

When the Gospel Meets
Tantrums and Time-Outs

FOR THE
LOVE
OF DISCIPLINE



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To my mom, Janice Thompson,
whose wisdom and grace echo in my own heart every day
and inspire me to love like Jesus.

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My husband, for daily coming to my rescue with support, wisdom, and chocolate.

From One Mom to Another: As You Get Started . . .

Last year I was an Awana Cubby leader. I had some skin in the game (two Cubbies of my own), so I decided it was only right for me to help out. One night I sat in the back and looked over the sea of little blue preschool vests, the kids wiggling excitedly as they listened to the Bible story from their leader. The leader stopped in the middle of the story to address a couple of distracting Cubbies. “No, Cubbies. We don’t spit on each other. Listen to the story and have self-control.”

I smiled to myself. *Good job, teacher*, I thought. *Don’t let those little troublemakers get away with it. They need to learn self-control now while they’re young. They need to be thoughtful of those around them, respectful of their teacher, and—oh, shoot. Those are my kids.*

Discipline always seems easier when we are applying it to someone else’s kids, doesn’t it? When it comes to our own kids, we’re a mess. How do we know if we’re being too hard or too soft? Why does what works for kid number one not work for kid number three? We’re too close to the situation. We’re emotionally and physically drained and headed toward burnout.

If you like the idea of well-disciplined kids but are finding it easier said than done, you're not alone—and this book is for you. After having five boys in just seven years, I thought about writing a book called *Lord of the Flies*, but that name was already taken. Instead I bring you this—a personal, frank, embarrassingly raw account of what God has taught me about the *D* word. I didn't write this book because discipline comes naturally to me, or because my kids are models of obedience. I wrote it because my kid pushed your kid into the pool at swim lessons. I wrote it because last week I had to leave the grocery store early when my kids were wrestling in the aisles. And I wrote it because discipline seems exhausting and discouraging only when we leave out the most important ingredient: the gospel.

There's a good chance that discipline isn't your favorite topic. But, whether you're awaiting the arrival of your first baby or you've trod this path for years already, you've recognized that it's important. Nothing brings out our frustration, our doubts about our parenting, and our random fears about our kids' futures like disobedience. When the two-year-old crumples up on the ground in a fit of anger, our hearts crumple up with him. "*Not again.*"

I want to show you a new way to look at disobedience: be glad that your children are disobeying here and now, with you as their loving parent to guide and shepherd them. The world is a cruel teacher. Satan is already hunting for their weaknesses so he can trip them up and wreak havoc on their faith and their lives. You have a chance now, in this tiny window of time, to strengthen their armor—to find the holes in their breastplates and sharpen their swords, to tweak their helmets and tighten their belts. You can't do that if they never show you where they are weak.

When your kids disobey, they are telling you something.

Strain your ears to hear past the tantrums, the rebellious stomping, and the disrespectful tone. They are saying, “Mom . . . I don’t know how to obey on my own. Can you help me?”

If you’re looking for a formula that will turn disobedient kids into perfect little angels, you won’t find it in this book. Actually, you won’t find that anywhere. God doesn’t give us a formula. He gives us principles. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom in order to use those principles to point our kids to Christ. But gospel-centered discipline starts with developing a gospel-centered mind-set—which is where we begin in this book.

The first part of the book will help us take a step back in order to see the big picture. What is gospel-centered discipline, and what is it *not*? What are the factors working against us? How can we lay a solid gospel foundation for our discipline so we aren’t building on shifting sand?

The second part of this book will take us into the nitty-gritty ins and outs of discipline. Theology is wonderful—but how will it help me shepherd my screaming two-year-old? We’ll take an up-close-and-personal look at specific discipline strategies that aid in big-picture gospel training. These are practical tools that will help stay-at-home moms and working moms alike.

Discipline is a beautiful privilege. We don’t want our children to learn the hard way. We don’t want them to disobey when it will cost them so much more than a time-out. When your children disobey, think to yourself, *Thank you for showing me your heart. Now I can help you.* Don’t get discouraged. Thank God for the opportunity to shape their little hearts while they’re still in your care. This is our time. This is our chance to point our kids to the only thing that matters: the gospel. God has given us the task of discipline not just in order to survive our day but to lead our kids to the cross. There is so much more to discipline than strategies, checklists, and behavior management. There’s Jesus.

Part 1

LASTING MOTIVATION

Discovering the
Gospel in Discipline

1

The Game Plan: Let's Get Ready

We were on vacation at the coast a few years ago. We sat at a coffee shop perched on a rocky mountainside overlooking the ocean and nervously watched our toddler explore his new surroundings. A family sitting nearby had a little girl a few months older than our son. She flitted around the rocky cliffs, and her parents smiled and told us, “She is such a free spirit! We never interfere with her independence.” The people sitting around us smiled. There seemed to be an unspoken respect for these freedom-loving parents.

Until the little girl bolted across the busy street.

Her parents didn't even notice she was gone until a customer at the coffee shop looked up and screamed. Thankfully, she was not hurt. Her parents, white with horror, gathered her up and quickly left the shop amid headshakes and disapproving frowns.

Undisciplined children are not children with more freedom. They are children in exceedingly more danger—not just physically but spiritually. “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child” (Prov. 22:15 NASB). If that verse doesn't give you the chills, read it again. Our children are utterly incapable of freeing

themselves from their own foolishness. While it is not within our power to make our children Christians, God has sovereignly placed us in their lives to help drive their foolishness out. That can happen only with loving discipline.

So what is discipline? We often associate discipline solely with consequences—something we do to our kids when they disobey. If we stop there, we will miss the depth and beauty of God’s plan for discipline. The Greek word for discipline is *paideia*, which means “the whole training and educating of children, which relates to the cultivation of mind and morals.”¹ Yes, discipline involves training and consequences, but that “cultivation” in the definition above takes place in the rich soil of shepherding, nourishing, and cherishing our children. Just as we feed them food to care for their bodies, our discipline feeds their minds and souls. Discipline prompts them to do what’s right and prevents them from doing what’s wrong.

As Christian parents we recognize that this involves hard work and pain because we will be met with resistance. But our goal is always for our kids’ growth and maturity in the Lord. When we look at it in this light, we see that discipline, while sometimes unpleasant, is always good. The purpose of this book is to look at the “whole training” of our children within the context of daily, practical discipline skills.

This summer my toddler got his first splinter. The skin around it instantly got red and puffy. He was in pain and helpless to get it out on his own. I had a choice. I could let it go and risk infection and further pain, or I could get the dreaded tweezers. As much as my son hated being pinched and poked by the tweezers (and as much as I hated doing it), I knew that the short-term pain was for the long-term good. The end result was that the splinter came out and my son’s hand could heal. Discipline itself is often not fun, but the bigger picture motivates us to press on.

It's helpful to look at what discipline is *not*. Discipline is not:

- a list of creative punishments
- a response to being inconvenienced
- an outlet for frustration
- embarrassment insurance for when your kids are in front of your friends

Discipline is not something we do *to* our kids, but something we do *for* them. It is a lifestyle. It doesn't need its own category; it's woven all throughout family life. But it doesn't happen by accident. When you have tiny ones, it's easy to think, *Of course we will discipline for really bad stuff, but our kids don't really need it right now.* But discipline is not a "we'll cross that bridge when we get there" situation. If you have kids, you're already at the bridge. You arrived the day they were born. You need a game plan.

Harry Randall Truman died of one of the most preventable causes known to man: he wouldn't get off the volcano. He had all the information telling him that Mt. Saint Helens was going to erupt and plenty of people willing to help him leave, but he was content to wait and see what would happen. On May 18th, 1980, he found out.² Saying "I'll deal with discipline when the time comes" is like saying "I'll wait until the volcano erupts, and then I'll decide what to do." True, we don't know exactly what the future holds for our parenting. But there are a few basic truths we *do* know that can help us come up with a game plan.

Discipline Is Not Optional

Organic or inorganic? Cloth diapers or disposable? To vaccinate or not to vaccinate? There are so many choices you will

make as a parent. When it comes to discipline, God has not given us the option of whether to do it or not. Discipline is an inseparable part of godly parenting that we cannot choose to relinquish. Ephesians 6:4 calls us to bring our children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Proverbs 13:24 says, “He who loves [his son] is diligent to discipline him.”

If you’re on the fence about discipline and your head is spinning from all the different perspectives and advice, don’t ask yourself *if* you’re going to discipline, but rather *how*. As we will explore in this book, discipline is not something to fear. It is the greatest adventure of love you will embark on with your kids.

Often discipline seems intimidating because we don’t feel qualified. And, on our own, we are not qualified. But our call to discipline is not based on our own merits. It’s not because we are smarter than our kids or because we are bigger than they are. As the authority in our homes, we reflect God’s authority. Nothing could be more humbling. Discipline is an opportunity to reflect the character of God, not our own pride. In *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, Tedd Tripp says,

God calls you to exercise authority, not in making your children do what you want, but in being true servants—authorities who lay down our lives. The purpose for your authority in the lives of your children is not to hold them under your power, but to empower them to be self-controlled people living freely under the authority of God.³

Not only does this humble us, but it should inspire us to be diligent to discipline our kids every day. We represent God, and God does not sit down on the job. If we are lax in our discipline, we know we have an enemy who is waiting for an opportunity. We must “be sober-minded; be watchful. Your

adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We are engaged in a battle for our kids’ hearts. We are on the front lines for the sake of our kids before they are even old enough to know the spiritual forces working against them.

Disciplined Kids Mean Disciplined Parents

When I was a teacher, I remember a colleague saying, “You can’t teach what you are not.” It didn’t really start to sink in until I had kids. If I was going to set expectations for them, I had to make sure I was ready to model those expectations. I saw a meme floating around Facebook that captures this idea from a mom’s perspective: “My child will only be as in charge of his emotions as I am of mine.” Ouch.

The first step in disciplining our kids is disciplining ourselves. When we fail to set a good example, we still have a beautiful opportunity to point our kids to the love and forgiveness we have in Christ. This has a chain reaction: they look to us and we look to Christ, ultimately channeling their vision to our glorious God. If our eyes aren’t fixed on Christ, our kids will look to us and find a dead end. We need to be in God’s Word and on our knees on a regular basis. Our kids will say what we say, act the way we act, and begin to view God the way we view God. Do our words and actions show our kids that God is worthy to be obeyed? Do our lives reflect the peace that can be found only in Christ?

Take a look at your daily routine. If someone asked your kids what your priorities were, what do you think they would say? If you’re in the “little years,” you might be in survival mode. Your priority is probably just to get through the next minute. I get that. There are seasons of life when the laundry is never done and Mommy lives in her PJs. But your kids see what lies

beyond the chaos. They can tell if Mommy answers to a higher authority. They can see that the family is working together toward a common goal, whether it's entertainment, money, or God's glory. Through periods of joy, grief, financial hardship, and plenty, our response to life should show our kids that God is good and he is in control. Can you reflect all of that to your kids and stay in your PJs all day? Absolutely. Relax. Your testimony to your kids doesn't revolve around how many items you check off your to-do list. It's about your attitude through the good, the bad, and the sticky spots on the floor.

Why is it important to discipline our own attitudes while we simultaneously shepherd our kids? I realized recently that I don't have the luxury of sighing and moaning under my breath when I'm hauling a load of laundry into the living room because, if I do, there is sure to be a little voice that immediately copies me. Parenting provides a whole new layer of accountability in our lives. There is always someone listening, always someone watching. Yesterday, at lunchtime, the three-year-old spilled his milk. Before I could say anything, his brother exclaimed in an exasperated voice, "Oh, for heaven's sake!" I frowned and thought, *That doesn't sound very kind and compassionate. Oh, wait. That sounds exactly like me.*

What about when we fail? If my kids modeled my behavior on certain days, I would have five little boys stomping around the house, short-tempered, discontent, and self-centered. What a disaster! The beauty of the gospel is that it is custom-made for imperfect mommies. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt. 9:12). We are all sick. So are our kids. We all need a physician for our souls.

There is no need to pretend we have our acts together. Our kids will see us sin. They will also see what we do with our sin. I can spend valuable energy trying to cover up my failures, or I

can use them to point my kids to the gospel. I can say, “Mommy was having a bad attitude. We all have bad attitudes sometimes, don’t we? My attitude was sinful. That’s why I’m so glad I have Jesus to forgive me! I am not perfect, but Jesus is perfect. His perfect attitude can take the place of my sinful attitude.”

You and I have work to do, don’t we? Thankfully, the greatest work of all has already been accomplished for us. Through Christ’s work on the cross we are free to love God and be loved by him. We can trust him to work through us for his glory even when we are at our weakest. We can say with Paul, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). God doesn’t work around our weakness—he works *through* it. We can confidently walk in his love in a way that reflects his holy character to our children.

Discipline Is Not a Quick Fix

Yesterday I loaded the kids into the van to run errands. Between the time I buckled them in and the time I went inside to grab my purse and keys, everything had fallen apart. They were screaming at each other, fighting, and generally making a pack of caged wolves look like puppies.

“All right, everybody out,” I said. We filed back into the house, and one by one each child was held accountable for his part in the chaos. Talks were had, consequences were given, and tears were dried. We piled back into the car, all of us worse for wear. We went through our errands tired, sniffly, and disheveled. *We’re a mess*, I thought as I wiped tears of frustration from my own eyes at the stoplight. *What happened? I did what I was supposed to do. I took the time; I disciplined the kids; I prioritized their hearts over my carefully planned errands. Why are we all still so miserable?*

If you have committed yourself to faithfully disciplining

your kids according to God's Word and it's a lot messier than you thought, it doesn't necessarily mean you are doing something wrong. It means that discipline is a long-term commitment. As with any commitment, we can't say, "I'll give this thing a shot, but if I don't see the results I want when I want them, I'm out." If that were our attitude, it would take about two days for all of us to throw in the towel.

Discouragement in discipline often reveals a heart set on a quick fix. If you go into discipline knowing it's a slow process, you are less likely to lose your steam. This goes against our fast-paced, results-oriented culture. Michael Horton in his book *Ordinary* says,

The problem is not that we are too active, but that we are recklessly frenetic. We have grown accustomed to quick fixes and easy solutions. We have grown accustomed to running sprints instead of training for the long-distance marathon. We have plenty of energy. The danger is that we will burn ourselves out on restless anxieties and unrealistic expectations.⁴

Are our expectations realistic when it comes to discipline? Is our ultimate goal God's glory or our own desired outcomes?

In Hebrews 11 we read about the heroes of the faith, such as Abraham, Moses, and David. If these godly people had set their eyes on a specific earthly outcome, they would have been greatly disappointed. Hebrews 11:13 says, "These all died in faith, *not* having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." I think about that when my hard work with the kids doesn't seem to be paying off. Instead of getting discouraged, I remember I am "greeting my reward from afar." I am an alien here. I am working against

culture, against sin in my kids, and against sin in my own heart. If my discipline seems strange on this planet, it's because it is accomplishing heavenly goals.

I don't know how God will use my discipline. I am hopeful that I will see much fruit from it this side of heaven, but frankly that's none of my business. I'm just the bricklayer. Every time I lovingly and intentionally discipline my kids for God's glory, I lay another brick. I don't know exactly what God is building in my kids. Will my toddler start staying in bed after just two days, or will this go on for months? Will my six-year-old be cured of his back talk through my discipline, or will he have a lifelong battle with respect for authority? I don't know. But I don't need to know in order to obey God's plan for discipline.

That doesn't mean discipline is a shot in the dark. Scripture gives us much guidance and much hope. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." While not a surefire promise that our kids will be Christians, this verse is a beautiful encouragement that the truth we teach our kids now will stick with them forever—however God chooses to use it. Scripture tells us that "a wise son makes a glad father" (Prov. 15:20) and that a faithful mother's children will "rise up and call her blessed" (Prov. 31:28). We know that godly mothers are often the means that God uses to raise up faithful leaders in the church, such as Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Tim. 1:5).

Elyse Fitzpatrick, in her book *Give Them Grace*, helps us strike that balance of working and hoping:

We work because we love him and all he's done for us. We work because he's commanded us to work. And we work because

he may use our efforts at parenting as the means to draw our children to him. But we are never to work because we think our work will ultimately transform our children. Our works are never good enough or powerful enough to transform any human heart.⁵

God can use our discipline however he wants. Our job is to faithfully lay those bricks—even though it sometimes seems to take the mortar a *long* time to set. Your discipline might be messy, but it is never fruitless. God will always glorify himself through our obedience.

Reflection

1. What does the word *discipline* make you think of? Does this word have positive or negative connotations for you, and why?
2. Proverbs 3:12 says, “For the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” How does this verse further explain why discipline is not optional?
3. In what specific ways do you want to be a more disciplined parent? Reflect on habits you want to change or begin.
4. What comfort can you fall back on when discipline doesn’t seem to be working quickly enough? Write a short prayer or a Scripture passage from the chapter to meditate on this week.