

What Grace and Discipline Should Look Like in a Christian Family

When should we discipline our kids, and when should we show them grace?

The truth is, it's not an either-or question: Grace and consequences go hand-in-hand. And we only have to look to Christ to see how.

You know the drill. You've told your child to clean his or her room a thousand times. Now you've had it.

You storm into their room, blow an emotional gasket and ground them until they are 20. That's not you, though. You love your kid and you want to offer them grace. That's biblical, right? Everyone needs it, even you. But somehow grace feels a bit like you're getting away with something. When you're the one that's guilty, grace is what you hope for.

On the other hand, discipline is also biblical. Your child needs to understand there are consequences to their actions. The only way a person will learn from their mistakes is to face some pain and consequences. Give them grace? Come on! How will they learn how much they've hurt us? How will they learn not to do it again?

Grace vs. Consequences

Now you feel you have to choose. Both views seem right; both are biblical. But what if they could function together?

They can: Jesus offered grace and allowed people to face the consequences of their actions. So it's not only doable, it's commanded if we are to be like Christ. But what does it look like, particularly in the home?

The answer lies in getting our arms around the concepts of grace and consequences, and seeing them in light of the gospel. When we see our relationship with our children much like our Father sees us in light of what Jesus has done, we can understand how these two truths run in tandem and build stronger relationships between us and our children. Let's take a closer look at both of these truths and how they fit together.

Choosing Grace and Consequences as a Parent

I love my kids. I want the best for them and want to give them as much as I can. It's what loving dads do, so grace comes easy for me:

"Your science project is due tomorrow? OK, I'll help you. After all, I don't want the Medford family to be the laughing stock of the science fair! We simply can't have that. Here's some grace for you."

But if grace were just about letting my kids off the hook, how would they ever learn not to wait until the night before to see if that volcano model actually spews lava? Grace is really about restoring relationships. When I offer grace to my child, it's not so much about letting them off the hook as it is about restoring the relationship between us that's been hindered by disobedience. Then consequences allow us the opportunity to strengthen the relationship through pain and struggle.

The Scripture is full of truth about how God uses pain in our lives to build character and strengthen faith (Heb. 12:6-7; Prov. 3:11-12). Disciplining a child is never seen as a negative in Scripture. It always strengthens and builds relationship and love. When a relationship has been restored through repentance and forgiveness (grace), the punishment can then be doled out with care and with instruction in mind (consequences).

Here's the rub, though. Too many times we give false grace to our kids by not punishing them.

Then, when it doesn't seem to be fixing the problem, we respond in anger and frustration. We put off discipline, all the while our frustration level increases and the punishment comes without any care or love. Our kids don't truly experience grace now, because they don't know where the relationship stands. All they see is anger from us, and the relationship status is left in limbo.

Try This at Home

I know what you're thinking: *"This all sounds good and fine in a nice little article, but what does this look like in my actual house?"* Here's a little scenario to see if grace and consequences can function together.

Before it's actually time for your child to clean his or her room, have a family meeting. In this meeting you are going to communicate clearly what is expected when it's time to clean the room. Stuffing things in the closet does not count as "clean." You'll also communicate what the consequences will be for not obeying.

Let's say "no phone for three days." Seems fair. Cleaning day arrives and the room isn't clean. Not a big surprise. Now it's time for the conversation: You go over the rule and the consequence with them so that they understand why their phone is about to become yours for the next 72 hours. This is painful. Consequences are. Wailing and gnashing of teeth ensue, but watch this: They get punished for disobeying you, not for not cleaning their room. You didn't make that rule up—it's the Fifth Commandment. God made it! The discipline, then, isn't about breaking a house rule; it's about sin.

This is where grace comes in. Their relationship with you and with God has been skewed. The next response is to confess and ask forgiveness of you and of God. You can offer grace (and

restore that relationship) because they simply asked for forgiveness. And because God has shown grace to you.

Though consequences follow, relationships are restored. You may even be able to offer more grace by helping them clean it or by giving back the phone a day early. This may be an oversimplification, but the concepts are tried and true.

Healthy relationships always provide a great environment for growing, even when growth calls for a little pain. As long as you are willing to trust God's Word about discipline and treasure a godly relationship with your kids, I believe that God will bless your home—and all of the relationships therein.

Conversation Starters

Whether it's five minutes in the car or an hour together at the dinner table, look for little moments throughout the day to start the conversation with your child. Here are some questions you can use to get started. Use them as open doors to your own story—share your experiences, and your faith.

Keep in mind it can be uncomfortable for many children to open up with their parents. Respect their need to talk privately, or even consider having this conversation on a walk where they don't necessarily have to look you in the eye.

- How do you think God uses our failures?
- When have you recently had to show someone grace?
- When was a time you learned something from failing?
- What do you think is the difference between grace and forgiveness?
- Who in your life do you think of as a disciplinarian?
- Do you view God as a disciplinarian?
- How can we pray for you?

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