

Series: Parent Like God, Part 5

Title: Correction — The Bitter Pill of Parenting

Text: Ephesians 6:4; Proverbs 3:12

Date: May 22, 2022

For hundreds of years, English speakers have used the expression “bitter pill,” or some variation of it, to speak of something that is hard to accept. The saying is traced back to the seventeenth century. During that time, most any sort of pill or medicine was bitter to the taste. Consequently, taking a medicinal treatment was regarded as something that was difficult yet necessary.

When it comes to parenting, there is a bitter pill of sorts. I speak of the act of disciplining children. Naturally, such correction is not easy. Many parents find it hard to lovingly correct their kids. However, such activity is necessary if children are to be healthy, happy, and holy.

Scripture instructs us in this matter. It regards discipline as a fundamental aspect of parenting. The author of Hebrews said, “For what son is there that a father does not discipline?” (Hebrews 12:7). As sure as the Earth orbits around the Sun, parents are responsible for providing loving rebukes for their children. It is an inalterable aspect of God’s universe — kids require discipline. Parents serve a purpose in the Lord’s design of things. They are to be an instrument for training and correction.

I recently talked about this subject with a man who is older than me. He has raised his kids, and he is one I look to as an example and a source of advice. In our conversation, he told me that he believes correction is where most parents fail. I believe his assertion is accurate. In a world intoxicated by a spirit of permissiveness, it seems that many children are allowed to live like the children of Israel in the book of Judges — most are left to do whatever seems right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25).

Even many Christian parents are reluctant to reprove their children. After observing American life, the Duke of Windsor once said, “Everything in the American home is controlled by switches—except the children!”¹ The Duke’s tongue-in-cheek remark was intended as a jab at the lack of control many parents have in reference to their children.

What is the reason for the prevalent delinquency in parental discipline? It seems love can sometimes become a pretext for an unhealthy spirit of liberty. Some parents are afraid of being too hard on their kids. Warnings concerning legalism make many shy to administer needed discipline. One Christian author has said, “A father’s passionate love for his child can degenerate into a spineless indulgence of a child’s faults.”²

A Fact of Life

As we consider these things, it is important for us to realize that the need for correction and discipline is a fact of life. Humanity is naturally bent toward sin (Romans 3:10, 23), so reproofs and rebukes are necessary. From birth, humanity has a will that seems hardwired to violate God’s Law; consequently, the Lord Himself regularly corrects His children. The wise listen to His rebukes and amend their ways. King Solomon said, “One who listens to life-giving rebukes will be at home among the wise. Anyone who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever listens to correction acquires good sense” (Proverbs 15:31-32).

Discipline Like God

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), [CD-Rom].

² Peters, Dan. The Emotional Life of Our Lord (2). *The Banner of Truth Magazine*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, June 2020), 12.

The way in which God disciplines us provides insight concerning how we are to discipline our children. Scripture is clear about this reality. It upholds the Lord's correction of His children as a pattern for the way parents should correct their children. The author of Hebrews said, "But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had human fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn't we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live?" (Hebrews 12:8-9). If parents want to know how to discipline their children, they only need to reflect upon how the Lord disciplines them. In what follows, we will discuss this subject by examining four important topics related to parental correction.

A PROBLEM IN CORRECTION

Before we launch into our subject, it is necessary to warn about a potential pitfall. Parents must be careful to not use harmful tactics. Attempts at discipline can backfire, if mom and dad don't handle themselves in a healthy way. Paul warned the Ephesians concerning this matter, saying, "Fathers, don't stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Take note of Paul's prohibition concerning anger. In the original language of the New Testament, he used a compound word that literally meant "unto a point." The word picturesquely described one being provoked or irritated. Children can be brought to the point of exasperation by unhelpful parenting techniques.

Why did Paul feel compelled to issue such a warning? He knew some fathers in Ephesus were prone to unhealthy tactics. In the first-century world, the iron fist of the patriarch ruled supreme. It was culturally acceptable for dads to emotionally and physically intimidate their children. For Romans, it was even permissible for fathers to sell their children into slavery.

Paul wanted his readers to know that Christian parents were to approach parenting differently. The gospel, not the culturally acceptable philosophy of a depraved society, was the standard for parenting. If moms and dads in Ephesus hit, yelled, and intimidated their children, they would undoubtedly stir up anger in the hearts of their children. The apostle gave a similar warning to the Colossians, saying, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won't become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). Bible scholars have explained the meaning of Paul's warning:

This involves avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs.³

In all generations, parents should be faithful to discipline their children; at the same time, they should be careful that they don't incite their children to anger through unruly approaches to such discipline. There is a perennial problem wherein moms and dads stir up anger in the hearts of their children through insensitive approaches. When parents are overly strict, overly lenient, inconsistent, detached, distracted, hypocritical, comparative, preferential, insensitive, or abusive, children are likely to rebel. Let's consider five tips to help parents with these things.

Avoid hurtful speech.

Remember that Paul told the Ephesians, "No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). His words were contained within the same letter that warned parents to not

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 446.

provoke their children to anger. It is quite possible that the same foul language prevalent in the church was also prevalent in some homes.

To safeguard themselves from provoking anger in their children, parents should avoid destructive speech. Yelling, shouting, and name calling should be off limits. Absolute statements about a child's character (e.g. "You never..." or "You always...") are to be avoided. Unlawful patterns of speaking are perhaps the foremost way parents provoke their children to anger.

Don't engage in physical intimidation.

Grabbing, pushing, slapping, hitting, and the like should be impermissible for parents when they discipline their children. Perhaps some fathers at the church of Ephesus were guilty of beating their kids. Such behavior was commonplace in the first-century world. Paul wanted his readers to be on guard that they did nothing to instill anger in the hearts of their kids. Modern parents should learn a lesson — physical intimidation may accomplish a short-term purpose, but it has catastrophic long-term hurt.

Practice what you preach.

Many kids are incited to anger because of their parents' hypocrisy. If mom and dad are held to a different standard, children will certainly resent it. Anger grows when parents are one thing in public and another thing in private. You are surely not perfect, but make sure you don't attempt to enforce standards you don't personally embrace. Hypocrisy will make your discipline both counterproductive and destructive.

Be patient.

I love an old praise song that says, "He's still working on me, to make me into what I need to be." If we are honest with ourselves, we realize we have plenty of room for growth and development. Each of us have struggles and strongholds that seem to beset us. If these things are so for grown adults, they are definitely true for our children. Each should bear with his or her kids patiently, realizing that all are subject to the effects of the fall. By the grace of God, parents should work to develop the love of 1 Corinthians 13:7 — "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Impatience and irritability will likely provoke your child to anger.

Pray for your children.

Prayer is the believer's offensive weapon for every situation and struggle in life. The spiritual discipline has a great bearing on parenting. It brings the power, presence, and provision of God to your interactions with your kids. It is said that Augustine, the famous Church Father, was converted to Christ after years of prayers by an anxious mother. In his younger years, the man was known for lustful and drunken living, but his mom never gave up on him. As she poured out her grief to an older Christian one day, she received the reply, "The child of many prayers shall never perish."⁴

There will be times in your parenting when you are pressed to your whit's end. Improper responses and reactions may push your kids to anger. What will you do in such situations? You will surely stumble on occasion, but prayer can make you stronger. The parent who is full of prayer is less likely to provoke his or her child to anger. Why? Prayer has a way of giving you the spiritual perspective and power you need. As you aim to be what God wants you to be for your kids, remember this admonition from Scripture — "Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2).

THE PITFALL OF NO CORRECTION

⁴ Ryle, J.C. Practical Religion. (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2015), 69.

I recently attended a parenting seminar in which the speaker warned about the phenomenon of absentee parents. Many parents aren't appropriately engaged in training and correcting their children. It is sad that such is even the case among many professing Christians. Instead of embracing their God-given role, many moms and dads delegate it to other agencies — the school system, grandparents, the church, or other authority figures. The speaker at the conference I attended said, "We have transferred the ownership of the family from the house to the church house."⁵ Worst yet, many kids wander through life with little warnings concerning right and wrong. They rarely receive the admonitions and reproofs they need in order to mature and develop.

When parents don't own their responsibility to correct their children, trouble is sure to follow. Kids who don't receive appropriate measures of discipline can turn toward lawless, indulgent living. Others may morph into the prototypical spoiled brat. Such situations are worst-case scenarios. However, there are other consequences that come from a household devoid of correction. The emotional and spiritual toll that results from a lack of discipline during the formative years exacts a heftier toll than most imagine. Kids who are deprived of necessary correction and instruction can lack a healthy sense of identity, since rules and guidelines have a way of providing necessary structure and security.

A Profile of a Non-Corrective Parent

The Old Testament provides a grim account of two men who were the spawns of an upbringing devoid of discipline. Their names were Hophni and Phinehas and they were the sons of Eli. The book of 1 Samuel tells of the way the pair desecrated the holy place of worship by indulging in gluttony with the meats that were to be offered as sacrifices (1 Samuel 2:12-17). The men also committed profane sexual acts with young women appointed to work in the temple complex (1 Samuel 2:22).

It is nearly stupefying to think that one of Israel's greatest prophets could have raised two men of such low moral character. What was the reason for Hophni and Phinehas' reckless living? Scripture indicates that Eli was responsible to a degree. It is implied that the priest never appropriately disciplined his boys. When he got wind of his sons immorality, he only asked, "Why are you doing these things? I have heard about your evil actions from all these people" (1 Samuel 2:23).

Eventually the Lord confronted his negligent servant. Though Eli wouldn't discipline his sons by relieving them of their temple duties, the Lord stepped in to do what needed to be done. He rebuked His servant, saying, "You have honored your sons more than me, by making yourselves fat with the best part of all of the offerings of my people Israel" (1 Samuel 2:29). He then promised judgment, saying, "...your two sons Hophni and Phinehas: both of them will die on the same day. Then I will raise up a faithful priest for myself. He will do whatever is in my heart and mind" (1 Samuel 2:34-35). The account of Hophni and Phinehas' demise is contained within 1 Samuel 4:1-22.

Interestingly, the Lord's judgment on Eli's household contained a gospel promise. Did you notice the Lord's reference to "a faithful priest?" Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more (Romans 5:20)! Though parents undoubtedly make mistakes and missteps from time to time, some of which have grave consequences, the grace and forgiveness of Jesus can give hope. Power and provision for parenting is found in Christ.

The Blessings of Discipline

As you seek to be faithful in these matters, remember that several good things grow from healthy and holy discipline. First, in owning your responsibility to correct your children, you provide them with boundaries and guidelines they need for life. You inevitably safeguard them from much harm and hurt. I can remember a time in which one of our children tried to run

⁵ Mike Ricks; Parenting Conference at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Cartersville, GA on January 20, 2022.

away from us in a shopping mall. He was upset that we wouldn't let him ride one of the cheap rides for kids. As he sprinted away from us, he streaked through the entryway doors and toward a street filled with traffic. I yelled his name with a strong, authoritative tone that could have been interpreted negatively. However, my scream brought him to a screeching halt. I saved him from potentially being hit by a car. As you engage in the hard work of correcting your kids, know that you are saving them from pains and problems that could come later in life. Though they may not thank you now, they may thank you later.

Second, discipline is ultimately an act through which you demonstrate your care. Growing up, did you ever have a corrective parent tell you, "I'm doing this because I love you." Though the cliché has surely been misapplied at times, it does represent an inalterable reality. Parental correction is proof of true parental care. There have been times in which I have had to strongly discipline my children. I sometimes feared that they would feel rejected and unloved by my reprimands. I had anxiety that they might harbor resentment. Amazingly, some of my strongest discipline has been met with the strongest displays of love. When children are given guidelines and boundaries, they often reciprocate with appreciation. Why? Your correction communicates that you care.

Finally, it may seem strange, but correction and discipline provide a way for parents and kids to bond. By showing your kids the plain paths of righteousness, you engage in a master-teacher role that solicits respect. In helping them sort through emotional and practical struggles, you interact with them at a deep, soul level. Through warning them about the folly and destruction of certain actions, you keep them safe and earn their trust. Don't be shy or fearful about lovingly correcting and disciplining your children!

THE PATH OF CORRECTION

In our talks about parental correction, it is necessary for us to deal with nuts and bolts matters. Practical guidance is necessary. Fortunately, the Heavenly Father metaphor teaches us how to discipline our children. Solomon said, "for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights (Proverbs 3:12). If one wants to know how to correct his or her kids, one only needs to consider how God corrects His children. From Scripture, consider five ingredients in godly discipline.

Communication (Genesis 2:17)

Godly discipline starts with effective communication. Think about the first time the Lord ever corrected a human being. He expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because of their sin (Genesis 3:22-24). Prior to that expulsion, however, He clearly defined and delineated His standards of right behavior. He told them they would die if they ate of the forbidden tree (Genesis 2:17).

Apply the Lord's way of parenting to your roles and responsibilities. It is unreasonable to expect your kids to follow rules and guidelines that aren't clearly established and communicated. Consistent communication is the starting place for effective discipline. You must embrace your responsibility to consistently teach your children about what is permissible and what is not permissible. It is your job to teach them about right and wrong.

In all of this, be slow to punish for unknown expectations. Give grace when kids stumble and make missteps in areas in which they lack understanding. There were many occasions when our kids were young in which my wife and I had to say, "It's okay, you didn't know." Now that they are older, they have a more robust understanding of what is expected.

Clarity (Deuteronomy 8:5-6)

As you establish rules and standards for your children, work hard to be crystal clear. When Moses led the Israelites to enter the Promised Land, He said, "Keep in mind that the Lord your God has been disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. So keep the commands of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and fearing him" (Deuteronomy 8:5-6). Throughout the forty years of wilderness wanderings, the Lord was faithful to be exact and precise in His

communication of His standards. He diligently taught the people to revere the Word of God (Deuteronomy 8:4). Do something similar. Parent like God. Be clear. If your child breaks a rule or crosses a boundary, be slow to mete out consequences if you discover you weren't clear in your communication. When required, give grace and restate expectations. You can only enforce that which has been clearly communicated.

Consistency (Deuteronomy 28:64; 1 Kings 8:46-47; 2 Kings 15:37; Jeremiah 30:15)

Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord warned His people time and time again that foreign invasion would be the consequence for covenant disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:64; 1 Kings 8:46-47). He was also consistent in His enforcement of such a consequence, sending foreign invaders at different times in the histories of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15:37; Jeremiah 30:15). Our Lord's consistent communication concerning consequences reveals a nonnegotiable part of parental discipline. Parents must be consistent in their communication of standards, rules, and expectations. They must also be consistent in their enforcement of such things. When kids don't know what to expect, or when it seems siblings are held to a different standard, hurt and resentment will grow.

Consequences

The first man and woman were banished from Paradise because of their sin. Israel and Judah were made to serve as slaves in far-off, pagan lands. The Lord's treatment of His people demonstrates that pointed consequences should be given when standards and rules are broken. Consequences can take many shapes and sizes — times outs, restrictions, chores, removal of certain privileges, and more. The point is to give a punishment that is appropriate for the offense and that instills a level of pain in order to train the child concerning right and wrong. In his autobiography, J.C. Ryle spoke of the destructive nature of a lack of consequences and discipline for children, saying, "...I think that it often does good to young boys who have been petted and spoilt, and indulged at home, and taught to think that their own will is law. It obliges them to submit to the will of others, and teaches the great lesson which we all have to learn in life, that we cannot always have our own way."⁶

Compassion (Lamentations 3:28-33)

I once had an older Christian man provide me with coaching on how to discipline children. He encouraged me to make love a priority. His advice was that I should be intentional to tell my kids I loved them each time I disciplined them. The man's advice was in alignment with the way the Lord parents His spiritual children. When Judah was disciplined for her rebellion, the Lord send Jeremiah to remind the nation of God's love (Lamentations 3:28-33).

As you discipline and hand out consequences, be sure to tell your kids you love them. Don't allow them to be overwhelmed with feelings of worthlessness. Be firm about their offense and be clear about the consequences, but tell them you love them and affirm the positive things related to their nature. One has said, "Our children need our love the most when they deserve the least."⁷

THE PURPOSE OF CORRECTION

As we close our discussion on the subject of parental discipline of children, I feel it is important to provide a reminder on the purpose of such discipline. Some moms and dads lose sight of the end goal from time to time. They discipline out of annoyance, frustration, or anger while forgetting that the Lord has purpose for their parenting. Scripture is clear that all godly discipline has a definite goal.

⁶ Atherstone, Andrew. *Bishop J. C. Ryle's Autobiography* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 42-43.

⁷ Hawkins, O.S. *The Art of Connecting*. (Dallas, Tx: GuideStone, 2004), 50.

Studying the prophets reveals that the Lord was strategic when He corrected the children of Judah. When He addressed His people through the prophet Isaiah, he said, "I will turn my hand against you and will burn away your dross completely; I will remove all your impurities" (Isaiah 1:25). God's corrective hand has a way of purifying His children. He uses discipline to make them into what He wants them to be. The Psalmist was aware of these realities; consequently, He took great delight in the Lord's discipline, singing, "Lord, how happy is anyone you discipline and teach from your law" (Psalm 94:12).

If you want to parent like God, it is important to keep these things in mind. Discipline has a purpose. Plain and simple, a parent's corrective hand serves the purpose of helping children grow in godliness and Christlikeness. Parents can view themselves as having the same responsibility Paul embraced toward his churches. To the church at Colossae, he explained his goal in ministry by saying, "We proclaim him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

The purpose of parental correction is to disciple children so that they might become what the Lord wants them to be. The aim should be to instill Christ-like character. If the goal is simply to remove shouting, annoyances, and unruly behavior, you will set yourself up for failure and frustration. However, if the goal is to rear your child into a full-fledged Christ-follower, you will sense a high degree of purpose. You will also receive greater motivation and help from the Holy Spirit.

As you parent and correct your children, keep the goal in mind. The purpose of discipline is discipleship. If your kids don't embrace the way of the Master, pain and sorrow is sure to result. One has said, "It is painful to see one's dear child a lover of pleasure more than of God - painful to see a young creature, born for communion of God and acquaintance with heavenly joys, wedded to trivial gratifications and the object of sense alone."⁸

⁸ Ryle, J.C. *Christian Leaders Of The Eighteenth Century*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 278.