



MONDAY'S MEAL

SUSTAINABLE NOURISHMENT *for the* LONG DISTANCE RUN

Fatherly Discipline

by Dale Johnson

Monday's Meal is a service of The Oaks Classical and Christian Academy. Each meal is selected specifically to feed and nourish parents for the long distance run. If you found it helpful, consider passing it along.

"...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds..."
Hebrews 10:24

Fatherhood is simultaneously an esteemed privilege and a daunting assignment. When your brand-new infant is placed in your arms for the first time, your heart is overwhelmed with joy. At the same time, the weight of responsibility can be crushing as you load your vulnerable baby in your car and into your care. This journey of fatherhood is one of navigating the balance between that overwhelming joy and fearful responsibility.

The picturesque perfection of that fragile child seems innocent enough, yet their hearts will bear weeds as sure as the summer garden. It's hard to believe they are born sinners and will need the corrective oversight of a father. The real task of fathering, loving and corrective discipline, becomes more apparent once he begins totting around and his sinful nature plays peak-a-boo. Men may respond to this God-given responsibility in several different ways. Some men want to disengage from that responsibility, repeating a sinful pattern of manhood that began with Adam in the garden when he abdicated his responsibility to protect against evil. Other men, however, are eager to engage in the task of disciplining their children. For those men who choose engagement there are pitfalls that can hinder effective discipline. Let us first identify a biblical understanding of discipline before we discuss its potential snares.

The Call to Discipline

To my knowledge, the only negative command given to fathers in the New Testament is "do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." In Ephesians 6:4, Paul is warning fathers

of a most pressing obstruction to the maturity of their children; provocation to anger. The path to maturity for a child is paved with godly discipline and instruction. Based on common practices, we often interpret this passage simply to mean we need to spank our kids and bring them to church. While church attendance is a priority, we must cease to consider it enough when it comes to instructing our children. Similarly, discipline is not limited to spanking, but rather embodies the idea of enculturation. Deuteronomy 6 prescribes fatherly teaching that consumes mundane daily life in order to instill a Godward orientation within the child. The child should be encouraged to think of all knowledge and life experiences with a keen view to God's perspective. We are to train them to be wise according to the kingdom of God rather than the worldly wisdom with which we are so tainted. As J.C. Ryle reminds us, "The time is short, the fashion of this world passeth away. He that hath trained his children for heaven, rather than for earth, for God, rather than for man, he is the parent that will be called wise at last." (Ryle, 9) Discipline encompasses the call of Deuteronomy 6 to be with our children and consistently point them toward a Godward orientation. Not only does this take intentional fatherly action, but we must also address several temptations that will hinder effective discipline.

Snares of Effective Discipline

Anger

Satisfied that you are at least trying to be involved, the flesh is religiously appeased when you engage your children out of anger. The evil one is best at tempting believers to do the right things in the wrong ways.

Unfortunately, there are many ways to provoke a child to anger and many dangers as a result. Provoking a child to anger can sever the relational heart strings between father and child. The devastation of the distance this brings between the father and child is broken trust, often resulting in a child who is more likely to rebel against his father's instructions rather than turning his ear toward his words. (Proverbs 4:20)

We are tempted to discipline out of anger when we want to impart truth to our children without grace. Sinfully, we often care more that our message is heard rather than understood. The child will tend toward conforming outwardly, but inwardly builds disdain toward parental authority and instruction. This may lead your child toward legalism, but not heart transformation.

The flip side of that coin is to discipline with extreme grace minus truth. This is a veiled hatred toward the child, choosing rather to keep him momentarily comfortable in his foolishness. Being ignorant of the truth and accustomed to following his own pleasures the child tends to rebel against God's loving commands or instruction provided by those acting in authority over him. Either of these two pitfalls provoke a child to anger and hinder the effective discipline of their foolish hearts. (Proverbs 22:15)

Self-Delight

Our discipline is always out of delight, but is that delight in the child or in yourself? Discipline motivated by love demonstrates delight in the child (Proverbs 3:12). However, genuine fatherly concern for our children is often tainted by our selfish pride. A father may be tempted to discipline a child for getting in the way of his own selfish desires, rather than for a particular disobedience. When we discipline from delight in our own way we respond in anger toward our child for hindering our self-pleasure. Death to self dismantles the father's flesh desires in order to discipline out of delight for the child's well-being.

Self-Preservation

Ironically, a father's use of anger to control or tame his child is a demonstration of his lack of self-control. That rotten fruit is born from the seed of self-preservation. In many cases we are trying to preserve our perception of ourselves as a wonderful father. As J.C. Ryle warns, "This is pre-eminently a point in which men can see the faults of their neighbours more clearly than their own." (Ryle, *The Duties of Parents*, 2) We are often blind to our own faults in this area.

It is not unusual for children to act like children in public; they spill drinks at tables, throw tantrums with impeccable timing, and disobey when crowds are watching. Those moments unveil a glimpse into a reality with which we would rather not deal, so we dearly cling to faulty thoughts that we are nearly perfect parents and that our kids are reflections of that perfection. In order to preserve that deeply jaded view of ourselves we respond to our kids out of anger, not caring so much to correct their misbehavior, but rather to preserve a reputation of our imagination built out of pride.

Discipline Like the Father

I wish I had a more difficult time thinking of illustrations of my own failures as a father. But the truth of the matter is the struggle against our own flesh is a real and consistent battle. Thankfully, our Heavenly Father demonstrates loving discipline for earthly fathers. God gave himself for our good not to improve his own status, but to restore us. In the same way, our discipline is for the sake of the child and not primarily for the sake of the parent.

Discipline in Kindness

The wrath of God is not the primary motivation that leads us to true change. Understanding the wrath of God is critical to grasping the depth of God's kindness in Christ. It is, however, God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). As a father, kindness toward our children shepherds true heart and mind change. Pervasive kindness keeps a child's heart open to instruction (Proverbs 16:21).

Discipline in Love

How much must we hate our children to recognize a hindrance to their growth and remain silent? The consequences of a child's disobedience are far worse if the parent sits by silently without pursuing correction. Because in the end the child's character will be self-will, pride, and conceit (Ryle, *Duties of Parents*). We must engage as fathers, but we must engage with love. True biblical discipline is motivated by love for and delight in the child and not by anger (Proverbs 3:12).

Faithful fatherly discipline is possible only when the earthly father has been so disciplined from above. Mimic the heart of the Heavenly Father in his kindness and love toward you. Godly discipline seeks good for the child beyond the immediate moment. The love of God seeks us with truth to unveil our faults but demonstrates grace by seeking us when we go astray. Genuine love is expressed toward a child when truth is swaddled by grace. The truth reveals the brokenness of heart and grace seeks to restore and mature the child in wisdom. The purpose of discipline is to make your child wise unto God and delight in his ways. Discipline lovingly done takes immense sacrifice and self-denial. In the end, to discipline with love and sacrifice is to teach a child wisdom unto God, resulting in a glad heart for the father (Proverbs 15:20).