

Proverbs - Commentaries by J.C. Ryle

How Should a Child Be Trained?, First, If We Would Train Our Children Wisely, We Must Train Them According to the Word of God. (22:15)

Remember, children are born with a decided bias toward evil. Therefore, if we let them choose for themselves, they are certain to choose wrong.

The mother cannot tell what her tender infant may grow up to be: tall or short, weak or strong, wise or foolish; he may be any of these things or not — it is all uncertain. But one thing the mother can say with certainty: He will have a corrupt and sinful heart. It is natural to us to do wrong. "Foolishness," God says, "is bound in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Prov. 29:15).

If, then, we would deal wisely with our child, we must not leave him to the guidance of his own will. We must think for him and judge for him, just as we would for one weak and blind, but we should not give him up to his own wayward tastes and inclinations. It must not be his likings and wishes that are consulted. He knows not yet what is good for his mind and soul, any more than what is good for his body. Do not let him decide what he shall eat and what he shall drink and how he shall be clothed. What shameful scenes at the table might be avoided if parents would seek divine wisdom as to what is best to put on the child's plate.

If we do not consent to this first divine principle of training, it is useless to read any further. Self-will is almost the first thing that appears in the child's mind, and it must be our first step to resist it. The best horse in the world had to be broken.

How Should a Child Be Trained?, Train Them With a Constant Fear of Overindulgence. (13:24)

I know well that punishment and correction are disagreeable things. Nothing is more unpleasant than giving pain to those we love and calling forth their tears. But so long as hearts are what they are, it is vain to suppose, as a general rule, that children can be brought up without correction. Spoiling is a very expressive word and, sadly, full of meaning. Now it is the shortest way to spoil children to let them have their own way — to allow them to do wrong and not to punish them for it. Believe me, you must not do it, whatever pain it may cost you, unless you wish to ruin your children's souls.

"He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (Prov. 13:24). "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying" (Prov. 19:18). "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Prov. 22:15). "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Prov. 23:13-14). "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." "Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul" (Prov. 29:15,17).

How strong and forcible are these verses! How melancholy is the fact that in many Christian families they seem almost unknown! Their children need reproof, but it is hardly ever given; they need correction, but it is hardly ever employed. And yet this book of Proverbs is not obsolete and unfit for Christians. It is given by inspiration of God and profitable. Surely the believer who brings up his children without attention to its counsel is making himself wise above that which is written and greatly errs.

Fathers and mothers, I tell you plainly that if you never punish your children when they are at fault, you are doing them a grievous wrong. I warn you that this is the rock on which the saints of God, in every age, have only too frequently made shipwreck. I would fain persuade you to be wise in time and keep clear of it. See it in Eli's case. His sons Hophni and Phinehas made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. He gave them no more than a tame and lukewarm reproof, when he ought to have rebuked them sharply. In one word, he honored his sons above God. And what was the end of these things? He lived to hear of the death of both of his sons in battle, and his own gray hairs were brought down with sorrow to the grave (1 Sam. 2:12-34; 3:10-18).

See, too, the case of David. Who can read without pain the history of his children and their sins — Amnon's incest, Absalom's murder and proud rebellion, and Adonijah's scheming ambition? In the account of Adonijah, in 1 Kings 1:6, "His father had not displeased him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so?" There was the foundation of all the mischief. David was an overindulgent father — a father who let his children have their own way, and he reaped according as he had sown.

Parents, I beseech you, for your children's sakes, beware of overindulgence. I call on you to remember that it is your first duty to consult their real interest and not their fancies and likings — to train them, not to humor them — to profit, not merely to please.

You must not give way to every wish and caprice of your child's mind, however much you may love him. You must not let him suppose his will is to be everything and that he has only to desire a thing and it will be done. Do not, I pray, make your children idols, lest God should take them away and break your idols, just to convince you of your folly. Learn to say "No" to your children. Show them that you are able to refuse whatever you think is not fit for them. Unrequired school activities and entertainments require firmness, lest your children become swept into the current of Satan's allurements.

Show them that you are ready to punish disobedience and that when you speak of punishment, you are not only ready to threaten, but also to perform. "Forbearing threatening." Fewer punishments, but really and in good earnest, are better than frequent and slight punishments, but do not allow disobedience to pass unpunished. When disciplining your children becomes needful, it is imperative that the parents stand together in loving cooperation.

Beware of letting small faults pass unnoticed, under the idea "it is a little one." There are no little things in training children; all are important. Little weeds need plucking up as much as any. Leave them alone and they will soon be great. Reader, if you do not trouble with your children when they are young, they will give you trouble when they are old.

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