

The Summer Garden (PART 1)

The Role of Corrective Discipline in Preparing Your Child's Heart to Receive the Gospel

By Daryl Wingerd

Corrective discipline is much more than just a biblical duty parents are commanded to perform. It plays an effectual role in preparing your child's heart to receive the gospel.



What I am saying here assumes much—perhaps even *most*—of what godly parents like you do for and with your children. You love them, nurture them, provide for them, care for them, and pray for them. You play with them, laugh with them, and cry with them. You help them identify and develop their unique abilities and interests, and you walk with them as they navigate through difficult times. You teach them about the world they live in, and about the God who made them in his image. Your children are wonderful blessings from God. Their care and upbringing is a multi-faceted and complex endeavor. But I wouldn't be writing if I didn't firmly believe that my subject concerns one of the most critical aspects of bringing up children.

Parents are often confused about the reasons and rationale for corrective discipline. Believing what the Bible says about the unregenerate person being unable to please God (cf. Romans 8:7), some parents struggle with what seems like an unfair expectation that unregenerate children should be held to a biblical standard of conduct. Others wonder if all they are really doing in training and disciplining their child is meeting the arbitrary expectations of other people. What are we missing if these kinds of questions or concerns distract us away from faithfully disciplining our children starting in their very early years?

God has given you a window of opportunity in your child's life for maximizing the impact of corrective discipline. Where that window of opportunity is missed, your gospel-focused influence is reduced. That is a strong statement, but it is strongly supported by the following biblical texts:

Proverbs 22:15 – “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.”

Proverbs 23:13-14 – “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.”

Proverbs 29:15 – “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”

Consider three similarities in the three proverbs quoted above:

1. In each proverb, the action prescribed (i.e., corrective discipline) is directly associated with the proverbial assurance that a desirable result will follow.
2. In each proverb, the application of corrective discipline is prescribed for the benefit of “a child.” This implies that the objects of such discipline are in their formative years, *before* patterns of undesirable behavior become established and rooted as lifelong practices.
3. Each proverb implies that the child brought up in this way will grow up to be a righteous person (i.e., freed from folly, saved from Sheol, possessing wisdom). In the context of the Old Testament, this describes God's people—those with whom he is pleased.

In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews quotes from Proverbs 3:11-12 where the Lord's discipline is likened to that of an earthly father. He insists that even though “all discipline is painful,” “later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (12:5-6, 11). Like God's discipline of his followers, the discipline of an earthly father also tends to produce righteous conduct. And even though righteous conduct cannot save a child (or anyone else, for that matter), it does provide evidence of God's saving work in a person's heart (e.g., 1 John 3:8-10).

Also consider Ephesians 6:4 – “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This command doesn't include an overt proverbial assurance of a desirable outcome, but it seems clear that the typical outcome—becoming a follower of Jesus—is to be anticipated in what we might call a “proverbial” sense. After all, if there is no hope or expectation of a desirable outcome attached to Paul's command, why would he place such a great responsibility on Christian fathers (actually both parents, with the father taking the lead in responsibility and accountability)? Paul's clear expectation is that parents who bring up their children in this way will see the hoped-for outcome: godly children who know and love the Lord.