

THE PLACE OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE IN CHRIST-CENTERED PARENTING

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I was mid-stride, making my way across the family room to deliver some well-deserved discipline to my young son, whose sinful rebellion was on full display. The Lord mercifully stopped me in my tracks with this thought: *“That’s exactly how you look to me sometimes.”* It was a loving correction from my heavenly Father, and it was exactly what I needed.

Parenting is not easy, but God is faithful, and he is with us. He has given fathers and mothers one of the most glorious privileges of human existence. The opportunity to have a hand in shaping the lives of children, created to reflect God’s image, should evoke both gratitude and the fear of the Lord in the heart of every parent.

The biblical responsibilities of parents are many: we are called to set an example, to teach the way of wisdom, to pray for our children, to nurture and provide for their needs, to love and affirm, to discipline and correct, and to help them treasure Christ above all. We read in Deuteronomy 6:7 of the vast scope of parental practice, to teach them diligently day by day. Ephesians 6:4 describes the magisterial content of parental instruction: “the discipline and instruction of the Lord”—in other words, we teach them to live in conformity to God’s righteous commandments. Psalm 78:4 calls us to the

joyful work of telling the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord.

As parents, we are called to bring all of the Word of God to bear in all of life to help our children fulfill the purpose for which they were created: to glorify God.

Great Sinners and a Great Savior

Sadly, we entered the world as enemy combatants, tainted by the evil of sin. Apart from the grace of the gospel, we would still be estranged from God. Likewise, our children also come into this world and our lives as beings created in the image of God, and yet “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). They, too, begin life as enemies of God and his kingdom. Like us, their greatest need and only hope is the powerful and miraculous inter-

vention of God the Father through the atoning work of Jesus the Son.

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Effective biblical parenting is ever mindful of the status of children apart from the gospel and proceeds accordingly. We must never forget who we were.

At the same time, we must never forget what Christ has done. The gospel

of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—provides for us and for our children a new birth, a new status as beloved children of God (Eph. 5:1), and a living hope for a glorious and eternal life, which begins the moment the divine gifts of repentance and faith in Jesus are exercised. Paul spends the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesian church extolling the glories of God’s work on their behalf. There is only one command in those chapters: to “remember” all that God had done for them. Our work as parents is, above all, to remind our children, through both our words and deeds, of the person and work of Jesus, the one who is our Savior and our example.

An Imperfect Reflection of the Father

In preparing to bring discipline to my young son, I had forgotten the most important thing about myself—I am a beloved child of God, rescued from enmity and death by the sacrifice of my older Brother, Jesus. Striding an-

grily across the family room to bring the wrath of Dad to bear, I forgot my most fundamental identity. I, therefore, was about to act as an independent “moral” agent.

How kind of God to admonish me at that moment and to remind me of my rescue and his ongoing, patient work in my life! “*That’s how you look to me sometimes.*” He reminded me of the great privilege he had given me, to parent as an imperfect reflection of his perfect parenting, to represent him in the interaction I was about to have with my young son. I am called to imitate God as a dearly loved child (Eph. 5:1).

A Love that Corrects

The thought jolted me back to reality, and I was immediately tempted not to discipline because I had just been appropriately warned by the Lord. I have often heard fathers say, “I can’t discipline my son because I am a bigger sinner than he is.” This represents a pendulum swing from unbiblical and angry discipline—the kind that I was going to bring to my son—to another unbiblical extreme, which is the failure to discipline at all.

Correcting or disciplining our children is not the only method of parenting or the main thing parents do. I am focusing on correction here because it can seem inconsistent with grace, our culture often rejects it, and even a growing number of Christian parents are making the mistake of neglecting it.

Scripture is clear that wise parenting includes correcting our children in love. Corrective discipline is a broad category that includes words of reproof, the wise and loving application of corporal punishment, loss of privileges, and other negative consequences. Children should never be disciplined in anger. Parents must not be harsh. Abuse should always be reported to authorities. But discipline administered in wisdom and love is good for our children and pleasing to God. Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”

Sam Crabtree has written an excellent and timely book titled, *Parenting with Loving Correction: Practical Help for Raising Young Children*. He says, “The wise, corrective discipline of our children glorifies the truth-speaking God of the Bible, honors parents (all parents, as well as the specific child’s parents), protects our children, strengthens the church, serves society, and gives

hope to the nations.”¹ Loving correction is God’s path of grace and blessing.

Repentance, Reception, Return

Why do parents neglect correction? There can be many reasons for failing to discipline our children, from laziness and abdication to guilt to poor teaching. Still, all of these reasons are ultimately rooted in the same theological problem: a lack of understanding our position and role before God and a similar lack of understanding the deepest need of our children before God.

A proper Biblical response to a rebuke from the Lord comes in the form of *repentance* (“Lord, forgive me for my anger and self-righteousness”); a grateful *reception* of God’s restoring grace (“Lord, thank you that you are faithful and just to forgive and cleanse me”); and a *return* to walking “in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Eph. 4:1). In the case of parenting, that means a recommitment to walk as a beloved child of God, representing and imitating the heart and actions of my Father to the children he has entrusted to my care.

What did this mean in the situation with my son? My Father, who had just demonstrated his unending patience and gentle but firm discipline concerning my sin, now expected me to turn from my sinful attitudes and to show my young son the same grace and patience through the gentle application of appropriate, God-honoring discipline. God had loved me by correcting my attitude. I now needed to love my son through the rod of discipline that he needed and the Gospel-motivated instruction and restoration that accompanies biblical correction.

For the Good of Our Children

Too often, particularly in the past decade, I have heard Christian parents avoid corrective discipline, saying things like:

- “*I like to give them grace.*”
- “*It doesn’t work for my kids.*”
- “*Discipline will damage their self-image and our relationship.*”
- “*It’s legalistic.*”
- “*They’re God’s kids—they’ll turn out okay.*”

These comments reflect misunderstandings of the character and the plan of

1. SAM CRABTREE, *PARENTING WITH LOVING CORRECTION: PRACTICAL HELP FOR RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2019), 35.

God for the glorious task of parenting. God commands corrective discipline for the good of our children. Grace and discipline are not mutually exclusive. Our Father is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” *and* he “will by no means clear the guilty...” (Ex. 34:6-7). As we follow in his footsteps and apply his ordained means of discipline, our children will come to understand the seriousness of their sin before a holy, unchanging God.

He will use this means, as he has done down through the centuries, to teach your children the devastating truth (he will not clear the guilty), leading to the anguished cry, “How then can I be saved?” And in those holy moments, like the millions of Christian parents who have represented the Father before you, you will have the astounding privilege of teaching, again and again, “With man, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.” You have the joy of introducing them to Jesus, the Son of God, who received the wrath of God so that they could become, like you, God’s beloved children.

Fathers and mothers, as those called to care for the souls of his little ones, let us again become “imitators of God” in our parenting. Corrective discipline plays a crucial role in Christ-centered parenting. A biblical approach to our task will protect our homes from the “winds of doctrine” that masquerade as wisdom and will point our children to the grace and truth that are found in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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