

Five Characteristics of Biblical Discipline

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From Focus on the Family

"Discipline" can be a really vague concept, and if you're lost in the landscape of opinions surrounding it out there, you're not alone. If you were to ask a hundred parents to describe their motives and methods of discipline, you might get a hundred different answers. But here's the good news: God's Word is pretty specific about this subject. Since the Bible is always more reliable than opinion surveys — a good principle for any issue in life, by the way — let's take a look at what God says through the writer of Hebrews.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Endure hardship as discipline: God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:4-11)

In this passage, we can discern five distinct characteristics of God's kind of discipline.

1. *The necessity of discipline: to deter destruction (v. 4).* The writer of Hebrews ends chapter 10 with a strong warning coupled with strong encouragement: Those who shrink back from faith and God's will are destroyed, but those who persevere receive all that He has promised. Chapter 11 is full of examples from the men and women in Scripture, and then chapter 12 continues with the encouragement to live a courageous, faithful life. The context of verse 4 is this idea that haphazard living leads to destruction. The message is clear: Disciplined lives reap rewards.

Discipline is about watching your child to see the direction in which he's going.

Remember the illustration of giving your child the keys and letting him drive on his own? Action needs to be taken when you see your child take the wrong route and you know he's headed straight for a cliff. You yank the wheel or slam on the brakes, or even put up a barrier so your child won't plunge a thousand feet. He'll get mad for a moment, but ten years down the road he'll thank you.

Many parents are afraid of making their children mad. I remember the first time one of mine stuck out his lip and said, "I don't love you anymore." My first thought was, "Boy, I don't ever want to be that hard on him again." That's a lot of power to give a five-year-old, isn't it? A better response is to grit your teeth and bear the anger of your child,

because it's better to make him frown than let him rush toward destruction. That frown won't last forever. Destruction, however, just might.

Do you see how, from this perspective, discipline — even painful discipline — is actually an expression of love? It always seeks the child's best interest. A mature parent can withstand the anger of their child and say, "That's okay, you don't need to love me right now. You'll love me for it in a few years." It hurts temporarily, but to compromise your child's welfare from fear of losing his love will hurt a lot worse later on.

2. The means of discipline: actions and words (v. 5). In the Proverbs 3:11 passage that is quoted in Hebrews, two different Hebrew words are used: *yasar* (discipline), which involves God's actions; and *yakach* (rebuke), which refers to God's words. Hebrews 12:5 tells us not to make light of God's actions and not to lose heart at His words of rebuke. *Yasar* refers to disciplinary actions; *yakach* refers to corrective words.

As parents, that's exactly how we are to discipline. We bring both words and actions, warnings and consequences, into our children's situations in order to keep them on track.

3. The motive in discipline: to express love (vv. 6-9). When juvenile delinquents, as part of a research study, were asked how they knew their parents' feelings toward them, almost all of them said that lack of discipline in their home was a sign that their parents didn't love them. We often think that we're expressing love when we repeatedly say, "I'll give you another chance." What we're really doing, though, is neglecting to set boundaries that let our children know they're in a safety zone where they can feel secure. One of the most powerful ways to love your child is to be consistent in your discipline. And that's really hard. We're inclined to do whatever we can to maintain a friendship with our kids, when discipline is actually much more important.

I tend to do discipline well for a few weeks, and then find it more convenient to make compromises. Kids pick up on that in an instant. Try listening to them sometime when they aren't aware that a parent can hear them. Their conversation often sounds something like this:

"I got grounded last night."

"Oh no. How long?"

"They said two weeks, but it'll probably just be three or four days."

Where did they get that idea? Children are diligent students of parental behavior. They usually know when they can get away with things. Over time, they learn your breaking points and where you are prone to compromise. They aren't consciously taking notes, of course. They've been taught very well by experience.

4. The goal of discipline: to teach obedience (v. 9). When you teach your children godly submission, you're teaching them to do the right thing for the right reason. You want them to get beyond the point where they say "I've got to" and get them to the point of obeying out of love and trust. Their discipline will be primarily external in the beginning, but eventually it should become internal — so integrated into their personality that it's self-discipline rather than imposed discipline. The way you regulate how they speak and act toward other people needs to become a part of who they are so that when you remove the regulations, the behavior remains.

5. The result of discipline: short-term pain and long-term gain (vv. 10-11). The reason we don't like to discipline our kids is because it involves short-term pain. We're

sympathetic to their feelings, and we never enjoy hurting them. Verse 11 acknowledges the pain, saying *all* discipline — not some or even most, but all — seems not to be pleasant, but painful. But there's a process involved; those who have been trained by it yield the fruit of righteousness.

Someone advised me long ago not to ask myself whether my child liked the discipline I was imposing but to ask whether he would love me when he looked back on the situation years later. That helped me tremendously, especially when one of them would say, "What do you mean I'm grounded? I really can't go? I hate you. You're the worst parent in the world." I even overheard one of my kids, only mildly joking, telling his friends, "It's like my dad chains me to the bedpost. I never get to go anywhere." I would have to remind myself that he was reaping the consequences we had decided on and spelled out up front, and his disobedience produced the expected results. I didn't give in, and my kids came back to me later and said, "Thanks, Dad."