

SPECIAL CHILDREN

A personal testimony about a special child and an unwise practice of discipline

I have never taken a class about “special children” nor have I ever read a book about them. It was my experience raising one that now gives me the feeling to attempt to share with others a couple of the lessons I passed through during those most difficult times while raising a child of extraordinary intelligence.

Some children are blessed simply with an extraordinary intelligence. My child was not so. While he had an extraordinary intellectual ability, it often seemed like he suffered at the same time, and maybe equally so, with at least some kind of an emotional handicap. And complicating matters even more was the fact that he had a very hot temper even as an infant and later with a destructive lack of self-control. All of these factors put together made being his parent more than a difficult challenge; in fact it went far beyond my ability to understand, sympathize with, or manage. I hope that this testimony may be of some encouragement, guidance, and help to those parents who may be in a similar situation and have not yet passed through some of these painful and difficult to learn lessons.

Before saying anything more, I must say that I have found that it is crucial for parents to believe that what Jacob said to his wife Rachel is indeed a divine truth, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Genesis 30:2). The first thing we must realize and believe in order to properly raise our children is that God Himself entrusted our children to us. He alone is the Author of life, and the conception of our children was a decision that He Himself made according to His eternal sovereignty and will. This understanding is the rock upon which parents must stand if they are to be able to withstand the trials of raising their children, whether “ordinary” or “special.” The wise King Solomon also confirms this fact through his words, “Behold, children are the heritage of Jehovah” (Psalm 127:3). In the first place, this statement means that our children are entrusted to us *from* Jehovah. In the second sense, it means that after we raise them up, they will be a heritage that we will offer back to Jehovah, for they are His.

Secondly, we must also accept from the heart that even our children’s make-up and formation is not a phenomenon that merely takes place by accident or happenstance. Rather, we must believe that the same One who with infinite intelligence created the universe also exercised His infinite wisdom, love, and care as He personally “formed our inward parts and wove us together in our mother’s womb” (Psalm 139: 13). With this confidence, we may borrow the Apostle Paul’s words and apply them even to our natural creation, “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Co. 15:10).

In my case, perhaps my greatest lack of wisdom and understanding regarding how to raise my child with his various special needs was exposed in the matter of exercising discipline when he would do something that could certainly not be overlooked. Of course, it is much more constructive, and takes much more wisdom to avoid situations that would provoke improper behavior and the ensuing discipline. Many times, especially when the children are under 5 years of age, discipline problems may be avoided by simply exercising foresight. Yet, as they get older oftentimes their improper behavior comes in a way that one is caught off guard, which results in a quick reaction at the spur of the moment. It would be better to take notice if there are patterns of misbehavior that require more than a one-time response, they require a *strategy*.

Certainly, as the Bible itself teaches, the discipline of children is absolutely necessary. Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him chastens him early." However, as brother Watchman Nee wisely points out, no physical punishment should be done in a "common way;" rather, he stresses, "you must show him that a "beating" [i.e. physical punishment] is a *big thing*"¹. He goes on to say "on the one hand, they [the parents] must point out the fault. On the other hand, they [the parents] may not be angry in any way"¹. No doubt, when we lack understanding and wisdom, we are found at fault on both counts. And so a vicious, destructive pattern of the child's misbehavior coupled with the parent's inappropriate reaction and discipline becomes the standard response. If this continues unabated, the eventual outcome of hatred and violence is unavoidable. This kind of home environment and parent-child relationship must be avoided at any cost. Help must be sought out before the damage becomes irreparable.

Of course, if we all "learned the secret" (Phil. 4:12) as the Apostle Paul did regarding how to live by Christ and apply Christ in our daily life, all would be well! Certainly, this is our first need and our greatest need. However, instead of practicing to live by Christ and to let Him do the parenting and disciplining of our children through us, we usually get caught up in our quick reactions and our habitual and stubborn responses, and thus lose the battle more frequently than we win. After ministering about the proper experience and living out of Christ in the Life-study of Philippians throughout 488 pages, brother Witness Lee brings the matter entirely down to earth as he addresses the matter of allowing Christ to live in us and through us in the context of our family life. Perhaps the final seven messages to this Life-study, entitled "A Life Full of Forbearance but Without Anxiety"², are the richest resource of help for parents and families in all of Brother Lee's ministry. However, to be perfectly honest, though I personally heard these messages and was greatly inspired by them, I was very much lacking in my experience as to the real application of them in the discipline of my son.

One night, and not the only one I ever had like this, I could not sleep. The frustration and agony about how to raise my son once again would not let me go. Finally, about three

o'clock in the morning I got up to go to my office and pray. As I prayed I read a framed poem on the wall a saint had given me some years earlier. It said:

*I took a piece of living clay
And gently formed it day by day,
And molded it with power and art,
A young child's soft and yielding heart.
I came again when years were gone,
It was a man I looked upon,
He still that early impress bore,
And I could change that form no more.*

I uttered some words like "Lord, I have no idea how to raise my son! He is so different than me; I do not have a clue what do with him...." As I tried to pray and really found no words, I had a feeling to try and express my thoughts by making a drawing. The drawing came out like this: there was a piece of very strong metal with a round hole, and a square-shaped peg was being hammered through it. Of course, it could not pass through intact, so the wood on the corners of the peg were being shattered and splintered. As I looked at the drawing I sensed that the Lord spoke to me and said, "This is what you are doing with your son. He is not a "round peg" and *you are not accepting him as he is. He is special.* He does not fit into the round hole, and he will never fit into the round hole – and you are only destroying him by trying to make him do so." Ugh! That hurt deeply! I wept bitterly and repentantly. I realized that I needed a whole new way to approach my son, whom I had no idea how to raise or discipline.

And yet, though I had received so much spiritual understanding over the years, I did not really begin to learn some lessons regarding disciplining my child until repeated failures finally brought me face to face with the elementary school child psychologist.

The dialogue went like this:

The psychologist: "Do you have to discipline your son frequently?"

Me: "I would say so."

The psychologist: "How often?"

Me: "Probably three to four times a week, at least."

The psychologist: "What do you do to discipline him?"

Me: "I use the belt."

The psychologist: "Does it work?"

Me: "Well, now that you ask, actually it does *not* work. He often becomes *more* rebellious."

The psychologist: "Why do you use it then?"

Me: "That is all I know. My father used the belt on me, and it would cause me to straighten up."

The psychologist: "If it doesn't work, it will only produce hatred in him. You will see a glare of hatred in his face. Is that what you want?"

Me: "No! But what else can I do?"

The psychologist: "Have you ever heard of 'Time out'?"

Me: "No. What is that?"

Well, the disciplining of my child began to take another form from that point on. I later received some personal help from a professional to learn about "Time Out." Something so easy to understand and not so difficult to learn to apply (if you really have been taught properly *how* to apply it) came in to rescue me from my one-method, "belt-method," discipline of my son! The way we applied "time out" when our son was out of control was to have him sit in a chair. At first he needed to be restrained to the chair. He would squirm all over, slide down to the floor, but still have one hand on the chair....Gradually he accepted this form of discipline instead of the belt. According to the instructions, we gradually increased the time out from a couple of minutes to one minute per year of age. Some times we would also send him to his room until he could get his temper under control. (Even that was not easy, for that required us to replace two doors due to the damage done to them!). Practicing "time out" broke the battle of our wills and put the responsibility of control on him instead of me. Of course, we would always recognize and praise him when he finally got himself under control. I still remember the day when we praised him because it only took him 45 minutes to get his temper under control! How I thank the Lord for a simple and practical understanding of my child's reactions and my unwise responses to his reactions! And I thank Him for stopping my failing attempts which would never have helped him to learn to bring his temper under his own control. With the proper practice of "Time Out" within a few months our child (and we also!) learned to master his out-of-control temper and respond properly to verbal correction or "threatened" discipline (time out). If I remember correctly, it seems that my son's need of any physical discipline was over. What a blessing! What a rescue to my son, to myself, and to our family!

These kinds of painfully damaging situations can be helped! We ourselves are the first ones who need to believe that such out of control situations can be helped, and we need to be open to seek that help and guidance when we do not have it in ourselves. We have the Bible, we have specific fellowship in the books of the ministry, we have

experienced brothers and sisters, and when necessary, we may even need the help of highly trained professionals also. May we never give up and sink into a withdrawn, isolated, defeated state of shame and despair! We are in the Body, and we must learn to “fight the battle in the Body” by learning to be open to other members of the Body in order to receive their prayer, fellowship and guidance.

Finally, the Apostle Paul pointed out on two occasions that not only are we “one Body in Christ,” but we are also “members individually”, or “in particular” (Ro. 12:5; 1 Co. 12:27). God’s creation, our particular experience, formation, up-bringing and education all work together to make every member in the Body of Christ unique and “particular.” Our problems are particular, our needs are particular, and as result, our portions are particular to contribute to the building up of the Body. May we learn to exercise the divine forbearance and love toward one another so that no member is disregarded, mistreated or lost! May the multifarious wisdom of God be manifested to His glory as He brings us all together and builds us up in love to be the Body of Christ, His masterpiece!

Recommended materials to read:

1. Messages for New Believers, by Watchman Nee, Volume 2, Chapter 33 Parents, page 547; published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, California, USA.
Link: <http://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?cid=2BE0>
2. Life-Study of Philippians, messages 56 – 62; by Witness Lee; published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, California, USA.
Link: <http://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?cid=2FE0>