

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCIPLINE

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There are some words which immediately call forth a positive, affirmative, favorable reaction. These include such words as holiday, vacation, gift, exciting, happiness, fun and many others. There are other words which are less popular. These are words like work, sacrifice, duty, responsibility, and discipline. Discipline is a word which is particularly out of step with our time. Ours is a permissive, indulgent age. It is an age emphasizing no controls, no restraints and no limitations. Both external and internal restrictions are unpopular. We can see this in such concrete matters as the rising crime rate which is increasing five times faster than the general population. One of the greatest needs of our day is discipline and for that reason we suggest this study of the subject.

In the Nation

Since we are a democracy in our nation, the people make the laws through their representatives. Over a period of many years these laws which affect almost every phase of man's behavior have been forged by the needs of our civilization. But the question comes, "What happens when people do not live by the nation's laws? What avenues of discipline does a nation have to enforce obedience to its laws?"

There are at least six ways in which violators of law can be disciplined. A verbal reprimand may be sufficient for some very minor infractions. Occasionally, an officer will simply give an oral warning to one who has made a mistake in driving. For those infractions that are more serious fines may be imposed. Social disapproval is still another means of bringing people to respect law. This was used particularly in Colonial times when offenders were locked in the public stocks and subjected to the gaze of passers by. Still another disciplinary measure is the withdrawal of privileges, such as terminating an automobile driver's license, or cancelling a passport. For more serious misdemeanors there is imprisonment, and, though it is seldom used in our land today, the ultimate penalty is that of death itself. All of these are avenues by which a nation can discipline lawbreakers and protect its system of law and order. Perhaps it is not out of place to point out that when a nation becomes unable to discipline offenders, anarchy results. The next step is the chaotic downfall of the nation itself. This should cause us some concern, for ours is a day in which law and order are in decline.

In the Home

Moving to another area of great practical importance, we come to consider discipline in the home. Obviously, the rules in the home are made by parents. Just here, let us pause to emphasize a very fundamental matter in connection with all discipline problems. Whether it be the laws by which a nation is regulated, or the regulations in a family, it is imperative that these rules and regulations be thoroughly and carefully taught to those who are to be subject to them. It is important for the laws of the land to be understood and accepted by the citizenry. Their usefulness needs to be demonstrated, so that decent people will have a desire to respect the laws. Perhaps even more important is it that the children in a family understand the restrictions which their parents impose upon them. They need not only to know the rules, but to understand the motives behind the rules. Only when regulations are clearly understood and genuinely appreciated is there a foundation out of which they can be respected.

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In enforcing the rules of a home, there are four avenues which are available to parents: (1) Verbal reprimand, in which parents talk with children when they have violated some regulation and explain the necessity of compliance with the rule. (2) Social disapproval, by which the family's social pressure is brought to bear upon the offender. (3) Withdrawal of privileges, such as the forfeiting of the right to use the family car, or the removal of certain freedoms. (4) Physical punishment, which is especially useful in the earlier years of a child's life. There comes a time, of course, when reason is more meaningful than a spanking in deterring a child from misbehavior.

Neglected

In view of the fact that discipline is so widely neglected in the American home of our day, it might be well to analyze some of the reasons for this neglect. There are at least four: First, discipline requires strength and courage on the part of the parents. There are many parents who take the easy way out for the moment and allow things to drift alone. The idea that everything will work out all right is widely held, but tragically misleading. Before one is old enough to marry, he ought to be mature enough to rear children. No young person should enter marriage until he is grown up. Only then is he in a position to have the strength and the courage to administer the necessary discipline which children need. The easy way out is almost always the wrong way out.

In the second place, proper discipline takes time. There needs to be time to study the entire situation, to listen to all sides of the question, and then to meditate upon the right decision. Many people who are apparently outstanding in their professions are notably inadequate in administering discipline in the home, largely because they have so little time to give to the matter. In the third place, discipline must come from disciplined lives. It is not possible for those who rebel against their own superiors to administer discipline to their children. Unless there is respect for authority and self-discipline on the part of the parents, it is almost certain that they will not be able to instill these qualities in their children. Fourth and finally, discipline must grow out of love. The child must realize that the parent loves him and has his good at heart. It was Augustine who said, "Love me and then say anything to me and about me that you like," Richard Baxter, the famous English preacher of the last century, added, "We take all things well from one who always and wholly loves us." These are at least some of the factors that keep modern parents from being very effective in the disciplining of their children. Fortunately each of these is a hindrance which can be removed if the parents genuinely wish to do so.

In the Church

With these areas as background for our observations, let us now consider discipline in the church. Here, God makes the rules, and we might add that he makes the rules of conduct for our own good. He loves us and therefore teaches us to live in ways that are for our happiness here and ultimate good hereafter. But what are the avenues through which the church can administer discipline to those who violate God's teaching? Obviously, some forms of discipline are inappropriate. Fines can hardly be levied against disobedient Christians. Nor is physical punishment a very satisfactory solution. Imprisonment is out of the question. What then are the disciplinary avenues that are appropriate?

God's plan for the church is that it should be ruled by elders. In I Tim. 3, Titus 1, and I Peter 5, we have the qualifications of elders. They are to be mature men, both in their behavior and in their understanding of God's will. Christians are to be subject to them, as we read in Heb. 13:7, 17, "Remember them that had the rule over you, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith. . . Obey them that have the rule over you,

and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of our souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief; for this were unprofitable for you."

Their first responsibility is that of teaching the will of God to all members of the church. The Christian must be plainly taught and clearly understood. It is a matter of admonition and exhortation. It is a matter of persuasion. The Bible, of course, is the source of the teaching. It is to be done in the vein that Paul wrote to Timothy, "I charge thee in the sight of God. . . preach the word, be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." (II Tim. 4:1-2.) But, what is to be done if someone then persists in violating God's will?

Fellowship

The answer is simple. There is only one avenue of church discipline. It is the withdrawal of fellowship. Perhaps the clearest case found in the New Testament is that which we read in I Cor. 5:1, 5, 9-11, 13, "It is actually reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not even among the Gentiles, that one of you hath his father's wife. . . Deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. . . I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators; not at all meaning with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolators; for then must ye needs go out of the world: but as it is, I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one, no not to eat. . . Put away the wicked man from among yourselves."

The motive for this withdrawal and not eating with the sinful Christian is to save the sinner. The primary motive must be to save the sinner. In II Cor. 2: 5-11, we find the apostle Paul writing about the man of whom he had spoken in the earlier letter, and saying, "Ye should rather forgive him and comfort him, lest by any means such a one should be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you to confirm your love toward him." In other words, the man had been led to repentance and now it was time to restore fellowship with him.

II Thess. 3:6, 14-15, adds emphasis, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us. . . And if any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle, note that man, that ye have no company with him, to the end that he may be ashamed. And yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." To this we would add Gal. 6:1, "Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any tresspass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Finally, on this point we would add James 5:19-20 which says, "My brethren, if any among you err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he who converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins."

To Protect the Church

There is yet another motive for administering church discipline. It is to protect the church. Discipline is often needed because there are hypocrites in the church. Negligent Christians hinder the influence of the Lord in his church and therefore need to be disciplined. Inadequately taught Christians may leave the wrong impression on those outside the body of Christ and thereby hinder the church. They need admonition and teaching. We find this emphasis in Romans 16:17-18, "Now

I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they bequile the hearts of the innocent."

We might also remember, though the circumstances are vastly different, that because of the damage being done to the model church at Jerusalem severe punishment was administered to Ananias and Sapphira. God, who knew their hearts and lives as no mere man can know the heart and life of another man, simply caused them to fall down dead, because they had lied to the Holy Spirit. This is not a type of discipline that could be administered by anyone other than God himself, but it does demonstrate that there are times when discipline must be meted out because of the damage being done to the church itself.

Something of this same emphasis is to be found in II John 9-11 which reads, "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If anyone cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not unto your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works."

Conclusion

It is difficult to understand why in the church today there is so little discipline administered. One wonders why. The answer is to be found in the fact that it is extremely difficult to know what to do and also to know how to do it. We cannot be unsympathetic to elders who find it difficult to take the lead in this extremely difficult undertaking. Also, it is likely true that the most truly good men feel unworthy to correct others. Their humility leads them to turn away from the condemnation of others who really need some kind of discipline. And, of course, men who are not good cannot administer discipline because of the impediment of their own lives. Still further, there is little teaching either from the pulpit or in classes on this subject of discipline. All of these combine to lead the church today to be relatively inactive in this important sphere of administering discipline.

In a sense, the situation in the church today is very much like it would be if the parents in a family simply did a thorough job of teaching the rules of the home, yet did not follow it up with correction. Most congregations do a rather extensive job of teaching from the pulpit and in classes, but then leave it to the members of the congregation to determine to what degree they will follow the teachings. When the Christians violate God's law little is said by way of admonition and reproof, and seldom indeed is there a case of formally withdrawing fellowship from a brother who is in sin. Without being critical of anyone, let us all resolve to be more concerned in our homes and in the church to love those who are violating the rules and regulations enough to administer the discipline that they need to help them be successful in their lives.

We need to read more often than we do Paul's words to the Ephesians, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27.) Let us also remember that if we reach heaven, we must bring our wills and desires under subjection to the will of Christ. In Matt. 16:24, our Lord said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny (discipline) himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."
