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## Winning the Game

Attribute: Discipline

Text: Hebrews 12:5–11

Characters: Eli and Sons

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It's easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them.

Alfred Adler

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In January of 2001 the Fox Family network aired a four-hour version of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo's compelling saga of man's heroic struggle against forces that threaten to break even the strongest and most noble spirits. The book became an instant success when published in 1862 and continues to capture the imagination of people around the world. The musical version still holds a prime spot among entertainment ventures of that kind.

Jean Valjean, the suffering hero of the story, depicts a man Hugo knew during his own lifetime. Claude Gueux stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. While in prison, he murdered one of his persecuting wardens and was executed in 1834. The character of Inspector Javert, many believe, was modeled after Victor's father, Leopold Hugo, a career army officer who eventually became a count and a general under Napoléon. Literary experts indicate that Leopold Hugo possessed the kind of obsessive behavior and "sense of duty" Javert displays until the final scene.

Discipline plays a major role in *Les Misérables*. Javert's absolute dedication to his duty as a police officer drives him far beyond the boundaries of reason and completely beyond mercy. On the positive side, however, Jean Valjean's dedication to truth, courage, and helping people in need shows disciplined behavior in scene after scene throughout the play, just as suffering one's way to salvation represents a standard theme in Catholic novels. But no character in Hugo's book depicts a biblical father carrying out spiritual discipline in a family setting. Amazingly, it's difficult to find that pattern in the Bible as well.

In the late twelfth century B.C., Israel churned in chaos. The tabernacle stood at Shiloh, twenty miles north of Jerusalem, and spiritual leadership rested in Eli's hands. The old man served by God's appointment and he served in difficult days. As we

noted in chapter 9, the text tells us, “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sam. 3:1).

Eli’s personal life and ministry seemed beyond reproach, but he could not handle parenting, and his weakest dimension in the family arena was his failure to discipline. The text says, “Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD” (1 Sam. 2:12). In our last chapter, we saw the problem; in this chapter we explore the solutions. Perhaps the key is 1 Samuel 3:13: “For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them.” What a tragic commentary on a spiritual leader who failed in his fathering discipline!

## **Coach the Team**

Teams are made up of captains and players who play specific positions. All players have to know exactly what the coach expects of them and what will happen if they don’t fulfill their roles. Every player also has to know how to take orders from the captain or coach and to do so without rebellion or bitterness.

In the Christian family, God ordains parental captains. Failure to understand and exercise biblical roles and responsibilities in the family creates havoc with any disciplinary structure. Imagine a football team on which the tight end lines up behind the running back or a defensive tackle insists on kicking the point after a touchdown. Making discipline work may mean going back to the basics to determine what moms do, what dads do, and what children do according to God’s design for Christian families.

In the family, all the players may get a voice (depending on their ages), but the final decisions belong to the co-captains, the parents. Their task carries with it the essential process of carefully pruning the sin along with encouraging the good in their children. When punishment is meted out in anger and bitterness coupled with sarcastic words and demeaning language, it can destroy a child’s spirit. Careful discipline (wisely structured rules and requirements) matched with loving punishment will show children that their wills must be submissive to their parents who, in turn, submit to the will of God.

As you prune and encourage, show children how family rules and guidelines derive from the principles of God’s Word. This helps them understand that the boundaries have been set not “because I said so” (a phrase many parents revert to as a last resort) but because God said so and had good reasons. These explanations will eventually become internalized by your children, giving them the foundation to make good choices as they grow older.

Discipline means training the team. Basketball coaches talk about a player “out of control,” which means he may be extremely fast, a good shot, and aggressive on defense, but he does not work with other players in a disciplined game plan. Just as in sports, discipline doesn’t come automatically to children; somebody needs to run them through training camp to get them ready for the season.

Good games require fair play. Vulnerability, honesty, and integrity create a positive atmosphere of home nurture. When children cheat on the rules at school and try to get away with anything they can, they show that their parents don’t require them to take seriously responsibilities at home. When parents are more lenient with one child than with others, the siblings may start to show bitterness over their enforced discipline and their sibling’s excessive freedom. They wonder if their obedience has any value in the eyes of their parents. That’s why the Scripture tells parents, “Do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (Col. 3:21).

Both captains have to say the same things for the same reasons and model that all-important family unity. If a child is not required to follow the rules, he or she actually does not feel a part of the family team. In truth, the parents have withheld love by refusing to enforce their guidelines. Their laxity can result in a very insecure child.

## **Be Conscious of the Fans**

Most professional athletic teams play much better on their home field or floor for obvious reasons, but road games are important too. As parents we need to remember that people—neighbors, friends at church, relatives, teachers, and even strangers we meet in public places—are watching our little family team. On the one hand we can’t be intimidated by the fact that people are watching. Yet we do remember that the Scripture says, “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb. 12:1). These words introduce one of the great passages of God’s Word on the subject of discipline. And, once again, we find God’s fatherly example portrayed for us.

Discipline is a necessary component of love (Heb. 12:5–6). The Lord disciplines those whom he loves and punishes those he receives. Obviously, parental discipline offered by Christians within the family context should always be loving—never administered in anger. Avoid irrational emotional outbursts. A loving response points out the wrong, explains the reason for the consequences, and proceeds with forgiveness.

Discipline identifies the child as a bona fide member of the family (Heb. 12:7–8). The reference to earthly fathers in these verses indicates again that God teaches us spiritual truth through family illustrations. We know we belong to the family of God because he disciplines us to bring us into line when we displease him. Uncontrolled, undisciplined children might as well not have a family.

Discipline by human parents is never perfect (Heb. 12:9–10). Scripture teaches that we are to reverence, or honor, parents who correct us, even when they do it imperfectly and sometimes at their own whims. Discipline must be accepted, even welcomed, by Christian children and teenagers because parents hold their authoritative positions by divine appointment. And, since we all know the captain sometimes makes mistakes, it may help from time to time to tell our children just that.

Discipline always seems painful at the time but produces fruit in the end (Heb. 12:11). When the task gets discouraging, Christian parents must remember the reward. We know we're attempting to do God's will, yet sometimes our efforts at discipline and punishment seem to stir up greater rebellion and achieve negative results. Successful discipline requires patience, persistence, and keeping the end in view.

Born with no arms, Harold Wilkey required constant care and help. On one occasion, a neighbor watched while Harold struggled to put on his shirt while his mother just sat and looked at him. Exasperated, the neighbor shouted, "Why don't you help him?" Harold's mother calmly responded, "I am helping him."

Discipline does not always mean doing things to or for our children. At times it can mean requiring them to do essential things for themselves.

## **Control Practice Sessions**

The difference between discipline and punishment seems unclear in the minds of too many coaches and parents. Punishment should be a consequence when discipline fails. Discipline erects fences; punishment comes when a player breaks down the fences or deliberately transgresses the boundaries.

### ***Discipline Precedes Punishment***

The word discipline flows from the root word disciple. Used as a noun, disciple means "learner" or "follower." How appropriate to describe what parents do with children in the Christian home! Discipline molds and strengthens godly character by means of structured behavioral guidelines. Wise parents control the environment toward these nurturing goals as soon as the baby comes home from the hospital. Coaching and "captaining" begin immediately.

A parent who administers punishment before the boundaries, rules, and "fences" of discipline have been established engages in unjust and unproductive behavior. It's like asking a soccer player to follow the rules without explaining them first and then kicking her out of the game when she violates one. We want nurture not negation, cultivation not confinement.

## ***Discipline Presupposes Punishment***

Only people who believe in original sin can understand this principle. Advocates of the belief that the nature of children is either good or neutral argue that children should never need punishment at all, assuming their environment is correct. But the Bible teaches that the evil sin nature is in every child's heart. Punishment, which flows out of discipline, will at times be necessary.

The overall picture of Scripture demands that Christian parents lead their children and teenagers from basic sinful, natural rebellion to a place of enforced discipline. Enforced discipline then leads to self-discipline and ultimately to Christ-discipline with lives surrendered to his lordship. Ancient wisdom works today—"Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; he will also delight your soul" (Prov. 29:17 NASB).

## ***Discipline Prepares for Punishment***

When telling our children what they can and cannot do, we must also tell them what will happen when they violate family rules. Disciplined coaches tend to produce disciplined children by the very nature of the order they bring to practice.

Think about two-year-olds who act totally uninhibited in public places. They run up and down church aisles and climb into the pews; they throw food around the table at restaurants or when the family dines at someone else's home; they seem oblivious to parental commands to "stop" or "come here" or "be quiet." What you see in public, of course, only reflects what goes on at home. These children live in worlds without fences. Their parents have not committed themselves strongly enough to erecting boundaries of behavior and letting punishment follow discipline when and where it must.

J. Paul Getty, the famous oil magnate, was once the world's richest man. To manipulate and control his children, he changed his will twenty-one times. In the process he drove one son to suicide and failed to show up at the funeral of another who died at age twelve. Here's a copy of Getty's diary entry for that day: "Funeral for darling Timmy. A sad day. Send cable to Zone that Aminoil can have fifty percent of Eocene by giving us fifty percent of Burgen and paying ten cents per barrel handling." You may not be as rich as Getty, but you can still make the same mistakes by prioritizing your business over your family.

Unity between the co-captains helps the process significantly. Young children learn to pit Mom against Dad to get what they want when the parents don't support each other. When disagreements occur over disciplinary matters, parents must stick together for the public moment, then hash out the issues in private. Parents must periodically sit

down together—and with the children as they grow older—to refine guidelines for behavior and consequences for lapses. Angry scenes between parent and child can fade into distant memory when rules have been agreed on ahead of time.

It takes time and effort to decide what we will allow our children to do and what we will not tolerate. Sure it seems harsh to firmly stop that little hand reaching repeatedly for the breakable vase on the coffee table or playfully yanking the eyeglasses off Grandma's face. But remember: That firm stop is at the same time a punishment that can be understood by a very young child and a part of the network of behavior we create to guide him or her toward a satisfactory lifestyle.

In a wonderful song called "Broken Pieces," Steve and Annie Chapman remind us to get a firm grip on our parenting responsibility and especially on the crucial behavior of discipline.

*All across this nation  
Families are falling  
And daily the number increases  
And the ones who suffer most are not  
The mothers nor the fathers  
The children are the broken pieces*

*Yes, the children are the broken pieces  
When the home falls apart  
Yes, the children are the broken pieces  
Who's going to mend their broken hearts.*

*And when our nation is fill with broken pieces  
It's so hard to build them on the ruins  
So mothers and fathers if you will not stay together  
The children pay the price for what you're doing*

*Yes, the children are the broken pieces  
When the home falls apart  
Yes, the children are the broken pieces  
Who's going to mend their broken hearts.*

*Oh, tell me, Who's going to mend their tender hearts.  
Please, tell me God's going to mend their broken pieces.*

## *Jeff's* Story

My children have grown up playing soccer, a game I never played much as a kid because my peers didn't consider it "cool" back then. But in watching my children play the game, I have discovered that soccer requires a great deal of discipline. As Soccer Pals, our kids joined the other munchkins on the field chasing the ball everywhere it went, despite the coach's pleas from the sideline, "Don't bunch up!"

But now my children have learned the discipline of soccer. They play their positions; they pass the ball; they work as a team. And more important, they are learning the discipline of living. They don't just run with the pack or wander anywhere they please. They play their positions in the family and contribute to the success of the team. Disciplined families know how to work together so that everyone wins.

## *Kenn's* Story

Our two children were very different in their temperaments. Parents with three, four, or more say it doesn't matter how many children you have; each one develops a unique personality.

Jeff was sensitive and easily corrected. Because of his tender spirit, a cross word or stern look would often straighten out his improper behavior. When the house was quiet, we could probably find him sitting on the floor surrounded by toys or reading a book.

Julie was another case altogether. During her preschool years, a quiet house told us we had better check on her whereabouts. She was often found eating the dirt from a flowerpot or pulling all the toilet paper off the roll and making a pretty pile on the floor. Our approach to correction with her required greater firmness and regularity.

## **Making It Work**

There is no one right way to handle discipline or punishment. There are, however, several clearly wrong ways, especially physical violence and demeaning name-calling. An occasional spanking, never done in parental anger, may prove necessary. We deplore anything hinting of child abuse; abused children often grow into abusive parents. If, as a parent, you find yourself struggling with uncontrollable anger and inappropriate punishment, we encourage you to seek professional help. A child brought up in fear of parental temper tantrums (much more damaging from parents

than from children) will have a very difficult time placing trust in God for ultimate matters.

Several practical fathering behaviors flow out of our study of Hebrews 12:

- Never lose sight of sin as the ultimate culprit in a child's negative behavior.
- Remember that the key is not perpetual success but faithful effort.
- Expect pain at the moment of punishment and look for righteousness and peace later.
- Map out a straight road for your family and get a grip on those feeble arms and weak knees (v. 12).
- Don't give up on spiritually lame children (v. 13).

The best discipline approach designs each individual rule and treats each situation with the goal of applying biblical principles to your family. May no one ever write about you, "He failed to restrain his children."

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. In what specific ways can Christian parents develop orderly disciplined patterns with young children? With young teens? With older teens?
2. Do you believe in physical punishment? What forms are most helpful? How do you handle the various biblical texts (notably Proverbs) that seem to affirm the value of physical punishment?
3. Why is it important for husband and wife to present a united front in dealing with the matters of discipline and punishment? How can they best do that?

## **Father/Child Dialogue**

1. Dad, tell your kids about the disciplinary measures your parents used and why they were effective or ineffective. Be sure to do it without putting Grandma and Grandpa in a bad light.
2. Kids, think about one way your dad disciplines you. Tell him how that discipline helps you obey.