

# A Biblical and Practical View of Discipline in the Christian Home

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Permissiveness seems to be a defining characteristic of our society these days. Most Americans would probably identify it as one of the root causes of our cultural decline and a contributor to many of the social ills we face. Like the proverbial frog in the kettle, the indulgence we see all around us steadily and silently accustoms us to accept more and more unruly behavior and self-centered attitudes in our churches, home school groups, and even within our own families. The practice of godly discipline seems to be slipping toward extinction.

Probably every parent on the planet would prefer obedient, well-behaved children, but we're often not getting the results we want. Why? I believe we've not only forgotten how to discipline, but more critically, we've lost a true, Biblical understanding of what discipline is. And once that is lost, there are two, and only two, eventualities: family polity trends toward either tyranny or anarchy. Either a sufficient external physical force controls the child, or the child develops uncontrolled.

Problems begin when parents have the wrong motives, the wrong focus, or the wrong goals. For example, our motive for discipline is often that we don't want to be embarrassed in front of others. A child's behavior reflects on the parents, whether we wish it were otherwise or not. But disciplining children merely to safeguard a projected reputation is an error children quickly recognize and later use to their advantage.

Often, the focus of discipline is too short-sighted. The desired outcome is simply to insure a particular behavior for some circumstance or event. Threats, rewards, or occupying activities are often successfully used to coax children to be good for a given time, not thinking of the long-term expectations or habits those repeated practices may develop.

But, the most critical errors follow when parents have the wrong goals in mind, or are ignorant of the real purpose of godly discipline. To most modern parents, the goal of discipline is control. They would say that a compliant child is a well-behaved child. Unfortunately, that is only partially true, and falls far short of the goal God has in mind for our families. The true purpose of discipline is to develop self-control in our children. Self-control does not merely produce compliance, it nurtures godliness. Attaining that goal is one mark of a truly successful parent, and the one we must keep continually in our sights.

Why is self-control so critical to raising Godly children? To answer that, we must look to the Scriptures and our understanding of them, and particularly to our concept of what the Bible calls sin. I think that perhaps the most practical and inclusive definition of sin is simply the term "self-will." It's instructive to think of the word "sin" spelled "sIn" because "I" am always at the center of sin. Sin is doing whatever I want whenever I want to do it, or making others do what I want them to do when I want them to do it. It is pure selfishness, the opposite of pure selflessness – the simplest definition of agape love.

At the risk of offending some brothers and sisters who may differ in their theologies on this issue, we must look at the sinful nature of mankind. I believe those familiar verses Psalm 51:5 and Ephesians 2:3 teach that humans are conceived and born with sin-natures. Babies are not innocent, sinless creatures. No, they may not consciously choose to sin (as far as we can tell) but they are nevertheless the epitome of selfishness. They come into this world as seven pounds of pure, uncivilized "self-will",

demanding that their every need and want be satisfied without delay, regardless of the expense or inconvenience to others. The only reason their sinful nature isn't more in evidence is due to their physical limitations. Someone once jokingly remarked that if babies were born with the strength, coordination, and physical abilities of adults, they'd all be axe-murderers! That's certainly an arresting thought! Thankfully, the Lord gave us parents a few years to train and civilize them before their heightened physical prowess puts us all in serious jeopardy.

That understanding of the nature of sin and the nature of all flesh directs us to the Biblically correct view of discipline. It is the process of restraining the sin-nature. (We must be absolutely clear that discipline does not and cannot change our sinful natures, lest we fall into a works-based, false religion. Only the Holy Spirit through the Word can accomplish that sanctifying feat.) Discipline is meant to hinder and suppress the activities and influences of the sinful man within our little ones.

We need to recognize that this goal is only partially achieved by erecting external boundaries or imposing barriers to carnal behavior. While such may produce a compliant child, stopping at that point is an invitation to disaster. We must instill self-control in our children. *Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down without walls.* Proverbs 25:28. A person without self-control is defenseless. Once beyond reach of the external authority, he or she will succumb to temptation at the first opportunity, stumbling into any pit Satan digs.

The importance of the distinction between external and internal restraints is illustrated in a human father's chastening spoken of in Hebrews 12: 9-10. The seldom used Biblical word "chastening" is defined by Webster as: to punish in order to correct. He adds this interesting footnote: "*Chaste*" implies moral excellence manifested by forbearance from acts or thoughts that do not accord with virginity or strict marital fidelity. "*Pure*" implies chastity through innocence and an absence of seductive influence rather than through self-restraint (emphasis added). We may succeed in keeping our children pure for a season, but they must learn to keep themselves chaste for life. Our ultimate goal then, is to teach our children to master the sinful nature that resides within them. Our discipline must be for the purpose of guiding them to make right choices on their own.

The first part of that training in early years must, of course, be those externally applied limits to behaviors and actions. Proverbs 22:15 tells us, "*Foolishness* (a silliness with a propensity to make wrong choices) *is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction* (discipline) *will drive it far from him*. Michael and Debi Pearl, of No Greater Joy Ministries [www.NoGreaterJoy.org](http://www.NoGreaterJoy.org), supply a wealth of practical ideas and helps for disciplining very young children and starting this process early, helping them to learn to control their own outward behavior.

As a child grows and matures however, the process must shift from controlling external actions toward monitoring and curbing attitudes of heart and mind. This is obviously a much more personal and spiritual battle that requires us to equip our children with skills in applying God's Word and staying in tune with His Spirit. The price of failure here too, can be great. Proverbs 5:12-14 (the speaker is one almost ruined by sin) reads, "*How I have hated instruction, and my heart despised correction! I have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to those who instructed me! I was on the verge of total ruin...*"

The eternal repercussions of applying a proper Biblical model of discipline are unimaginable. But, even the temporal consequences are enormous. We'll just consider two.

Our social and economic welfare depends on the individual willingness and self-imposed ability of our citizens to delay personal gratification for a greater good. Savings and investment, ethics and civility

all flourish only to the degree that individuals bridle their immediate needs and passions for a higher or greater purpose to be realized later. Incidentally, the Pearls' methods of child-raising key on understanding a child's expectations for gain. Discipline involves raising the cost of unacceptable behavior to the point that it exceeds what the child is willing to pay for the anticipated gain. That normally means the child loses the profit he expected, plus pays an added cost for the inappropriate action. Reduced to simple economic terms, bad behavior becomes a bad investment in the child's own eyes. He learns to master selfish impulses, and become a welcome, productive member of society.

Another area of benefit is in government. In civilized lands, those who cannot control themselves must be controlled with a police force. Robert Winthrop, Speaker of the US House of Representatives said, in 1849, *"All societies of men must be governed in some way or other. The less they have of stringent State Government, the more they must have of individual self-government. The less they rely on public law or physical force, the more they must rely on private moral restraint. Men, in a word, must necessarily be controlled either by a power within them, or a power without them; either by the word of God, or by the strong arm of man; either by the Bible, or by the bayonet."* Freedom itself is at stake in our child-rearing. Permissiveness is an open door to tyranny and oppression. Self-discipline is a salt that preserves freedom. It's a lesson we all ought to hear and heed well.

Parents can be encouraged to know that Biblical discipline produces great rewards. First, it is an identifying mark of love. *"My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves, He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."* Hebrews 12:5-6. Next, it produces fruitful lives. *"Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."* Hebrews 12:11. Finally, it brings joy to our hearts. *"Correct your son, and he will give you rest. Yes, he will give delight to your soul."* Proverbs 29:17.

May the LORD bless your homes with sons and daughters who always see God's love expressed in the training and discipline they receive, whose self-controlled lives produce righteousness for their families and nation, and who bring you continual delight.

(All scripture is quoted from the NKJV)