

How to Give Your Child a Gospel-Centered Timeout

The gospel changes everything, my pastors often say. I wrestle daily with exactly what that means, especially how the gospel changes my parenting style. I've written before about the difference in discipline and punishment. Christians and non-Christians often use those two words interchangeably, but the Bible doesn't, and that is the focal point for me of what is and what is not gospel-centered parenting.

I cannot believe the gospel changes everything and then continue to punish my children (read the article to which I previously linked for a biblical defense of that statement). However, I can and must disciple them. I proactively train them in righteousness and reactively guide them in how the gospel equips them to reconcile with the one to whom they have done wrong.

Christ bore all their punishment (payment of sin) on the cross, and there is no condemnation for those who are in Him. I can't believe the gospel is sufficient for my children and then heap shame and condemnation on them in punishment for their sins. Yet, I cannot disengage either. God has tasked me with the responsibility of training them.

These are all nice words on paper, but they mean little until I apply it practically in the mud pit of daily life. I've found Give Them Grace (and all of Elyse Fitzpatrick's writings) helpful on this topic. [Although I will say that I have some push-back on the chapter from Give Them Grace on spanking. I'm working on an article on that topic, and Elyse has been gracious to interact with me on the issue. When I finally get my article written, I'll post her response as well. I am looking forward to that edifying discussion. Here's an older post on the subject.]

In my ongoing attempts to apply the gospel to the discipline of my children, I've found that a simple tweak to the Super Nanny style timeout better fits my doctrine than traditional timeouts. Please don't feel constrained by my practical application, though if it's helpful to you, that is great. The simple change I've made is that I no longer put my sons in timeout for a specific amount of time.

In times past, if they didn't obey me on a specific issue, my temptation was to punish them with a 5 or 10 minute (or longer) timeout, depending on their age and the severity of what they did. But that reminds me of a punitive jail sentence. "You took your brothers, toy? Verdict: guilty. Your sentence is to sit in that chair for 10 minutes." But the gospel teaches that Christ took their guilty verdicts on the cross and bore the punishment for every last one of them.

I struggle then with punishing them a second time. It makes Christ's punishment seem irrelevant, and I sure don't want to teach them that. Yet, as I said before, I have to disciple them through it!

In light of that, time-outs have become a tool for getting my boys' attention so we can DEAL with the problem. Many times (not always), the way this looks is that I put one or the other in time-out until they have calmed down and are ready to deal with the problem.

I'll sometimes say, "when your attitude has changed and you're ready to talk to me respectfully (or repair with your brother, or clean up your mess, or whatever the issue is), you can come find me." Sometimes, right then, they'll say, "I'm ready," though it's obvious they aren't. In that case, I repeat my instructions with some additions (when you are no longer angry, or when you have finished crying, or when your tone of voice has changed). Then when they come find me and I can tell they really do seem ready to address/fix the problem, then we start talking about it.

I ask them, "What did you do?" Because if they don't understand or admit what they did wrong, we won't have an effective discussion about fixing the root issue (what a big problem this is among grownups too!). Once they admit the real problem, we can start addressing the solution.

What does God say to do? Usually, we start with the greatest command and golden rule. True to how Jesus addresses the greatest command, most every other issue they have in life stems from its root. Next, how does the gospel equip us to deal with this problem? Well, it enables us to receive forgiveness from God, and God's forgiveness equips us to then forgive the next person (Eph. 4:32). From there, what can do we do to repair the problem? That question often takes some thought, yet it is a crucial point of reconciliation.

I enjoy watching my boys try to answer that question and love those moments when they sincerely face the problem and genuinely start caring about fixing it. Repairing and reconciliation are beautiful things to witness.

The discussion of discipline verses punishment has to address both negative punishment and positive reinforcement. Consequences and incentives. I don't want my consequences to be punishment. But I don't want to set my boys up for failure, which is what I do if I don't address problem areas in which they tend to sin and disobey.

I've found a simple tweak in how I communicate consequences to my children to be particularly helpful in practically applying my beliefs. We now talk about consequences as more about removing stumbling blocks than punishing behavior. For instance, I won't take them to the playground if they can't listen to my instructions and keep other kids safe. It's not a punitive jail sentence. It's removing a stumbling block for them until they've grown some on the issue.

We have a particular problem with morning negativity when it's

time to get ready for school. One of my sons likes to play games in the morning and had a very negative attitude when it was time to stop for school. So we took time off from playing those games in the morning.

I didn't talk about it as punishment against him in retribution for his attitude. But I was clear that playing these games was causing him problems in the morning, so we were going to stop for a while because it set him up for having a bad day. After a few weeks of that, he asked if he could play them again, and we had a good discussion about it. He recognized that we had stopped because it caused him to have a bad morning when time to get ready for school.

We discussed if he could now do it but have a good attitude when it was time to turn them off. And we talked about needing to stop playing them again if they became a problem for him that caused him to have a bad attitude. It's just a minor change in how I communicated consequences to my son, yet I have much more peace about the consistency of this with what I'm trying to communicate to him about the gospel, grace, forgiveness and repentance.

If this sounds like an easy system or method, don't let the simplicity of a short blog post confuse the complexity of any given situation in real life. I've outlined my best-case scenarios, targets I only rarely hit myself. And again, **please don't read this and feel constrained to discipline your children the way I do mine.** But if this encourages you to think more deeply about how the specifics of your discipline techniques reflect the gospel to your kids (as it has for me), then that is a good thing.

Adapted from Wendy Alsup's blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.