

Introduction: The vows of the covenant of infant baptism are serious and demanding. You believe this child is a possession of God entrusted to your care. You promise to provide for your child's temporal well-being. You promise to teach your child to love God and his Word. You promise to teach your child about the sinful nature, the plan of salvation, and its personal application. You promise to pray for your child and to train your child. You promise to lead your child by your example and to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness in all the relationships of life. Now, how are you to do all that you promised? What is the nurture and admonition of the Lord for your child?

Dad and Mom, do your children feel loved, guided, and encouraged by you? Or do they feel mistreated, embittered and discouraged? God says many things in the Bible about bringing up children, but one of the most important is that parents need to treat their children with care and not be too hard on them. In ^{KJV} Ephesians 6:4 Paul writes, "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." In Colossians 3:21 Paul warns, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

How can parents avoid embittering their children? Must they always let children do whatever they like? Sorry, kids. God expects parents to say no to some things and mean it. Parents must guide, correct, and even punish their children. The opposite of wrong discipline isn't no discipline. It's right discipline.

There's an approach to parenting based on the notion that children are by nature sweet and pure. Dads and moms shouldn't teach any rules or punish their kids for breaking them. All parents need to do is get out of the way and watch those beautiful little people blossom. Give them what they want, let them do as they please, and let them clarify their own values as they go. Some "experts" recommend this approach, but sensible people still call it "spoiling kids rotten."

Kids aren't all sweetness and light. They need parents who can say no and back it up with discipline. Proverbs 22:15 says, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him."

Loving parents are willing to discipline children for their good. Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." The contemporary proverb is, "If you can't hear it with the ear, you will feel it with the rear." Proverbs 23:13 says bluntly, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die." In other words, a well-deserved spanking isn't going to kill a kid. To expand on the biblical teaching of child-raising, let's think about four subjects: The Problem of Extremes; The Position of Parents; The Potential of Balance; The Provision to Blossom.

A. The Problem of Extremes

About now, some may be getting upset. You feel strongly that spanking is always wrong, that any swat on the britches is child abuse. Maybe you were badly beaten as a child, or you work at a hospital or social agency where you have seen the bruises, burns, and broken bones, maybe even the dead bodies, of abused children. So when I say that spanking can be good, or when Proverbs says that physical discipline won't kill a kid, you feel outraged. You know that beatings can kill – you have seen it. Even when the beatings don't kill the body, they can destroy the spirit. So you're 100 percent against physical punishment of any kind.

Let me assure you that I detest abuse as much as you do, and God hates abuse more than any of us. When parents bully and brutalize the children God created, it makes God furious. But does this mean it's always wrong to spank? No, the Bible plainly says that spanking can be good for a child. Some experts might disagree, and some governments might even outlaw spanking, but they are giving more authority to their own opinion than to God's Word. The Bible clearly includes spanking as part of its instructions on child-rearing. Unless you claim to be smarter than God, don't insist that spanking is always wrong and harmful. The problem isn't with spanking, but with going to extremes.

Let's change the subject for a moment. It is wrong to scream at your kids and to go on yelling uncontrollably. That's verbal abuse. But does this mean you should always speak softly and sweetly, never rebuke your kids, and only say things your children like to hear? No, sometimes a child needs a good, sound scolding. Verbal rebuke is verbal abuse only when it's taken to an extreme. Likewise, a young child who defies mom or dad may need a spanking. Physical punishment is physical abuse only when it's taken to an extreme.

God doesn't prohibit all physical discipline or all scolding. But he does condemn cruel and abusive extremes. Children sometimes need punishment -- true enough -- but it must be fair punishment, controlled punishment, loving punishment.

Let me hasten to add, children need much more than just punishment in order to flourish. They need hugs, lots of them. They need love, lots of it. They need encouragement, lots of it. They need to be taught and built up in what's healthy and right. They don't just need to feel that badness is painful.

Children need to feel that goodness is joyful, enriching, and fulfilling. They need parents who show the meaning and wonder and happiness of a reverent relationship with God. Ephesians 6:4 packs all this into just a few words when it says: "Fathers, do not exasperate

your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” The first subject of the problem of extremes leads us to the second subject of the position of parents.

B. The Position of Parents

We need to keep our feet planted firmly in reality. We don’t live in a fantasy land of fairy tale kids and perfect parents. Every day we get reminders of how bad our kids can be, and how flawed we parents can be, and sometimes it’s hard not to overreact. When they misbehave, we can get so afraid of how they might turn out, or so frustrated at our failings as parents, that we lose perspective. At times like that, we need to remember that even if kids aren’t perfect, they might still turn out all right; and that even if we’re not perfect parents, we have a Father in heaven who knows our faults and yet keeps helping us grow into the kind of people he wants us to be.

You can read all sorts of books on raising children, and some of them may be good. But I get skeptical about some of these books, especially the ones that make it sound like you can produce ideal kids if you just follow a certain set of directions. If you follow the recipe to bake a cake, it will turn out right; and if you follow the recipe to raise a kid, it will turn out right. But kids aren’t cakes. They’re people. Each person is unique, and there’s no magic formula to produce a perfect product. In the Bible, God doesn’t offer a detailed recipe to raise perfect kids. But he does reveal the basic approach he wants parents to take.

God clearly gives parents the authority to make and enforce rules for their children (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20). Some parents don’t like this. Maybe you buy into the philosophy that kids are born innocent and beautiful, and your job is to give them what they want and stay out of their way. Or maybe you just want to be buddies with your kids. And buddies don’t go around making rules or handing out punishments.

But is it realistic or healthy to see yourself only as your kids’ buddy? Your kids can find other kids their own age to be their friends, but where are they going to find parents? If you don’t use your authority to set some boundaries and bring some structure and discipline to their life, who will? The juvenile detention center?

As a parent you probably love your children a lot. But you must love with parent-love, not just buddy-love or grandparent-love. It’s okay if your kids’ friendships are mostly fun and games and enjoying each other’s company. That’s what friends are for. Grandparents must be careful when they give kids they want. Grandparents must be sure they are not undermining the oversight of the parents. If you’re a mom or dad, then act like it. Do lots of fun things with your kids and have many good times together, but at the same time accept your God-

given position as the main authority in your children's life. God wouldn't command children to obey parents if he didn't want you to be a parent worth obeying.

With all that God says about the rightful authority of parents, however, he is equally clear in opposing the misuse and abuse of that authority. One of the worst effects of sin on us is that we become people of extremes. We tend to be spineless and permissive and spoil our kids rotten; or else, if we do have some sense of authority and discipline, we go to the other extreme and become rigid, domineering, and even downright brutal with our children. God warns against both extremes. The second subject of the position of parents leads us to the third subject of the potential of balance.

C. The Potential of Balance

What a marvelous way God has of showing us a healthy balance! God wants us to use our authority but not abuse it. We should expect obedience from our kids, but we shouldn't embitter or discourage them. What does that mean? There is no recipe or how-to list for producing perfect kids, but here are six guidelines in keeping with Colossians 3:21, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." A summary of the six guidelines are: be clear, be controlled, be consistent, be reasonable, be fair, and be attentive.

1. Be clear. Be clear about three things: your verbal instructions, your physical boundaries, and your spiritual expectations.

Be Clear in Your Verbal Instructions -- Children need to be told what to do and what not to do. Their fallen nature makes them selfish and self-centered. Their unrestrained desires will lead them to destruction. Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death."

Teach your children to listen and respond immediately, the first time you speak. This is not to save you the aggravation of repeating yourself, but training them to hear you with respect to two attributes: your authority over them, and your care for their safety.

One of the persistent exhortations of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is, "Hear the word of the LORD" (e.g. Isa. 1:10; 28:14; Jer. 2:4; 7:2; Eze. 6:3; 13:2). That is the goal of parental instruction. It is to be so trained in hearing and responding the first time to a parent's instruction that the child learns to hear what God says about sin and misery, about redemption and salvation, and about thankful and productive living. Proverbs 4:10 exhorts, "Hear, my son, and receive my sayings, And the years of your life will be many." Yet, what characterized the covenant people is summarized in Stephen's rebuke in Acts 7:51, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your

fathers did, so do you.” If your children will not hear you the first time, you have no reason to think that they will hear the Word of God.

Develop the expectation that your child will hear and respond immediately. Don’t fall for the count-down game. Counting down only assures a child that there are no consequences until you reach zero. If there are no immediate consequences, why should a child expect any delayed consequences?

Another reason to hearing the first time you speak, in addition to your authority over them, is your care for their safety. Because of your life experiences and your awareness of your environment you can sense dangers and threats that children have no comprehension. They will unknowingly try dangerous actions because they do not know it is dangerous. As the parent, when you see a threat your child must be trained to respond immediately to your clear admonition. If not, life-threatening events will envelop the child. Because of your authority and your care for safety, be clear in your verbal instructions.

Be Clear in Your Physical Boundaries -- Children need physical boundaries about what is safe, and what is appropriate. Don’t fall for the fallacy of offering choices because children do not know what they should choose. Whatever they choose will be determined by their immediate lust, not their logical decision. Set the boundary of time, when they arise and when they sleep. Set the boundary of food, what they may eat and when they shall eat. Because you will serve only healthy food and small portions, require that they eat everything on their plate, especially a food they think they don’t like. Life often requires that we do something we would rather not do. Set the boundary of clothing. Teach your child what is appropriate and inappropriate to wear. Set the boundary of order. Show your child how to pick up and put away toys and clothing. Set the boundary of health. Instruct your child in hygiene and cleanliness. Be clear in your physical boundaries.

Be Clear in Your Spiritual Expectations -- Children need spiritual expectations about their attitudes and actions. They need mom and dad to clearly identify their stubborn refusals, their whining compliances, their phony submissions, and correct it. We are wrestling with matters of the heart. The clear correction of Proverbs 22:15 is, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.” Our Lord Jesus identifies the depravity of the heart with specifics in Mark 7:21-23 where he says, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”

How should we correct wrong attitudes and actions? Not by depriving of physical benefits, but by applying physical consequences. Taking away some physical object because

of rebellion only identifies the object as wrong (which it is not) and does not identify the heart as wrong (which it certainly is). The biblical response is in three stages: (1) to verbally explain to the child what is wrong, (2) to physically apply appropriate and sufficient discomfort, (3) to verbally confirm that the offense is satisfied and forgiven. Be clear in your spiritual expectations. In your verbal instructions, your physical boundaries, and your spiritual expectations, be clear.

2. Be controlled. One of the quickest ways to embitter and discourage your children is to keep losing your temper. How can you insist that your children control their behavior if you can't control yours?

This is where scolding and spanking can become abusive. It's one thing to give a child a no-nonsense scolding. It's quite another to yell and scream uncontrollably. It's one thing to give a young child a well-deserved swat on the backside to teach that sin doesn't pay but it hurts. It's quite another to deliver blow after blow or to pinch savagely to vent your own rage and smash your child into submission.

If you can't control your temper, you must not spank your child. None of us should resort to spanking too quickly. We should spank only when kids disobey us and directly defying our authority. We should spank children only when they are quite young and learn most effectively from quick, physical consequences. But some parents should never spank, simply because they can't control themselves if they do. If that's your situation, you need to find other ways of punishing. Your kids need to respect your authority and discipline, but they don't need to be scared stiff of your violent and uncontrolled temper. Be clear. Be controlled.

3. Be consistent. Nothing drives a kid crazy more than having you react to something one way today, and another way tomorrow. He does something wrong when you're in a good mood, and you just ignore it or make a joke about it. Later he does the same thing, but this time you're grouchy, so you blow up and threaten to ground him for life. That embitters kids. They soon get the message that punishment is more the result of your mood than of their behavior. Don't be unpredictable. Be consistent in your reaction to their wrongdoing.

Be consistent in the sense that your own behavior is consistent with what you expect of your kids. Don't tell them to say no to drugs and booze but then get drunk yourself. Don't tell them to put God first and then put work and money first in your own life. You embitter and discourage your kids if your life isn't consistent with what you teach them.

Also, be consistent as husband or wife in how you treat the kids. As father and mother, don't contradict each other's ways of dealing with your kids. When one of you says no, the

kids may try to get the other one to say yes, and they find out soon enough which of you is the easiest to win over.

As parents, be on the same wavelength. (By the way, that's why it's so important to marry someone who has the same faith and the same philosophy of life.) Don't confuse your kids. Be clear. Be controlled. Be consistent.

4. Be reasonable. Don't expect a five-year-old to have the maturity of a fifty-year-old. Don't make rules for the sake of making rules. And don't put too much pressure on kids to succeed in school or in sports. You want kids to make the most of their talents, but you also want them to feel grateful for whatever measure of talent God has given them. Some kids may need an extra push, but far too many get pushed so hard that it embitters and discourages them. They feel like failures who will never measure up. Are your kids really under-achievers, or are you an over-expecter? Be clear. Be controlled. Be consistent. Be reasonable.

5. Be fair. Sometime children really are at fault and need to be punished, but make sure the punishment fits the crime. Kids never enjoy punishment, of course. They often complain even about fair punishments. As Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful." Discipline isn't fun. It's not supposed to be fun. But it is supposed to be fair. And even though children don't like being punished and complain about it, they won't be embittered or discouraged if the punishment is fair and matches their offense. But if you overreact, if you give huge punishments for minor offenses, if you bully or punish too harshly, it causes lasting damage.

Likewise, if you humiliate them in front of other people, especially in front of their friends, you are wounding them. Never degrade! Never humiliate! Don't drive a child into discouragement and despair. Be clear. Be controlled. Be consistent. Be reasonable. Be fair.

6. Be attentive. Try to understand your children. If you've got a little kid who's being impossible and making all sorts of trouble for you, it may be a case of defiance. But then again, the child may just be overly tired. If you're attentive you can often tell whether the child needs punishment, or just a hug and a kiss and a one-way trip to bed.

In the same way, unsettling behavior by older kids isn't always a matter of defiance and disobedience. Teenagers may be going through moods affected by hormonal changes, or having tough times with friends, or wrestling with severe temptations, doubts, and insecurities, but all you see is ornery, obnoxious behavior directed at you. You don't have to pretend the behavior is okay, but be alert for underlying causes. Your teenager may need love and understanding and reassurance more than punishment.

Always, always listen to your kids and talk with them. If you cut off all discussion without listening to their side of the story, you're not treating them as humans. After listening you still might decide they're just putting you on -- many kids are experts at making excuses, and they can come up with some humdingers to wriggle out of trouble. But you still need to listen before you make up your mind. Sometimes kids give you a sense of what's really on their heart, things you really need to know in order to understand them. If you won't listen at all, or if you won't explain your own actions, you will embitter and discourage your children.

Be attentive also to change and growth in your child. It's hard for some of us to watch our kids grow up. We'd like to keep them little and cute and lovable -- and controllable. But kids change as they grow, and we need to change with them. We can't treat fifteen-year-olds like five-year-olds. We embitter and discourage them if we treat them as who they were instead of as who they are. Be firm, strict, and loving when they are small, and you can trust them to make good decisions on their own as they get older. As kids grow up, give them greater freedom and responsibility. Be clear. Be controlled. Be consistent. Be reasonable. Be fair. Be attentive. The third subject of the potential of balance leads us to the fourth subject of the provision to blossom.

D. The Provision to Blossom

As a parent, use your authority in a way that doesn't embitter or discourage your kids. Stay focused on your goal and your God. Your calling as a parent is to help each child blossom or flourish as a child of God. The Lord has entrusted you with the care of a precious, immortal soul, a soul that needs to be nurtured with a lot of firmness and a lot of tenderness. That precious soul has been born sinful, so in order for your child to flourish, you need to say no and apply discipline. That precious soul has also been born ignorant and weak and insecure. So for your child to blossom, you need to help overcome the ignorance with sound teaching, the weakness with encouragement, and the insecurity with love.

On your own, you don't have the inner resources to do this, and neither do I. Of ourselves we don't have what it takes to make our own soul flourish, let alone make another soul flourish. That's why we parents need to draw on God's resources to keep us going, and that's why we need to put our children in touch with all God's resources in the Lord Jesus.

But you can't give what you haven't got. Ephesians 6:4 tells parents to bring children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. But before we can do that, we ourselves need to be trained and instructed by the Lord. We need a living faith ourselves before we can share that faith with our children.

Maybe you've been careless with your own soul and haven't paid much attention to Jesus. If so, isn't it time you changed -- if not for your own sake, then at least for the sake of your children? You wouldn't be the first person to discover your need for Christ only after the Lord prompted you to ask yourself what would become of your children if you kept living far from God. And you'd also discover that it was God moving you to ask that question in the first place.

You and your kids need to know that there's a Savior who lived and died and rose again to cover your sins and failures, to credit you with His righteousness, and to give you eternal life. You and your kids need to know this Jesus for yourselves and put your trust in him. Then you and your family will be free to blossom in the knowledge that even though you often fall short of what you ought to be, you can still live by faith in Jesus' love and forgiveness and acceptance. That is the provision to blossom.

Conclusion: What's more, when you trust in Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit of Christ living and working inside you. The Bible says that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Sounds like a pretty good list of qualifications for a parent, doesn't it? When you're filled with the Holy Spirit, a lot of good fruit flourishes in your life. When that happens, you can introduce your children to Christ in a way that seems right and natural. You won't have to force religion down their throats in a way that embitters them. Instead, Christ will be such a constant presence in your home, and the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control will be such a natural part of who you are, that your kids can't help but notice. As they accept the Savior they meet in you, they too will begin to flourish with a life that lasts forever. This is the blessing of the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, you have made a covenant with us, your servants, in Christ Jesus. Now, we implore you, let our children be included in its gracious provisions. We believe the promise you made to Abraham (Gen. 17:7) that you established an everlasting covenant, to be God to him and his descendants after him. We know that our children are born in sin; therefore we ask nothing on the basis of their birth, for "that which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). Lord, make them to be born under your covenant of grace by your Holy Spirit.

We pray for our descendants throughout all generations. Be their God as you are ours. Our highest honor is that you have called husbands and wives to serve you. May our descendents joyfully serve you in all the years to come.

Father in heaven, you have loved us with an everlasting love, and you also discipline those you love. Draw us to our Lord Jesus, fill us with your Spirit, and mold us into the

people you want us to be. Then, Lord, help us express your fatherly love, firm and yet gentle, in the way we treat our children.

We pray for the children, Lord, especially those who are mistreated or abused. Touch them with your kindness and help them get beyond the bitterness and discouragement that poisons their lives. Move abusive parents to repent and change their ways, and forgive all of us for the ways we have failed you and failed our children. In spite of our failings, work through us to make our children flourish, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Resource: Rev. David Feddes, *Spanking without Embittering*, Colossians 3:21, and broadcast on *The Back To God Hour*, January 27, 2002. [Edited, expanded, and adapted]

The Book of Psalms for Singing: 34B, 71C, 78A, 90B (instruction of children)

Scripture reading: Colossians 3:12-25

Theme: To outline biblical discipline for covenant children