

Child Discipline: Pedagogical, Ethical, and Biblical Perspectives

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Abstract: This paper explores the discipline of children from a biblical, pedagogical, and ethical perspective. It argues that child discipline is fundamentally a parental responsibility grounded in Scripture and oriented toward the spiritual formation and moral development of the child. The study examines the biblical foundation of the family, emphasizing its divine origin and purpose, and highlights the role of parents as primary educators. Particular attention is given to the distinction between preventive and corrective discipline, as well as the theological implications of disciplinary practices, including the controversial issue of corporal discipline. Furthermore, the paper presents three primary methods of child education: personal example, formal instruction, and family-based spiritual formation. The study concludes that effective discipline must be motivated by love, guided by wisdom, and aimed at cultivating holiness, obedience, and maturity in the child.

Keywords: Child Discipline, Family, Biblical Education, Parenting, Pedagogy, Christian Ethics

Introduction

Child discipline has become a subject of increasing debate in contemporary society, especially in the context of changing educational philosophies, the rise of child-centered approaches, and heightened sensitivity toward issues of authority and autonomy. In this climate, traditional forms of discipline—particularly those informed by biblical teaching—are often questioned, misunderstood, or even rejected. As a result, Christian families are faced with the challenge of navigating between cultural expectations and their commitment to scriptural principles.

The importance of this topic lies in the fact that discipline is not merely a practical concern but a deeply formative process that shapes the moral, spiritual, and relational development of the child. Within the Christian worldview, discipline is closely connected to broader theological themes such as human nature, sanctification, and the role of authority as an expression of divine order. Therefore, how discipline is understood and practiced has significant implications not only for the family unit but also for the spiritual formation of future generations.

In light of these considerations, this paper examines child discipline from a biblical and theological perspective, seeking to clarify its purpose, scope, and proper application. It begins by exploring the biblical understanding of the family and parental responsibility, then considers the nature and aims of discipline, including its preventive and corrective dimensions. The discussion also engages with the controversial issue of corporal discipline, evaluating it within a broader theological framework. Finally, the study outlines key methods through which discipline and education are carried out in the Christian family.

1. The Biblical Status of the Family

First, it must be emphasized that the family is a blessing from God, who established the family and gave the command to multiply (Genesis 1:28). One of the fundamental needs of the human being is fellowship, and although true communion and fulfillment are found in God, the human being also needs someone beside him. A relevant example is Adam, who experienced loneliness (Genesis 2:18). Therefore, the family is constituted by a man and a woman. This union, defined as marriage, must be “in the Lord,” meaning that both partners are oriented toward God, directly subordinated to Him, and evaluate their lives according to the standards established by God (Mureșan, 2002, p. 19).

2. Child Discipline – The Responsibility of Parents

Child discipline is a frequently discussed subject among parents, involving not only parents but also children. However, the responsibility of raising children remains with the parents, according to biblical texts such as Deuteronomy 11:19 and Proverbs 22:6. These passages clearly emphasize the role of parents in the upbringing of children. John Chrysostom argues that the education of children represents the primary task of the parents' life (Chrysostom, 2007, p. 28).

2.1. The Purpose of Discipline

The purpose of discipline, as mentioned above, is to guide the child toward maturity and must have a positive goal. Parents must follow the example of the heavenly Father, who disciplines, guides, and directs His children, as stated in Hebrews 12:10.

Parents must have the same goal in raising their children. Children must become participants in sanctification. Through small actions such as obedience, respect toward others, and self-control, the child is formed. Teaching these aspects contributes to the child's growth and sanctification (Dobson, 1993, p. 307).

2.2. Preventive Discipline

Parents must pay attention to preventive discipline. Many individuals who are about to become parents make certain mistakes, such as failing to prepare themselves properly for raising a child. Parents must first prepare themselves for the responsibility of raising a child, and only afterward focus on other resources.

Manoah provides a biblical example of this principle. When Manoah's wife became pregnant, he prayed to God to send the angel of the Lord again to teach them how to raise the child (Judges 13). This attitude exemplifies the appropriate response that parents should have when they know they are about to become parents. (Mureşan, 2002, p. 119).

2.3. Corrective Discipline

Children must be educated from an early age and repeatedly, since they often reject or forget the discipline they receive from their parents. This is evident in Scripture, particularly in the Book of Proverbs, where expressions are repeated frequently: "My son, if you receive...", "My son, do not forget...", "Listen, my sons...", "Pay attention...", "Keep my words..." Expressions such as "pay attention" and "do not forget" suggest that children often forget or ignore the instructions given by their parents. Corrective discipline aims to instill in the child's heart the desire to do what is right and to pursue sanctification. Regarding corrective discipline, attention must be given to the distinction between punishment and corrective discipline, as well as discipline through the rod (Dobson, 1993, pp. 306-307).

2.3.1. Punishment or Corrective Discipline

Considering these goals of discipline, which include teaching the child to choose and do what is good, it is necessary to examine which approach is more beneficial in guiding the child. Punishment aims to penalize disobedience, while corrective discipline aims to promote the formation of proper behavior. Punishment focuses on the past, on the act of disobedience, whereas corrective discipline relates not only to the past but also to the future, aiming at behavioral transformation.

The emotional consequences of punishment may include fear, guilt, and even rebellion. In contrast, corrective discipline leads to regret for wrongdoing, but also to a sense of forgiveness and confidence in future obedience (Dobson, 1993, p. 308). Parents must understand the difference between these two aspects of discipline. Corrective discipline is also modeled by God, who does not merely punish wrongdoing but also teaches how to act in future situations. He rebukes in love, as stated in Proverbs 3:11–12. Therefore, corrective

discipline emphasizes instruction and correction and is motivated by parental love and the desire for the child's well-being.

3. Discipline through the Rod

As mentioned above, the rod is necessary for child discipline, but it must be used by parents who possess the maturity and wisdom required for its proper application. This concept is often rejected by modern pedagogy, which assumes that the child is inherently good and that human nature is fundamentally good, thus rendering the rod unnecessary. However, according to the Psalmist, "Surely I was sinful at birth" (Psalm 51:5). Therefore, God has provided the necessary tools for raising children, and one of these tools is the rod. (Mureşan, 2002, pp. 167-169).

3.1. The Rod of Correction and Reproof

God has given authority to parents over their children. Parents are the first who truly know the child and are therefore able to apply discipline appropriately. The Word of God must be applied in the upbringing of the child.

Scripture commands parents: "Train up a child in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6) and "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). This correction should not necessarily consist of harsh words but should be rooted in the Word of God, which teaches, rebukes, corrects, and imparts wisdom.

3.2. The Rod

God Himself uses discipline for correction and guidance. Likewise, parents must apply it with wisdom and moderation. "Do not withhold discipline from a child... if you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from death" (Proverbs 23:13-14). The rod must be understood as a means of correction rather than as universal solution to all problems in a child's life. Parents must also understand that discipline must be applied with discernment.

It is essential to recognize limits. The child must feel safe at home and must not fear the home environment, but rather desire to return home and feel loved by the parents. Parents must discern the balance between authority and parental love. Excessive severity creates a harsh environment, while excessive permissiveness leads to rebellion. Therefore, a balance must be maintained between discipline and freedom (Dobson, 1993, p. 157-158)

4. Methods of Education

There are three primary methods by which parents teach children and transmitting biblical truths. The first is through personal example. Parents must serve as role models for their children, as children spend daily time with them and imitate their behavior. The second method is formal instruction. The third involves teaching within the intimate context of the family. (Wegner, 1990, p. 126)

4.1. The Personal Model – Education through Example

Scripture provides references that support the idea of personal education, whether positive or negative. A parent who teaches what is right but lives contrary to that teaching will nullify the effectiveness of instruction. Therefore, the parent must resemble God both in teaching and in behavior. This inconsistency represents one of the most harmful influences on the child, who receives correct teaching but observes an inadequate personal example (Brânzei, 2003, p. 76).

4.2. Oral Transmission

In the Old Testament, great emphasis is placed on oral transmission. Teaching children required repetition, reaffirmation, and emphasis. These elements were also present in daily prayers.

Children must be reminded repeatedly and educated consistently, and this is achieved through oral communication. Effective discipline requires communication, and this presupposes a relationship between parent and child based on communication. (Cohen, 1999, pp. 253-254)

4.3. The Intimate Context of the Family

One of the most important contexts is prayer. Daily family prayer gatherings provide a setting in which parents model devotion and spirituality. However, these gatherings must be carefully planned so that they do not become a stumbling block for children.

4.3.1. When and How to Conduct Family Devotions

The appropriate time varies from family to family, but the most suitable moment is often in the evening after dinner, when all family members are together. In larger families, parents must make sacrifices to maintain this practice. This time must be structured in such a way that children do not become bored but instead look forward to these moments. Communication among family members is essential. Family members should discuss personal issues and engage in meaningful conversations that attract children.

If communication is lacking, the family will suffer. Communication strengthens and unites the family. Activities such as games may also be included. These meetings should not be excessively long or too short, typically lasting between 10 and 15 minutes, although they may sometimes be longer.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the biblical understanding of the family highlights the central and irreplaceable responsibility of parents in the upbringing and formation of their children. The family is not merely a social structure, but a divinely ordained context in which children are shaped spiritually, morally, and relationally. Within this framework, discipline is not an end in itself, but a means through which the child is guided toward maturity and participation in holiness.

The purpose of discipline must therefore remain formative and redemptive, reflecting the model of God Himself, who disciplines in love for the benefit of His children. True discipline is not limited to correcting behavior but aims at shaping the heart, cultivating obedience, self-control, and respect. In this sense, discipline becomes an essential instrument in the process of sanctification, contributing to the development of a Christ-centered character.

Children must be raised according to biblical principles, within an environment where both moral values and spiritual truths are consistently taught and embodied. The role of parents is not only to instruct but also to model these truths in their daily lives, ensuring coherence between teaching and personal example. Furthermore, discipline, including the use of the rod, must be exercised with wisdom, discernment, and balance, avoiding both excessive severity and permissiveness, and always being rooted in love.

At the same time, the study has identified essential methods of education, such as personal example, repeated instruction, and spiritual formation within the intimate context of the family. These methods contribute to a holistic approach to child development, addressing both the external behavior and the inner disposition of the child.

Ultimately, the goal of Christian parenting is to raise children in the fear of the Lord, forming in them a stable spiritual foundation that will endure throughout their lives. As Scripture affirms, when a child is trained in the way he should go, he will not depart from it even in adulthood (Proverbs 22:6). Thus, faithful and biblically grounded parenting has not only immediate effects but also lasting spiritual implications for the future of the child.

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