

The Practice of Affirmation and Discipline

This past Sunday, I taught on the 5th Commandment, which is to honor our parents. As a follow up on that message, I would like to share a few more thoughts about parenting. I am no expert on marriage and the family. I, like many of you, am learning on the job and can share more extensively on what I have done wrong, more than right. Roxanne and I have learned about the practice of **Affirmation and Discipline**. I believe these two parenting commitments are Biblical and reflect in many ways how God our Father relates to us, His children.

Affirmation helps enable the God-given personality of our children to flourish. By affirmation, I am not advocating a “self-esteem” philosophy that makes our child the center of his/her universe. True affirmation seeks to build confidence and identity in our children as they have been “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God (Ps. 139:14). So often, we practice appreciation which seeks to express positive re-enforcement for what a child does. While this is critical, appreciation roots our loving, positive response to the child based on their performance. Affirmation seeks to esteem who our children are, uniquely created by God. Enhancing your child’s identity through affirming who they are; uniquely created by God, is one of the greatest contributions you can make to your children’s life. But, we must balance affirmation and discipline.

The Bible is clear. We and our children, while wonderfully and fearfully made, are also sinners. In fact, the Bible teaches not only that we “have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), but we were “sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:6). What this means is that our children not only need to be affirmed, they must be disciplined. If affirmation enhances a positive self-image, then discipline teaches respect for authority and provides clear moral and spiritual boundaries. Discipline is not only the basis for respect of authority, but it also breeds wisdom. “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother” (Prov. 29:15). A lack of discipline can create moral confusion in children, unrest within the family, and chaos in a society. “Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul” (Prov. 29:17).

Discipline is not just punishment, even though it carries a punitive dynamic. Discipline is instruction. Discipline seeks to teach the good and perfect ways of the Lord. “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4 NASB). As parents, we all know this is extremely hard to do. Discipline demands consistency, wisdom, and a lot of love. It is essential for the sake the souls of our children. Below are a few practical suggestions about discipline:

Defined boundaries and expectations should be communicated clearly. God has chosen to clearly communicate his rules. He gave us 10 commandments. Jesus summarized this in two commandments. We should not only make the boundaries clear, but I encourage us to have fewer, rather than more rules.

Avoid unannounced rules. Depending on the mood of the parent and the actions of the day, a bad day can lead to unannounced rules, punitive measures enacted, and then, rules forgotten. Coming up with new rules when our children irritate us is counter-productive.

Delineate with loving wisdom the difference between normal childishness and willful defiance. The former may call for a word of encouragement; the latter calls for punitive action.

Discipline when it is an issue of the will, shaping of the character, or mistreatment of others. Being silly and irritating is one thing. Being disrespectful and disobedient is an entirely different matter. Discipline seeks to instill godly character, shape the will and character, and teaches respect and responsibility towards God and His representative authority. Discipline includes instruction, punishment, restitution, and the asking and receiving of forgiveness.

Start early. Waiting until a child starts school is merely creating a challenge for the school teaching the child and setting him/her up for failure. Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. What some think is cute, if not addressed, becomes the seed of rebellion. There are some things children grow out of; the need for discipline is not one of them.

Discipline each child uniquely. I grew up in a home with a mentally handicapped sister. There was never a sense that she was different because of her handicap, yet my parents affirmed and disciplined her uniquely. Our children are not doughnuts made on an assembly line. We need to discipline and affirm them, as they are uniquely made, according to their needs. Paul says this in regards to the tongue: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs...” (Eph. 4:29).

Discipline with wisdom. Avoid making any rules that you know full well you are not going to be able to enforce. Show your children what you expect. Do not punish when you are angry. Always discipline with instruction on what the boundary was, how the child crossed the boundary, and why the boundary was in place, followed with the expressions of affection.

Be consistent. Communicate the boundaries. Communicate the consequence of crossing the boundaries. Enforce the punishment.

Punishment should be done privately and culminated with instruction, affection, and affirmation.

Great Peace in the Lord,
Eddie