding, and our memory verse says of our shepherd, **“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** The rod was the club that was used to defend the sheep from their enemies, while the staff was the long crook used to discipline the sheep and keep them on the right path. In order to discipline our children, we must find comfort in the rod and staff of Jesus. He has defeated our enemies through his death on the cross, and he continues to fight for us as he disciplines us faithfully. Do you find comfort there? It is only as we do so that we will be equipped to bring loving discipline to others.