

Teaching 2: The Role of Nurture, Discipline, and Parental Counsel

by Jan Peacocke in the series *Raising Godly Children*

Our topic today is nurture and discipline; two very vital aspects of developing our child's spiritual character and training them in the Lord. By "discipline" I am talking about the kind of coaching that we mentioned previously, and not just the correction that is often associated with that word. But first I would like to talk about the quality of nurturing. Ephesians 6:4 tells us to "provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." I have always felt that the mention of nurture first in that admonition to us as parents was significant because physically that is the first thing we do with our children. We obviously don't instruct them and correct them as babies- we nurture them. We feed them, and we cuddle them and we care for them. That is the foundation of our relationship.

In some very real ways, nurture as a foundational part of our relationship continues throughout life. Obviously they don't need us physically to care for them so much, but they still appreciate the hugs, especially in time of need. A little kiss on the cheek from one of your parents, even if you're 60 yourself, still really means something! And it's important for us to maintain those appropriate physical contacts with our children because it is a real part of life. That is one of the real tragedies of the modern emphasis on sexuality and sensuality, because it has robbed us in large part of some very appropriate emotional reinforcements through physical touch. So I do encourage you to remember that and don't hesitate to give your teenager a pat on the back or a little hug on a regular basis.

I know that was one thing that my son said he missed very much at college was those little appropriate physical encouragements and the absence of that was something that he really missed. I'm sure many of you are probably familiar with the studies that have shown excellent care for infants at home, but a real high mortality rate in orphanage situations. It has been traced basically to just the lack of touch, that if volunteers come in and just hold the babies, that that alone increases their chance of survival exponentially.

Another very important aspect of nurturing is prayer and having a prayer base. I've always prayed for my children, but in large part, I've prayed with my children or prayed over my children. I think it's important for them to hear our prayers and it's one way that we draw them into praying themselves— and certainly the most effective way to teach them how to pray.

Those of you that are familiar with the concept of the Greek and the Hebrew models of learning will really appreciate this. The Hebrews taught in large part by example and the presupposition was that a teacher was teaching by the example of their lives, whereas the Greeks talked simply about the ideas and didn't require the teachers to manifest or live out their own ideas. And we can see the negative effects of that by a society going ahead and adopting things that are purely in the idea realm, and have never been proven to be the case in the physical realm. So again, praying with your child and not just for your child is really crucial. And verbal encouragement, especially as it furthers understanding is very, very appropriate. But verbal encouragement that is based totally on reasoning or justifying our decisions I think is very inappropriate because you do not have to justify your decision and explain yourself.

In fact, that's a very large waste of time as it's been proven in studying development that children actually do not have reasonable minds until they're, normally 7 years old or older. Prior to that they really are not unable to go through the lines of inductive and deductive reasoning. That is one reason why their energies are so well spent on memorization. And we need to keep in mind what a child is really able to do— as we've talked about before in assigning physical tasks— but it's equally as true in talking to them. We must communicate on a level that they can understand and only require the kind of mental abilities that they have at that point.

Otherwise, you'll find yourself reasoning something out very well, but a child will still argue with you because they don't really see the reasonableness of the explanation. It doesn't hurt to verbally explain why, if it would increase their understanding. But I would not do it if you're simply justifying yourself— telling them why you're doing it. Say, we are going to make the child's room a guest room for some visitors. You can explain that the guest room is where these people that will not be in their own house, will be staying. You can acknowledge to the child how much you like to go into your own bed and when you're going to be sleeping someplace else, you're never quite as comfortable. So, we want to make them as comfortable as we can in here and make it like a special treat for them. So we're going to fix up the house. We're going to put some flowers in their room, or a little bowl of candy, or a little drink out for them, so that they'll know that we're really happy to have them and that they'll feel more comfortable, even though this isn't their own bed. And we can explain how we are trying to bless our guests, thinking of others over ourselves. That will encourage them to be more other-oriented— but justifying ourselves reasonably is not going to be of any value to the child, at all, until they're at an age of reason. But when they can do that, then that is an appropriate way to develop their adult skills.

We also can encourage our children by helping them when it's really necessary in physical ways, but allow them to do all the parts they can in different chores or things that they want to accomplish. They may really want to wash the car, and just not be able to reach the top, or all those kinds of things— where we can make up what is not reasonable to expect of them, but allow them to do all they can. I see this as a form of encouragement and therefore part of nurturing. I don't put rewards in this kind of category as an encouragement. I personally feel that rewards in large part develop self-interest and I'm really much more interested in developing a child's self-government.

Another aspect of nurturing that becomes increasingly important with a child's age is counseling. It's providing that little help in learning what to consider in making choices, or contrasting the immediate with the long-term goals, or helping them see an alternative to learning the hard way. By that I mean, there's so many things which the world wants to say you have to learn for yourself, but that really is the hard way. God will show us, through following His laws, an easier way to learn the same lesson. The ability to receive counsel itself is the alternate to learning the hard way, because we can find out what the Bible says, or what others who've been through this circumstance before tell us, so that we don't have to learn the hard way. So teaching your child how to seek out and receive counsel is itself a very needed skill. I know most of us, if we have a new computer program, would much rather have someone come by and show us how to work that program than try to just figure it all out from scratch ourselves.

And much of life is that way. If we just learn how to ask for people's good counsel, we can save ourselves a good deal of the difficulties that otherwise would come our way. Being able to give and receive counsel also facilitates what we call "generational transfer", especially with teens. If we want our families to grow and build on each generation, it requires the communication between the two so that our children are able to benefit from what we've already accomplished and start from there, rather than having to redo what we've done.

In the natural I have an example in my own family, where my great grandparents made the immigration to the United States, therefore establishing our family in this area. Then my grandparents were able to acquire businesses and a secure financial situation for our families. Although the depression was difficult, it was not horrible for either of my parents' families. And as a result, both of my parents were able to finish high school and, although they had to work their way through college, they were able to go because they had finished high school. Then when it came to my generation, my parents having been through college, had an even more secure financial situation and I actually only had to

work part-time and did not have debt when I came out of college. My children have been able to take that same situation with them and have been able to go to college, have to work part-time and watch their finances, but not go into the significant debt that many have to for college. So each generation built on the previous one and benefited from it, and I would expect my children to make the same sacrifices and provide the same for their grandchildren as we did for them.

As a result, each generation will have the benefit of the past, and will not just be always digging their way out, but will be able to work forward. One of the blessings of prosperous families is the ability to support members with special gifts and go beyond the provision for the basics of life and have some choice. That is, of course, the benefit of prosperity for the nation as a whole, rather than being consumed with the need for just food and shelter. Instead we're able to develop arts and culture. In the Christian community, I would particularly like to see this, as I'm sure we all would. With the degeneration of art forms in our somewhat collapsing society, it would be very wonderful to have more Christian artists able to fill the gap, as we are able to support them.

When counseling, we have the opportunity of motivating our children in other ways besides self-interest. Self-interest, of course, comes naturally. But when we counsel with our children, we're able to point out what God's laws and principles are in the situation. We show them how they do work and help to develop the spiritual understanding that's necessary for them to come to a decision based on those spiritual principles. In this regard, a study of Proverbs 1 is particularly encouraging, and I would recommend each of you do that.

In regards to nurturing and disciplining our children, I'd like to insert a little section here on what our commitment as a parent has to be. And this is, of course, at least a 15–20-year commitment to each child really. So part of it can compound out there, but our free time becomes pretty much always on call with our children. It's good for parents to take time out, to have a weekend or two together during the year and have dates now and then and an occasional vacation. But in general, we're always interruptible by our children and our free time is not really very protected if we are really watching their life and how it develops.

We have to do the work when it's needed, when the opportunity comes. When the heart is open of the child or when the emergency happens, we have to be willing to sacrifice our own free time and interrupt our own goals in order to help them with theirs. Because again, they have to be a very primary goal to us. We

also have to be willing to show true love, a biblical love, and not just what I call a sloppy agape that is always making excuses or covering up for the other person. Because true love will want that child to really be conformed and become all that they can be.

A parent also has to appreciate diversity. Each of our children are going to have unique personalities. It is just really amazing in a large family how each child will still be very distinctive, and we need to appreciate the diversity and nurture that also. If one child is artistic and another is athletic, that broadens our perspective too. Even if we ourselves are more athletic and feel a more natural comradery with the athletic one, the artistic one will draw out of us areas that maybe aren't as developed. We need to appreciate the diversity that God has placed in them and not try to conform them all to the same thing. That's sort of like someone who only eats hamburgers and mashed potatoes— they miss so much joy in eating because they have such a limited palate. We don't want to be like that in the Spirit. Certainly, as a parent, our responsibility is to develop who that child is rather than making them into a clone of our preferences.

Hopefully this will develop us, as I indicated, into a more rounded person in Christ. We also are going to be setting an example to our children. As parents we have to decide where is our reality going to be? Is it going to be eternal with Christ? Is that going to be where we're setting our own faith and encouraging ourselves to grow? Or are we going to have so much interest in the natural world that our children cannot see the importance of the spiritual? Or if we don't think it's important, why would they think it's important? It's even less real to a child than it is to an adult, in most cases. We need to live our priorities. Again, back to that Greek versus the Hebrew model. A lot of what children are going to do is based on what we do more than what we say. So that commitment is the biggest one I think we have to make as parents.

When we're talking about methods of discipline- with our long-run goal of seeing our child conformed to the image of Christ, to become as much as they can be and to fulfill the purpose and their destiny in the Lord- we really have to evaluate things, not so much on their immediate effect, but take the long view and determine what the ultimate fruit of that method would be. We need to consider what the presuppositions of the method are, particularly whether it presupposes that man is basically good and can bring himself to perfection. In other words, if man is god, or if there is a God, that has standards and does have purpose for us.

We do also need to be very aware of going for convenience, which of course is a hallmark of the modern age. Just because a particular method has reestablished peace in the situation or brought it under our control again, does not really mean that it has accomplished our purpose necessarily. It sort of reminds me of someone who had left a salad bowl out with food in it in the sun. The lettuce was really baked onto that wood and you could soak it off until it would rub off, or you could get it done quick with a little cleanser. But of course, we all know if you use the cleanser, you're going to have big scratches on that bowl from getting off that lettuce. And next time, of course, you'll have more trouble because the scratches will hold food, even when it isn't being baked on, and in the end, that short-term fix is going to be a long-term problem. So really consider your methods of discipline whether they are just a stopgap measure that may be doing more harm than good.

Some specific things to avoid are anger, and the use of anger, or other forms of emotional manipulation, on our children. We don't want them reacting out of fear, or some kind of performance that they only get your love if you approve of what they're doing. That performance-based love can really can warp a person's sense of worth before God. Each person is really worthy before God, and God obviously loved us despite our sins and our imperfections. We need to have our children understand that we also have that type of love for them and not have love based on performance because each one of us fails so miserably, so often. To have your self-worth and your sense of acceptance with your parents at risk every time you make a mistake is really what I would call cruel and unusual punishment. It's certainly not unusual in the world, but it should be in the church.

Anger of course, is biblically shown to be very destructive for everyone concerned. Other forms of psychological abuse and manipulation, which seem to be acceptable to the world, we definitely in the Lord do not want to subject our children to. Reasoning, as we said, is sometimes of no value whatsoever because the child lacks the development to follow your line of reasoning. We also want to remember that without a conscience, only self-interest is reasonable. So what kind of character are you trying to promote? And that's why I really feel that reasoning is a mistake. Trying to reason with your child to convince them to do the right thing in your opinion is really counterproductive. You can reason through a situation with them guiding them through the scripture and through biblical principles, but just using reasonable progressions is counterproductive to our goals as Christian parents trying to develop character— this at least is in regard to character. There are times if you're counseling them about what school to go to, jobs to take, cars to buy, where reasoning is appropriate. But when we're talking spiritually, then we want to

always be reasoning from principle and not from the result that we're trying to achieve, but from the principle that's involved in the situation.

Another thing to be aware of is behavior modification. It's very popular because, again, it appears to be very effective. It's a quick fix. But I'll ask you this. If changing the speed limit from 65 to 55 caused behavior modification, which it clearly did, instead of everybody going 70, they now go 60— that's because the human tendency is always to press the limit, and everyone sort of knew that they had five miles an hour grace. So the flow of traffic just went down 10 miles an hour, but it didn't go down to what the speed limit was. Because modification can control, but it doesn't really change our attitude. So unless we had an attitude that wanted to obey and wanted to be within the law, we simply modified our behavior. We didn't conform to the new law, we simply modified it. So again, this is an example of what you are really trying to accomplish with your child.

Sparingly behavior modification may work in a pinch, but it certainly should not be a normal form of discipline or you're not going to be developing character in your child. You are just keeping them within a line but not giving them the strength to establish standards and hold them themselves.

The last point in this regard is rewards. As I said earlier, I would use them very sparingly because there is that tendency for them to just develop self-interest and not self-government. As such it is just a very carnal motivation, much like the behavior modification, it's not really dealing with the character of the child. It's simply controlling their action rather than molding their will.

I'm going to go through a few other issues and comments that will maybe give you some insight on application or how I at least approach situations with my children at various ages. And they are things that every parent faces.

Frustration, a child gets horribly frustrated— and certainly we all have sympathy with that because we ourselves have allowed ourselves to get that way more than once. When that happens to stop the child in their activity, whatever it is that's frustrating them, you can discuss that spiritual issue that's allowed them to get to a point of agitation and anxiety where they're really unable to function as they want to. They've gotten out of the peace of God, and they need to settle down and reconsider and think through, again, what is going on. And you can let them know that you'll work with them- that you'll help them work through the situation. They do need to be confronted about it, but you can help them as they try to work it through. Then if it comes that they are not really trying to work it through and they don't really want to get it done, then that is another issue. If it

was something that they just want to give up on, you will have to evaluate whether that is a lack of diligence on their part or if that is appropriate- that they should not have started it in the first place, and that that shows good judgment to just stop the situation.

Sometimes the frustration is they're given a job that they really don't want to do. So they want it to go quicker or easier than the reality of what it is. And again, you have to work through and help develop their strength of character for them to work it out until the job is accomplished.

Discouragement is another related item to frustration. I always wanted my children to understand that sometimes they were discouraged because things were hard and they weren't necessarily measuring up to the expectations or the hopes that either one of us had. But even if it wasn't who they were right then, frequently it was a situation where it was who they could be, if they were willing to grow and try harder.

Every one of us has had circumstances where there's something that we have wanted very much and we've had to make that choice whether we were going to work for it or just drop it. The movies on tv, the biographies especially, of people that have had to overcome great odds, this is the type of thing that you're trying to build into your child. Hopefully they can get that strength of character without having to overcome a real strong handicap or disability. So working through it with them again and encouraging them in it is important. We must be willing to help them through it to whatever extent is appropriate for their age and it's another way that we lay down our lives for them.

In large part, as a mother, I felt I was what I called an "enabler". I never really did the job or necessarily finished the job, but I enabled them to do it. And that was what was really important, because they were my project- for them to be successful meant I was successful.

Challenges- let's talk about a 3-year-old, tired, child who is ornery and cranky and starts crying and carrying on because they are tired and they want to go home. Or they are tired and they want to play and you know they should lay down. Or they don't want to lay down where you've instructed them to lay down and rest so that they are grumpy. This is really a test of the child's self-government and whether or not we are going to require that of them. A lot of parents, especially with the younger child, just try to manipulate the circumstances and make them more convenient for the child so that they will not really have these challenges. But I feel like that's a disservice to the child.

Say your church has a Sunday or a Wednesday evening service and you don't go because your child doesn't like to sleep there, or you don't want to have to deal with their unhappiness about laying down there, or you're just not willing to make the sacrifice required to train your child to be cooperative in that situation. Now what you're doing then is telling the child that their convenience is more important than your commitment to the Lord and His body, or that their convenience is something that they have a right to. I think it's very important that even a small child to learn how to give in some meaningful ways. And going to a meeting and laying down in somebody else's house on a sleeping bag in the other room is something that any 3-year-old child ought to be able to do. They ought to be able to be told to be quiet, not talk even if there are other children in the room. And if all the parents agree on that standard and enforce it, it'll only take a couple times for the children to understand that that is how it is going to be. Every one of us needs to learn how to perform well, even if we're stretched.

Now, we don't want to snap our kids, or test them beyond what they can bear, or bring them to exasperation. But again, we don't want to give them such a protected environment that they never have the opportunity to grow Christian characters. One aspect of a Christian character is that ability to sacrifice for others. One part of real love is seeking the other person's good at your cost. This is a little way that a child is able to do that for the rest of the family. It's important for them to see that the Lord is important to you. I think for a mother to be able to have that time of fellowship, prayer, encouragement and worship in the word with other members of the body is very important. Probably more important at this point in your life than any other because so much of your time is taken up with very mundane and what on the surface appear to be very carnal, physical transitory kind of needs. But they all do reflect a spiritual pattern and you need to have that encouragement and strengthening that comes from being with the body.

The New Testament makes it very clear that we're not to forsake the fellowshiping together, and that that is a very important thing— and it really is for our benefit besides being a way that we're able to express our love to Christ.

Extending grace to our child in a meaningful way means that, just like Christ gave us His nature in the place for our sin nature, it means that we help our children to have that ability to obey. If we don't require them to strengthen their spiritual muscles, they're not going to be able to run the race. And if we start when they're young with the challenges and make them small challenges, hopefully they will never have those big and overwhelming situations come on them. Because when a large situation comes on them, it will not be

overwhelming because they will know what their capacities are. They will know when they need to go to the Lord and they will have experience doing that and will be able to do it.

If we protect our children from all discomfort or inconvenience, we may make our life a little easier for a time, but we limit their ability to grow. It's sort of like if you only allow a child to run the hundred-meter dash. They'll never be able to find out if they really are a marathon runner. We need to give our children the chance to run a long race. That really is the best opportunity we can provide for them and the most wealth. The strongest inheritance we can give them is a character that allows them to attempt to achieve all that Christ has in front of them. We want them to be able to take advantage of the gifts God has given them and be able to bless others with them. We need to look at it that way, just like if using the athletic analogies because Paul, you know, used those analogies of those that compete.

There's always some pain, right? The world says "no pain, no gain." Athletically there's always some pain- there's discomfort, there's challenge. But meeting those challenges and having that success is an encouragement that he can build on for the next challenge. The child really is able to do more. He has something in him that he can really give to help others in a point of discouragement or to help others as they overcome their frustration or to help others that really aren't going to be able to provide for themselves in some way— but our child will be able to do that provision, because they have been equipped and they have grown and they have met that challenge and they're able to serve. Serving really is what Christ did for us. He really was servant of all. And that, if we are to be conformed to His image, has to be a large part of our goal. Part of our purpose in life is to be able to serve others on Christ's behalf.

When we come to a challenge with our children where there's overt disobedience or clear rebellion and we really are required to discipline them in a corrective way, that correction needs to involve some very real consequences because life always has real consequences. Now, biblically, the pre-adolescent child is normally corrected in this way with the rod, and that is seen as the most appropriate action. That is because there is a clear consequence there. But we need to remember that also, when it comes to true repentance, that both apology and restitution are necessary components. Now a child can pay the consequence and doesn't necessarily feel remorse. You cannot require the remorse as such from a child, but you can require the restitution. I really feel that you should require restitution because otherwise you are leaving them with the impression that they can be disobedient or rebellious and that there is no real consequence to that action. So, it is important that

there always be a consequence and that you do not shield them from that spiritual reality.

The Bible tells us that some sins follow before and some after (1 Timothy 5:24). There will be a lot of people that thought they had gotten away with something in life, but when they get before the judgment seat will find that they wish they had taken care of it earlier. I, for one, would much rather resolve my sins here and seek forgiveness and do the restitution than have it brought up before the throne of God. And I think that training our children to have that attitude and understand that perspective is very important.

I don't want to leave this topic without talking a bit about grace, because that is something that each one of us really needs. It's what Christ gives us and it's what we need to be able to extend to our children. It's very important that we pray about it and really try to discern in the Holy Spirit what the appropriate time and place is for grace and how that grace should be shown. It's not necessarily the grace of wiping everything clear, but it can be a grace of allowing our children to obey or help them through a situation that they just don't quite have the strength for, that perhaps we thought they did. Just as Christ does that for us, we are to represent those qualities to our children. Again, this is a chance for us to manifest a Christlike character and to grow as an individual on our children's behalf.

That strong love we have for our children seems to make that easier for us to do for our children than it does for anybody else. And in that way, it is another blessing of parenthood that it can build that into our character. It allows us, after our parenting days have been completed, to be able to extend to others also because we have built up that strength and gifting in our own character. And hopefully we've put that also in our children by example, and that our grandchildren will also benefit from appropriately applied grace. God doesn't keep care of every one of our problems because the problems of course, are meant to strengthen us. But He does know when we have more than we can bear, and we too need to be aware of that with our children.

So in summary, parents are like good coaches. We're supposed to be aware of the growth of our children's abilities and be able to encourage them to use those growing abilities. To not to just stay at a certain level of spiritual development, but to stretch forth and grow themselves and be able to serve others more. We need to be there to support them emotionally and in prayer, by accountability, by encouragement, and by giving our good counsel. That's something that we will do throughout our life. That's something that we do with

our spouses. That's something that we'll do with our small children, our grown children, our friends in Christ! It just means that we as individuals have this extra encouragement to grow in these gifting because of our love for our children and our desire to see them be fulfilled Christians.

In difficult circumstances, or where discipline is required, we want to consider the spiritual perspective and the long-term perspective above the immediate or easier options available. And that, of course, is the hardest one because so often things seem to be, "oh, it'd just be so much easier to let this one go." But if we really take just a moment to consult with the Holy Spirit, we will, most often, find that no, this is an opportunity. That this really is another manifestation of a root situation that we're trying to get at. And that's going to be the next topic, how to discern those root situations and how to use what I call "themes to help with our own spiritual development."

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