

ACCEPTING DISCIPLINE

Proverbs 29:1-3, 12-20

The word “discipline” has a negative connotation in the opinion of many people. For some, the word is associated with punishment rather than “a means to bring order and meaningful behavior into our lives.”

Discipline begins with cognizance of observed behavior. If it is good behavior, then discipline would lead us to continue with that behavior. If the behavior resulted in error, then discipline would be required to take corrective action. The realization of error might be a result of self-discovery or could be pointed out by someone else who brings the “cause and effect” relationship to our attention. We could say this type of discovery is very much akin to conviction. Whether the behaviors involved are physical, emotional, or spiritual; discipline involves decisions to take deliberate actions to either eliminate the error (with its attendant bad results) or to enhance the good behavior.

The Goal – 29:1-3

¹ A man who hardens his neck after much reproof Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy. ² When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, But when a wicked man rules, people groan. ³ A man who loves wisdom makes his father glad, But he who keeps company with harlots wastes his wealth. Proverbs 29:1–3 (NASB95)

Most translations of verse one give us a message that “continued irresponsible behavior of a rebellious (difficult) person will eventually catch up with the person and the results can be disastrous.” Unfortunately, this happens even when those who care about the person give repeated warnings (reproofs) of what will probably happen. We can think of many such situations that can lead to problems that can’t be readily solved (broken beyond remedy). Typical physical life examples are smoking that leads to lung cancer or emphysema, alcohol consumption that can addict and destroys a person’s liver, habitually driving at excessive speeds that end in an auto accident, always being late for work which results in being fired from the job, and the list goes on.

This message also has a spiritual application that all of us have heard during invitation times in worship services. Some of us may have also used this argument when trying to convince a friend to accept God’s salvation rather than continuing to delay to some later time. Now is the right time for salvation because we have no guarantee of tomorrow.

We can find examples in the Old Testament of nations to which this warning applied. The first and most obvious example was the pre-flood world that was destroyed. Another example is that of the Jews prior to the exile that Jeremiah prophesied about. Their entire history was such that they would rebel, they would be reprovved, they would have a short-term repentance and the cycle would repeat and the rebellion would become worse with each cycle. They knew what they should do but were undisciplined in their behavior and God eventually acted strongly to get their attention.

Then GOD said of these people: “Since they loved to wander this way and that, never giving a thought to where they were going, I will now have nothing more to do with them— except to note their guilt and punish their sins.” GOD said to me, “Don’t pray that everything will turn out all right for this people. When they skip their meals in order to pray, I won’t listen to a thing they say. When they redouble their prayers, bringing all kinds of offerings from their herds and crops, I’ll not accept them. I’m finishing them off with war and famine and disease.” Jeremiah 14:10-12

The implication and application of these verses to our nation today are sobering to say the least.

The English translation of this first verse in the Septuagint gives us a different message perspective that seems to be complementary to the second verse in this chapter. That translation

is as follows:

A reprover is better than a stiff-necked man: for when the latter is suddenly set on fire, there shall be no remedy.

This version of verse one appears to be in reference to those who are in positions of authority such as kings or governors. The implication is that a leader who cares for his people will “reprove” (give corrective rebukes) them multiple times so that they will change their ways and become disciplined in their behavior. Most parents have done this very thing in dealing with their children. You tell them once and once again and hopefully by the fifth or sixth time they will finally “get it” and do the right thing. This is also the example of God’s dealing with Israel especially during the time of the Judges.

The contrast that is presented in that of a leader who is not very patient and easily becomes angry (suddenly set on fire) to the point of using severe punishment against those who rebel against him.

If verse two was intended to be parallel to verse one, then we see that when the leader is “a reprover” and encourages his people to become disciplined, then things go well for the nation and people are happy when they properly respond to the reproofs. If the discipline of the leader is immediate punishment rather than reproof, then the people suffer. This second alternative was typically what happened when a nation was conquered by an aggressive power that came into an area and ruled with harshness. This type behavior was typical of much of the history of the world with the many wars of aggression. A notable exception to this general historical course of events occurred at the end of World War II. At the end of World War II, our nation went about to rebuild those who were conquered and the world became a better place because of what was done.

The emphasis in verse three shifts from a national or global perspective to a personal application of parenting and the response of their children. Nothing makes a parent happier that for their children to do what is right and, therefore, are able to enjoy life. Conversely, when that does not happen, then the costs can be high. There will, of course, be high emotional costs to parents and there can also be increased economic burdens if terrible things happen when a child behaves irresponsibly. A common example of this could be a teenager who drinks and drives and causes an accident and there are lawsuits involved which could result in financial ruin for the family. The example mentioned in the text regarding association with harlots could be expanded to include a multitude of bad activities that can be costly to a young adult. The prodigal son is such an example of a young person who wasted his inheritance on riotous living.

The spiritual application of this example is that we (as Christians) have been entrusted by God with the good news of God’s salvation and we have been enabled with gifts that should be used in carrying out the “family business” of making the Gospel known. When we act with wisdom and conduct ourselves in alignment with Godly precepts then we are pleasing to our Heavenly Father. If we get caught up in the ways of the world and embrace other philosophies (spiritual harlotry), then we are misusing or throwing away the benefits God has entrusted to us.

The Availability – 29:12-14

¹² If a ruler pays attention to falsehood, All his ministers become wicked. ¹³ The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: The LORD gives light to the eyes of both. ¹⁴ If a king judges the poor with truth, His throne will be established forever. Proverbs 29:12–14 (NASB95)

The emphasis on discipline shifts back to leadership and to those in such positions. Disciplined leadership is certainly needed in governing a nation, a state, county or city. It is obviously needed in whatever organization or entity we can think of. If leaders are not

disciplined, then there are not checks and balances that keep the organization on the right path to accomplish the purpose for which it exists. Of course, we realize that this applies to our churches and to our families as well as to civil governments.

Apparently, a key discipline for anyone in a leadership or ruler position is to insist on the truth. When a leader lets down his guard on this point, then those who are interacting with him may see an opportunity to shade the truth or to deliberately lie so they might gain some personal advantage. There have always been some people who have no inhibitions regarding lying. It seems that in the past several decades that the percentage of people in leadership roles has grown in such a way that those who have little or no regard for truth are in the majority. Clear examples can be seen during an election season when candidates deliberately give misinformation about their opponents in an attempt to create false impressions regarding those opponents. If a person would do this to be elected, then he or she would not let the truth inhibit their behavior if they are elected and we wind up with “government officials” who act in an unjust manner. We see this in our judicial system in which prosecutors are less interested in “justice” than they are about winning.

The outcome of such evil is that some people find themselves being unjustly oppressed. This can happen to those who do not have the financial means to hire a good attorney to present a proper defense. As we see in verse thirteen, both the oppressed and the oppressor know the truth in such situations. If leaders are wicked, then they ignore the truth, disregard justice, and attempt to promote their careers with a positive “cases won” record. If that happens, the success they achieve will not be long lasting and certainly will be judged for what it was in the Day of Judgment. Those who want to obtain long-lasting success will apply the discipline of truth to every situation or case that comes to them for judgment. It is ironic that those who judge unjustly during their time on earth will have perfect justice applied to them in the final judgment. Their life’s record will be opened and any attempt to plead ignorance for their evil will not be allowed since “the Lord gave light to their eyes.” This should remind us of the comments Paul made in the first chapter of Roman where he stated

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Romans 1:18–20 (NASB95)

By implication, we can apply the same “cause and effect” logic to ourselves in making judgments in situations that we encounter in the normal course of living. We are faced with decisions and choices many times every day. If we want to make the right choices and if we want to be “established” in our individual lives, then we need to be careful to apply the discipline of truth when we need to make decisions.

The Responsibility – 29:15-17

¹⁵ The rod and reproof give wisdom, But a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother. ¹⁶ When the wicked increase, transgression increases; But the righteous will see their fall. ¹⁷ Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; He will also delight your soul. Proverbs 29:15–17 (NASB95)

The subject matter is back to the parent-child interaction and we see in these verses the clear responsibility of the parents to provide proper guidance to their children so they can enjoy some measure of success in their lives. As has been emphasized again and again throughout these sayings of Solomon, wisdom is essential and without someone to guide a child in the right paths there will be many errors made as various possible actions are attempted.

Although life and life's choices are very complex, Solomon realized that most of us eventually sort through the choices so that we end up with only two practical options. We see this throughout the Proverbs. There is a right way and a wrong way. We take action or we remain passive. We choose the way of life or the way of death. The paths of life lead to heaven or hell. Parents can be interactive in the development of their children's sense of value or they can turn it over the cartoons on TV or to the Day Care workers, to the public schools, or even to a Sunday School teacher.

Parental responsibility most certainly includes giving direction and instruction to their children as they start to learn and continuing as they become adults. In verse fifteen, older translations mention "rod and reproof" as the means of passing on wisdom. Some newer versions show this as the "rod of correction." This slight difference in the choice of words can produce different ideas regarding how to deal with children in their learning process. Those who believe that the verse states "rod and reproof" may be more likely to use physical punishment in the learning process while those who endorse the idea of "rod of reproof" may use more of a "coaching" or teaching approach. It is probably more effective to use the second approach although it may take more time to effect a change in the child's behavior.

Those being taught by Solomon were familiar with the "shepherding" practices of that culture and they knew that the shepherd had both a rod and a staff. David referred to both these objects in Psalm 23 where he stated "Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." The rod could be used for correction, for punishment or for protection of the sheep. Invoking the concept of "comfort" would tend to direct our thought toward "correction and protection" rather than punishment. Of course, we could logically make an argument that if a child is guided by "the rod of correction," then he or she will also benefit from the protection resulting from the wisdom they gained.

The other alternative to using reproof and correction in rearing children is for the child to "figure it out on his own" or to "learn things the hard way." We realize that such choices can produce a multitude of bad and costly outcomes that bring grief to the entire family.

As a society tends to adopt a more "hands off" approach in rearing their children, there will be a general deterioration in morals and ethical behavior will suffer. This usually ends badly as we have seen developing over the past several decades in our own culture. The predicted outcome is failure for those who choose such an undisciplined approach to life. We can be thankful that, in spite of what is happening in the general culture, we can choose a better way and see a better outcome for our children by bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The Source – 29:18-20

¹⁸ Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the law. ¹⁹ A slave will not be instructed by words alone; For though he understands, there will be no response. ²⁰ Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Proverbs 29:18-20 (NASB95)

The cause of the breakdown of civilized behavior in a nation can be correlated with what has been termed our "world view." With regard to fundamental, basic, foundational elements of our view of the world and the way "things" work, most of us have led a relatively sheltered life. Our ideas of acceptable and unacceptable behavior and what defines success, are significantly different from the majority of the world that has not been impacted by Christian thought. Without a proper "world view" (or vision) the results can be riots, looting, lying, perverted behaviors, disrespect for others, no regard for spiritual or eternal values, disregard for life and the list goes on.

Our “vision” or our concepts of desirable aims, goals, and objectives have been influenced by our understanding of the relationship we have with the Creator of all things and knowledge of His fundamental nature. Historical evidence has shown that nations do well when they abide by these precepts and we can examine our own experience to come to the same conclusion.

Verse nineteen is probably stated as a contrast of the response to discipline of God’s people versus foreign slaves. The anticipation was that God would give His people instructions, laws, and commandments and they would follow those and prosper. In the Israelite culture, slaves were foreigners and they did not share the same world view as the Israelites. They tended to operate from pagan ideas that were not aligned with the values that were given by God to Israel. There was nothing in the mind set of pagan slaves to motivate them to be pleasing to their masters because there was nothing in their religion that suggested they were to please their pagan gods. Their religious ideas were that they tried to “appease” their gods and followed rituals rather than being concerned about holiness, righteousness, and morality. Consequently, the slaves were typically obedient to their master only from a stand point of self-interest which involved avoiding being disciplined by punishment.

The final thoughts in this study address a situation that impacts most of us. We tend to jump to conclusions without having all the information and we tend to express our opinions without having thought about the possibility that what we say could be misinterpreted or (perhaps) come across as being critical rather than helpful. The discipline of simply waiting to hear all the information and taking some time to think about it before saying anything is a mark of wisdom. Failure to do this can be evidence of pride in that we might think that what we want to say is more important than what we are hearing from you. In this age social media with “tweets” and Face Book posts there are many opportunities to speak or share information hastily that may be in error or does not help the situation.

All of us have opportunities and responsibilities in our lives. Consequently, the need for discipline is always present so that what we think, what we say and what we do work together to glorify God and be pleasing to Him.