

Paul's Word about Discipline

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

One of the Greek words for child literally means “one who is molded or shaped.” Hidden in the word is the idea that a child is a person in the making, an unformed hunk of clay, if you will, waiting to be shaped. The parents are given the responsibility and the privilege of doing the shaping. That's what discipline is all about. Discipline is shaping a person. That applies not only to children, but adults as well.

Before one attacks a hunk of clay, it is good to know what shape one wants to make of it. It is good to have a plan. The same is true of the process of disciplining a person. Discipline often fails because neither the one doing it nor the one receiving it understands its goal. All too often what is called discipline is nothing more than angry punishment of some kind. Such responses may curb behavior, but they produce no positive change in anyone. A good deal of discipline happens as a thoughtless reaction of the parent. Parents respond not necessarily to the child's behavior but to what that behavior does to the parent.

We confess that God is our Father, and we believe that God disciplines us in the proper way – he shapes us intentionally. In Hebrews we read, “Endure suffering as discipline. God is dealing with you as sons. Is there a son whose father does not discipline him?” (Hebrews 12:7). God has a reason for our discipline – a plan he is following: “God disciplines us for our good, so that we may have a share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant when it is happening, but painful, yet later it yields a peaceful harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:10-11).

God's plan for us, the reason he disciplines us, is that we may share his holiness. That is the shape, the mold into which he is working us. He is training us to be like himself.

1. What does the model of God disciplining us to mold us into his image say to a Christian's attempt to discipline their children?
2. God disciplines us. He does not punish us. God punished Jesus Christ in our place, and that punishment Jesus bore on the cross was full and complete. What does the truth that God punished Jesus in our place say about the way he deals with us now?
3. Though we are free from the punishment for sin, we still often suffer the consequences for our sins. Agree? Disagree? Why?

INTO THE WORD

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 These words that I am commanding you today are to be on your heart. Teach them diligently to your children, and speak about them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

1. Paul didn't write these words, but as a child of the Scriptures, surely he knew them by heart. When is the right time to practice discipline?
2. Where should discipline be practiced, and to whom does it apply?
3. These verses are strongly in favor of frequent positive reinforcement instead of negative reinforcement. Agree? Why or why not?

2 Timothy 3:15 and that from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

4. When did Timothy get into the Word?

Romans 12:1-2 Therefore I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is your appropriate worship. Also, do not continue to conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you test and approve what is the will of God—what is good, pleasing, and perfect.

5. We have said that discipline is a shaping process. What does this text say about the shape to which God has called us?
6. Some things in our world are labeled “adult.” Particularly in entertainment we find “adult programming” separated from material for general audiences. What kind of message do we send to our children when we tell them some things are okay for adults but not for them?
7. We keep hearing more and more that television and other media are shaping our children (really all of us) more than any other factor in their lives. Many people are becoming used to violence, and moral values are suffering because of so many outside influences. Do you agree? Why or why not?

What alternatives to these influences can you think of that might do a better job of shaping character?

Romans 8:29 because those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers.

8. To what “shape” are we called in this reference?

Romans 6:1-4 What shall we say then? Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? Absolutely not! We died to sin. How can we go on living in it any longer? Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.

9. What does our baptism have to do with discipline?

Romans 5:3-5 Not only this, but we also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.

10. What confession does Paul make about the process of divine discipline?

Ephesians 6:1-4 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with a promise: “that it may go well with you and that you may live a long life on the earth.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

11. Where does discipline begin?

Romans 1:18-32 Indeed, God's wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who try to suppress the truth by unrighteousness. ¹⁹ This happens because what can be known about God is evident among them, because God made it evident among them. ²⁰ In fact, his invisible characteristics—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, because they are understood from the things he made. As a result, people are without excuse, ²¹ because, even though they knew God, they did not honor him or give him thanks as God. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless heart was darkened.

²² Although they claim to be wise, they have become fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human, or like birds, four-footed animals, and crawling things. ²⁴ So, as they followed the sinful desires of their hearts, God handed them over to the impurity of degrading their own bodies among themselves. ²⁵ Such people have traded the truth about God for the lie, worshipping and serving the creation rather than the Creator, who is worthy of praise forever. Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God handed them over to disgraceful passions. Even their females exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ And, in the same way, their males, after abandoning natural sexual relations with females, were consumed by their lust for one another. Males perform indecent acts with males and receive in themselves the penalty that is fitting for their perversion.

²⁸ And since they did not consider it worthwhile to hold on to the true knowledge of God, God handed them over to a corrupted mind to do things that should never be done. ²⁹ They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarreling, deceit, and malice. They are gossipers, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent mockers, arrogant boasters, and loudmouths. They dream up evil things. They disobey their parents. ³¹ They are senseless, faithless, heartless, and merciless. ³² Even though they know God's righteous decree that those who do these things are worthy of death, such people not only continue to do them, but also approve of others who continue to commit such sins.

12. Compare what we just read to Romans 8:5-8. How can we help our children see the discipline process as part of our whole life with God?

Romans 8:5-8 To be sure, those who are in harmony with the sinful flesh think about things the way the sinful flesh does, and those in harmony with the spirit think about things the way the spirit does. Now, the way the sinful flesh thinks results in death, but the way the spirit thinks results in life and peace. For the mind-set of the sinful flesh is hostile to God, since it does not submit to God's law, and in fact, it cannot. Those who are in the sinful flesh cannot please God.

13. We will not reach perfection either as the objects of God's discipline or as the ones responsible for the discipline of children. How does God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ fit into our attempts to discipline and accept discipline?

14. Why is forgiveness the most important “tool” for the one who disciplines in the home?

AT HOME THIS WEEK

If you have children: Spend some time this week sharing with your children the concept of discipline as shaping.

Together with them, develop a written description of what you would like them to be. What qualities would you like your children to possess and why? (Use Galatians 5:19-24 to help you work on your list)

If you don't have children: Read Galatians 5:19-24 and consider how the description of these words apply to you.

IN CLOSING

Prayer: Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we commend to your care all the homes in which your people live. Keep them free from bitterness, pride, and selfishness. Fill them with faith, wisdom, patience, and godliness. Let children and parents show respect for one another, and bless us all with a spirit of kindness and true affection. Amen.