

The Urgency

of Enforcing Parental Discipline

Our delinquent age needs to regain its sense of the urgency of enforcing parental discipline. As a means to that end, let us look at two fathers named in the Bible and the harvest that they reaped.

We meet the first father, Eli, in 1 Samuel 2. At this point in Israel's history, Eli's sons are serving as priests, and Eli himself is serving as both high priest and judge. "Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel... And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord's people to transgress" (1 Samuel 2:22-24). Eli appears to have been a weak, easygoing father. Although he did verbally protest against the dishonest and immoral conduct of his sons, he took no further measures nor even threatened to remove them from office. With Eli, this had probably become a lifelong pattern. When those sons were yet boys, he had probably protested many of their actions. "Boys, that is wrong; you should know better!" But evidently he seldom insisted on their obedience. Words without action prove very ineffective.

The inspired account then tells of God sending an unnamed prophet to Eli. His message is one of divine judgment reflecting the seriousness with which God viewed the situation. Eli is severely indicted. "Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?" (1 Samuel 2:29). Eli evidently wanted to stay on good terms with his sons, but in essence he was siding with them against God. Included in the prophet's message of judgment was the announcement that Eli's two sons were soon to die, both in one day. Furthermore, all Eli's posterity was doomed to "die in the flower of their age."

In chapter 3 we hear God delivering warning number two through the boy Samuel. "And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not" (1 Samuel 3:11-13). It is made emphatically clear that God held Eli responsible for not restraining his sons. His failure to ever remove them from office reflects his earlier failures to restrain them by any means.

Eli did not sense the urgency of enforcing parental discipline. Do we? Do we side with our children against the school? against the church? If so, we are doing them a tragic disservice. Furthermore, we are reflecting the permissive attitude of Eli and bringing upon ourselves a bitter harvest.

It is important that one sees the relation between Eli's failure to restrain his sons and their not knowing the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12). That child who is not trained in the habit of obedience makes very poor material for the kingdom of God. For any child who disobeys his parents and repeatedly gets by with it will find it extremely difficult to ever meekly surrender to the lordship of Christ and to the authority He delegates to His church. In contrast, those who are well trained from early infancy are at the same time being conditioned for saying, in all the great crises of life, "Not my will, but thine, be done." It is this necessary conditioning that adds to the urgency of enforcing parental discipline.

One may console himself in the fact that he or she, as a parent, is not at all wicked. But to simply be a weak parent can very definitely contribute to the permanent wickedness of one's children and possibly make one a partaker of their sins.

King David is another father from whom we should learn. Toward at least one of his sons, he was entirely too permissive.

This became evident at the point where David's son Solomon became heir to the throne according to previous plans. At that juncture, another son of David, Adonijah, made a bold bid for the throne and thus knowingly defied the wishes of his father. "Then Adonijah the son of Haggith [one of David's wives] exalted himself, saying, I will be king; and he prepared him chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. And his father had not displeased him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so? . . . And he conferred with Joab the son of Zeruiah, and with Abiathar the priest: and they following Adonijah helped him" (1 Kings 1:5-7).

Nathan, the prophet of God, when he learned of Adonijah's plot, went into action immediately. "Wherefore Nathan spake unto Bath-sheba the mother of Solomon, saying, Hast thou not heard that Adonijah the son of Haggith doth reign, and David our lord knoweth it not? Now therefore come, let me, I pray thee, give thee counsel, that thou mayest save thine own life, and the life of thy son Solomon. Go and get thee in unto king David, and say unto him, Didst not thou, my lord, O king, swear unto thine handmaid, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne? why then doth Adonijah reign? Behold, while thou yet talkest there with the king, I also will come in after thee, and confirm thy words" (1 Kings 1:11-14).

Obediently Bathsheba followed Nathan's instructions. David, at that point, rallied enough to issue a royal command calling for the immediate anointing of Solomon as king in his place. The news of this decisive counteraction soon reached Adonijah and his companions. "And all the guests that were with Adonijah were afraid, and rose up, and went every man his way. And Adonijah feared because of Solomon, and arose, and went, and caught hold on the horns of the altar" (1 Kings 1:49, 50).

The verses that follow show Solomon mercifully sparing the life of Adonijah. But after David's death, Adonijah made another unwise move that aroused Solomon's suspicion, and on that occasion Solomon issued an order for Adonijah to be slain at once, and he was.

Why did Adonijah so boldly assert himself, and knowingly defy his father's plan? It stems back to the fact that David, his father, "had not displeased him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so?" (1 Kings 1:6). Throughout Adonijah's childhood and youth, David had allowed him to repeatedly have his own way. This kind of parental delinquency is bound to bear bitter fruit.

Although David was an otherwise good man, a man after God's own heart, he clearly spoiled this son, Adonijah. Consequently, there were many heartaches, and finally the premature cutting off of a life that otherwise might have been a glory to God.

The truth of Proverbs 29:15 has been verified repeatedly. "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (and also his father). Here, then, are two fathers who in other respects lived commendable lives, but they did not feel the burden of the urgency of enforcing parental discipline. And out of that neglect grew a long train of tragic consequences.

In any sizable group of parents, there will likely be some inclined to be overly harsh, and still more inclined to be overly permissive. Both extremes militate against the effectiveness of disciplinary measures.

If you are inclined to be a dictatorial parent, you need to be reminded that anger and harshness may frighten, but they will not persuade the child that you are right. Moreover, if you administer discipline in anger, you will lose the respect of your child. Although our children should respect us, it should not be necessary to make

them literally fear us. Such fear tends to put an end to the openness that should exist between children and their parents. "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). Our children ought to be afraid of the rod but not afraid of us.

While recognizing the danger of being overly harsh, the burden of this message is the danger of being overly permissive. This was the mistake of Eli. This was also the mistake of David. And the climate of our day, with its emphasis upon the need to allow children to express themselves and develop along lines of their own choosing, is extremely unfavorable for the exercise of firm parental discipline.

Parental love is by nature soft. If it is not tempered with divine love, it tends to become permissive and sentimental. This overly tolerant love can blind a parent to the faults of his children. It can deceive a mother into believing that everyone but her Johnny is out of step.

Parental permissiveness appears in many shapes and forms. In one family, whenever the children disobeyed, the mother would go into the closet and pray. She tried to substitute prayer for firmer measures and, needless to say, it did not work.

The permissive philosophy says, "You've got to give them what they want." On this basis, one mother allowed her daughter to begin dating at fifteen. She was afraid to say no because she had not trained her girl to take a no.

Many a child has been told, "If you do that again, I'll punish you." What happens when the child does do it again? Too often there are simply additional verbal threats. Words become a substitute for the rod. When the overly permissive parent finally does punish, it is likely to be too mild to accomplish the end that it should. Normally, a child need not be punished often if he is punished severely enough. The hot stove serves to illustrate this point. It teaches the child to mind with but few applications.

Many an overly permissive parent has said, "I don't want my children to go through what I went through." Consequently, attempts are made to shield his children from all forms of hardship. What a shame! Such children remain strangers to the virtue of personal sacrifice and hard, honest toil.

Overly permissive parents, in a mistaken effort to maintain the goodwill of their children, often spend a great deal of money on them. Toys and gifts are showered upon them. Upon arriving at his sixteenth birthday, the son is given a car. He is allowed to pocket all his wages and spend them however he pleases.

Are you an overly permissive parent? Do you find yourself continually allowing your child to have his way, to get whatever he wants, to do wrong and get by with it? If so, mark it down that you and that child are headed for trouble.

No matter how good your family tree may appear to be, all your children came into the world with a wayward nature and will go wrong unless you, by means of proper discipline, seek to alter that downward course. God's Word calls for precisely this: "Train up a child [not in the way he *would* go, but] in the way he *should* go" (Proverbs 22:6). It is urgent too that this discipline be administered very early in the life of children. As soon as children show signs of selfishness and anger, they are old enough to be punished. A fit of anger at one year old should be corrected so that the child begins to learn emotional responsibility.

Today much is said about the need to understand our children and reason with them and explain the motives behind our discipline. In later childhood and adolescence, there is a place for this approach, but a child must be disciplined to surrender his will long before he reaches that stage. Long before you can reason with your child, you must find ways of dealing with his self-will. A baby needs to learn the meaning of *no* long before the mother can discuss that meaning with him.

The enforcing of parental discipline requires parental cooperation. When a child receives punishment from one parent and pity from the other, the corrective effect is destroyed. Furthermore, this affords the child an opportunity to form the habit of pitting one parent against the other. This contributes to the further deterioration of the unity of the home.

Success in the enforcement of parental discipline depends also on the consistency of the discipline. Do not allow tomorrow what you forbid today, and do not allow today what you forbid tomorrow. To do so creates confusion in the child's mind. It is only fair that he knows where the parental bounds exist. A good disciplinarian is definite, firm, and consistent.

In a Christian family, the church service ought to be one of the first places to which a new baby is taken with regularity. New babies have a potential for disturbing the worship service, so parents need to be sensitive to this possibility. Nevertheless, although we recognize this negative potential, we ought to want our children with us in the worship services. That means that your baby's church training ought to begin at home. There is where he ought to learn what no means, and that Mother keeps her word.

Mothers and fathers usually have ways of knowing whether their baby is crying from discomfort or simply because he wants to have his own way. If it is clearly evident that your baby is crying from discomfort, he ought to be taken out immediately so as not to distract from the worship service. If the child is manifesting stubbornness, he likewise ought to be taken out promptly, and well away from the hearing of the audience. There, where it creates no disturbance, the child's stubbornness ought to be dealt with in an appropriate way. But, as was stated earlier, the basic training to solve this problem should be done in the home.

Children who are removed from the worship service are sometimes allowed to run free in the anteroom or church basement. This is the worst possible course. A child who thus gets his way will, in all likelihood, repeat the same performance in the next worship service. When misbehavior is rewarded by liberty, the child gets what he wants. But when it is rewarded with discipline, he gets what he needs. They must learn that being taken out involves less "fun" than staying in.

If, for the entertainment of the very young, a toy or related item is brought along to church services, it ought to be of a kind that will not create a noise. Furthermore, even noiseless items, if they are continually getting beyond the mother's reach, can interfere with the worship of those around her. This can be overcome by simply tying a string or ribbon to the object. This enables Mother to keep the object in her immediate possession.

Parents are again put to the test after the conclusion of a worship service. If there is an absence of parental restraint at this point, there are bound to be groups of little ones here and there, running, playing, and even yelling. While there is a time and place for this, it certainly should not be permitted in connection with a worship service, neither in the church building nor on the church grounds.

Misbehavior among children is very contagious. If at this point, after the benediction has been pronounced, you as a parent take the easy way and allow your child to run loose, you are thereby making it harder for those parents who are sincerely trying to restrain their children. If at this point we cannot properly restrain our children, would it not be better to shorten the "after service" and do that visiting in our homes?

The urgency of enforcing parental control requires that parents stay close to their children in all their activities. It is proper for growing adolescents to assume more and more responsibilities and to make more and more personal decisions. But in all this, parents should be close observers. Your daughter may select an article of clothing that is inappropriate for a Christian. Your son may come home with a haircut that reflects a step toward the latest in hair fads. Those are points at which you as a parent ought to lovingly, yet firmly, assert your God-delegated parental authority. Wise parents supervise the decisions of their growing children and thus prevent them from introducing fads that would tempt others and mar the witness of the church.

Leisure-time activities also call for close parental supervision. As a parent, you may rejoice when you see your son or daughter reading a book. You may feel that now he is out of mischief; he is doing something profitable. Your rejoicing may be well grounded, but not necessarily so. Reading, although normally profitable, can degenerate into a form of escapism. It can, for example, become an escape from needful work. Furthermore, what about the content of that book your child is reading? Is it character building? Is it soul enriching? Or is it written, as so much material is today, simply to feed an unhealthy fantasy? That kind of reading has no permanent value but rather will dissipate the benefits of other disciplines in the life of the child. So you had better keep close supervision over your child's reading.

Parental discipline should also be exerted in an endeavor to teach children thrift and Christian stewardship. It is the duty of Christian parents to instill ideals, such as saving 10 percent of one's earnings, and likewise giving 10 percent.

Are we training our children to save and to give as they ought? If your son is earning and is permitted to keep any portion of what he earns, it becomes your responsibility to see that he gives to the Lord's work a portion of that which becomes his. Likewise, if your daughter is permitted to spend money of her own for personal items, train her to give also a portion in the Sunday morning offering. How else will they learn stewardship?

We ought to also teach our children that they have a definite responsibility to help along in the financial struggles of the family. For grown children, 1 Timothy 5:8 has a special message. "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." Too often we apply this only to the breadwinner in relation to his wife and dependent children. But notice, it says, "if any." The context indicates that if a widow has grown children and grandchildren, they have an obligation to help her financially, and furthermore, their obligation precedes the obligation of the brotherhood. The principle embedded in this passage is that the close of kin to one having financial struggles are under special obligation to help. This we need to instill into our children.

A tragedy occurred some time ago in the writer's home community. A young boy, while riding his motor scooter, was instantly killed. The mother acknowledged that his death was related to parental neglect. The preservation of even your child's physical life makes the enforcing of parental discipline an urgent matter. But still more important is the spiritual well-being of your child. Proverbs 23:14 indicates that parental discipline is a means of delivering a child's soul from hell. More than anything else, this ought to put into our discipline the note of urgency. This is written in the hope that you will not need to look upon the grave of a child that went wrong because you restrained him not, because you displeased him not at any time. Act now and save yourself that bitter regret.

—*Merle R. Ruth*