Of course, I’ve lived long enough now that not only can I tell some discipline stories on my mother, I can tell some on my own parenting. But they are mostly on my son, Nathan. Kristen was one of those kids with such a keen conscience that all it took was a look. If she did something wrong (which was pretty rare), the old Clint Eastwood glare would dissolve her into tears. You know what they say: “Spare the glare, spoil the child.”

Nathan was a different story—more strong-willed and mouthy. I told you about the time he was mouthing off and disturbing me from watching the rare Razorback game I could watch on TV in the Kansas City area. Finally, at the next commercial, he followed me into the kitchen and continued his backtalk. I decided to wash his mouth out with soap: “That’ll teach him to be mouthy!” He was around four years old. Soap seemed right. But the only soap in sight was dishwashing liquid. So I squirted some on my finger, rubbed it into his mouth. And he looked up at me with tears streaming down those chubby cheeks ... and you know what he did? He blew a soap bubble. Sort of killed the moment. I laughed out loud and he did too as I picked him up in my arms and hugged him tight. But you know what they say: “Spare the dishwashing liquid, spoil the child.”

And then there was the time in second grade when we discovered that the little rascal had been stealing these California Raisin action figures from a girl at school. That just about did me in. The kid broke one of God’s top ten commands. I didn’t spank him, but I lectured him, preached to him really, on the evils of stealing, which was surely harder to endure than a quick swat on the backside. The poor kid had never seen me so upset. And he was as terrified as the Israelites when God came down on the mountain and gave them those commandments in the first place. We made him take the raisins back to the girl from whom he pilfered them, apologize to her, to his teacher, and to the principal. And we grounded him till he went away to college—well, it was a couple of weeks of no playing outside. I even went so far as to call my friend, Jim, the police chaplain for Lee’s Summit, Missouri, and ask if he would give Nathan and me a tour of the jail. My chaplain friend said, “Sure, but call me back in a couple of days to set a time.” When I called him back I told him I decided that was a stupid idea for a second-grader, and Jim said, “Yeah, that’s why I said to call me back in a couple of days. I figured you’d come to that
conclusion.” I was a crazy man. But you know what they say, “Spare the jail tour, spoil the child.”

Well, they don’t say that, but they do say this: “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” That’s got to be in the Bible somewhere, right? It sounds so “biblical.” It sounds so “proverbial.” It’s probably in the Proverbs. Or is it?

As we continue our series, Is That Really in the Bible, I invite you to open your Bible to Proverbs 13:24. This is one of five verses in Proverbs that use the word rod in connection with the discipline of a child.

But before we read our text, let me give you a quick refresher on the Proverbs. The Proverbs are not a bunch of promises. Proverbs are mostly brief, pithy little sayings that reflect the conventional wisdom of God. Read them like this: “Generally speaking, if you raise a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it.” Or, “Generally speaking, a soft answer turns away wrath.” Proverbs are not promises. So don’t wave them in God’s face and demand your money back if your situation doesn’t exactly match the words of a particular proverb. This is wisdom literature, not a bunch of promises, not a money back guarantee. That goes for proverbs about anger and speech and money and marriage and laziness and work and parenting and all the rest. So when we comb the Proverbs looking for a little parental guidance, realize that guidance, not guarantees, is what we get.

Some of that guidance has to do with the rod of discipline. One of those proverbs is our text this morning. Is this where we find, “Spare the rod, spoil the child”? Let’s read it and see. The word of the Lord … (read the text).

I

You don’t have to have made an A in English to see that “spare the rod, spoil the child” is not found in our text. It’s not found in that many words in any Proverbs text. Proverbs 23:13-14 reads, “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with a rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.” That text and ours in 13:24 are the texts that seem closest to the concept of “spare the rod, spoil the child.” But that particular phrase doesn’t come from the Bible.
The phrase comes from a lengthy, somewhat bawdy, 17th century poem by Samuel Butler called Hudibras. In the poem, Hudibras is in jail. He is also wooing a widow he thinks could get him released from jail. She said she would do just that if he would prove his love to her. She suggests that if Hudibras attempted suicide by hanging, that would prove his love, and she would cut him down before he died. Hudibras thought that a bit harsh. So she next suggests that if he whipped himself or let her whip him that would prove his love. She then speaks of the benefits of whipping and concludes with these words.

What medicine else can cure the fits
Of lovers when they lose their wits?
Love is a boy by poets styled
Then spare the rod and spoil the child.¹

There are literary critics who think Butler fashioned this line from the ideas expressed about the rod in Proverbs. But the phrase “spare the rod, spoil the child” doesn’t come from Proverbs; it comes from Butler’s poem.

Still, the Proverbs do have something to say about the rod and the discipline of children. Look again at our text: “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.”

In spite of how this verse appears on its face, there is some interpretive uncertainty as to what Proverbs means by the term rod. The Hebrew word is used in a variety of ways in the Old Testament.² Among its uses are these:

• a traveler’s staff—we’d call it a walking stick,

• an instrument of discipline or punishment—we might call it a switch, a paddle, a wooden spoon, a belt, a house shoe, or the “board of education” that I felt a few times, the worst of which was in the hands of my high school principal who was 9 parts mean and 1 part kindness. I was bent over his desk, and the man almost lifted me off the ground when he swung that paddle.

• And the word *rod* also means a tool used by a shepherd—yes, this is the Hebrew word used in Psalm 23:4 when David says of His Shepherd Lord, “His *rod* and *staff*, they comfort me.”

And in both Old Testament and New, the *rod* is used as a symbol of terror (Ps. 2:9; Isa. 10:5; 1 Cor. 4:21), a symbol of comfort, protection, and security (Ps. 23:4), and a symbol of authority (Num. 20:8; Ex. 17:5-6; Rev. 12:5).

*Rod* is an elastic word. It’s stretchy in its meanings. Context becomes the key to getting at its meaning in a particular usage. And in the context of our Proverb, the *rod* is an instrument of discipline. The obvious meaning is some kind of stick or switch used to inflict minor physical pain without inflicting physical injury.

I read about one couple that took this verse so literally they felt the need to design and market a Proverbs *rod* for today’s parents. Clyde and Twyla Bullock, from Eufaula, Oklahoma, once swore by the Rod—a 22-inch, $5 white nylon whipping stick Clyde designed and once produced. Named after the biblical *"rod of correction,*" the Rod, they explained, provides "a faith-based way to discipline children ... and train them as Christians." The advertisement for their product read: *"Spoons are for cooking. Belts are for holding up pants. Hands are for loving. RODS are for chastening.*" The ad went on to quote one of the Proverbs texts about the rod of discipline.³

Most of us who were raised in the era where spanking was common both at home and at school know about the *rod*. In fact, the sheer mention of it—*“Do you want me to get my belt?”*—or even the mere sight of it struck terror in the heart and usually led to better behavior on the spot. The anticipation was often worse than the event. The *rod*.

II

I’m not sure we can be honest with our text and the other “rod” texts in Proverbs if we suggest that this has nothing to do with some kind of corporal punishment. Some interpreters try to make that case, in an obvious effort to make the Bible say what they want it to say. And while they

³http://www.religioustolerance.org/spankin13.htm
and many modern psychologists and thinkers believe any form of spanking is barbaric and inappropriate, our text would bear to differ. This is not a license to whip a kid when the mood strikes you. This is no declaration of open season on the fannies of little children. Nor is it a command for a parent to obey. It’s wisdom literature. Sometimes it’s wise to use some sort of humane physical discipline on our kids.

But common sense and wisdom also suggest that there need to be some parameters here—parameters like these:

Physical discipline should be **age appropriate**: a kid can be too young or too old for this type of discipline. Much of my reading suggests spanking is effective anywhere from fifteen months to age 10 or 11. I read of one study that found that children spanked until age 6 were likely as teenagers to perform better at school and were more likely to carry out volunteer work and to want to go to college than their peers who had never been physically disciplined. But children who continued to be spanked into adolescence showed clear behavioral problems. Marjorie Gunnoe, a psychology professor at Calvin College, says that her studies show her, “The claims made for not spanking children fail to hold up. They are not consistent with the data. I think of spanking as a dangerous tool, but there are times when there is a job big enough for a dangerous tool. You just don’t use it for all your jobs.” She’s right. The rod is not the only tool in the toolbox to discipline our kids. There are time outs, the withdrawal of privileges, and grounding (which is something of a combination of the two). Be creative. Learn your child. Learn which form of discipline creates the best result in your children. But keep the rod age-appropriate. That’s one parameter.

Here’s another: physical discipline should be **applied only when necessary**. If there are other ways to discipline and make the same point, use those.

Here’s another parameter: physical discipline should be **applied consistently**, or to use the word in our text, **diligently**. If you use the rod one time and let your kid get away with murder the next time, the rod is a bad choice for discipline. Your inability to apply it consistently confuses a child and turns the rod into a way for you to vent your anger rather than as a helpful

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4Notes on the cited study and Gunnoe’s comments can be found in “Study: Spanked Children May Grow Up to Be Happier, More Successful,” foxnews.com (posted: Jan 4, 2010).
discipline for your kid. Any form of discipline should be about the kid rather than the parent. What’s best for the kid? Be consistent, diligent.

And then this parameter: physical discipline should be applied lovingly. If you’re angry at your kid or his misbehavior, which you probably are, cool down before you apply the rod. Like all discipline, the rod is not so much for punishment as it is for correction. If you’re just beating your kid because you’re mad, then you are not acting with the wisdom of the proverb. Love should motivate every form of discipline.

Any parent who chooses to use the rod, needs to have clear guidelines and parameters in place or the rod becomes a tool to punish rather than discipline, to beat rather than correct.

III

And correction is the big picture in the discipline of children. The goal of discipline is to raise a kid into a responsible adult. For Christian parents the goal is to raise a kid to become a responsible disciple of Christ. A kid is not going to get there without discipline. Reggie Joiner writes about how to raise a jerk—a jerk being a kid who has an over-inflated sense of self-worth and entitlement. And in case you want to raise a jerk, here are some things that will get you there:

- Protect them from the consequences of their own mistakes.
- Make sure you do whatever they can do for themselves.
- Keep them away from anyone who thinks differently than they do.
- Try to give them everything they want.
- Tell them over and over again you just want them to be happy.
- Convince them that they are more special than other kids.
- Always take their side when they get in trouble with their teacher at school.
- Always take their side whenever they are in a conflict with a friend.
- Keep insisting that they are the best player on the team.
- Don’t give them consistent opportunities to help or serve other people.
- Never require them to do chores.

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• Reinforce their prejudices about people from different cultures or backgrounds.
• Make your relationship with them more important than your relationship with your spouse.
• Rarely express genuine gratitude to those who help you.
• Teach them to talk more than they listen.
• Never let them hear you say “I was wrong. I am sorry.”

Dayna and I always wanted to raise kids other people would like, but if you want to raise a jerk Joiner lays out the blueprint. But who really wants to raise a jerk? I don’t think there’s a parent in this room that holds their newborn baby in their arms and thinks, “I’m going to raise this kid to be the biggest jerk on the block.” Isn’t the jerk just another way to say a spoiled kid, a brat.

A failure to discipline or that lousy hit-and-miss discipline some parents sort of apply spoils kids. Such kids tend to grow up with a sense of entitlement, with a sense that they can get away with anything, with a sense that the rules don’t apply to them, with a sense of no boundaries to live by. They tend to grow up lazy and selfish and insecure and dependent on everyone but themselves.

On the other hand, kids that grow up under an iron fist of harsh discipline or too much discipline can also end up spoiled—but in a different way. They tend to grow up angry and bitter and pessimistic. They tend to fear risk. They have trouble believing in themselves. They live with the insecurity that their next step might land them in trouble. They sometimes struggle in relationships, not because they are selfish but because they are afraid to open themselves to others. They build walls of protection around themselves—too often protecting themselves from the people who can help them most.

Too little or inconsistent discipline, too much or harsh discipline spoil the child in ways that can nag them for a lifetime.

The wisdom of Proverbs helps us strike a balance. Proverbs reminds us of the value of discipline.

• That discipline helps train children to learn that they are responsible for their actions and that their actions have consequences.
• That discipline is a way parents teach children the **difference** between right and wrong and a way we teach them what really matters in life.

• That discipline teaches children that there are **authority figures** in their lives, and they do best when they respect authority rather than buck up against it.

• That discipline produces **self-discipline** over time—mom and dad say no to me now so I will learn how to say no to myself as I mature.

• That discipline is directed toward **the future** more than toward the past. It’s about correction and training more than it is about punishment.

• That discipline is a key way that a child learns that she is a **sinner**. She’s not a perfect angel. She messes up. She does wrong. She sins against God and others.

• That discipline can help a child learn of his **need for forgiveness**, for a Savior, for God.

• That discipline is a **gift of love** that good parents give their children.

Substitute the word **rod** in our text with the word **discipline**, and hear the text again: “**Whoever spares discipline hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.**” Don’t get so focused on “the rod” that you lose the **big picture** of providing discipline in the lives of your kids. And don’t expect the school or the church to do that work for you. It’s your job, mom and dad. Do the best you can. Talk all you want about how much you love your kids, but if you don’t discipline them, Proverbs would suggest you don’t love them near as much as you say you do: “**Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.**”

Discipline is a good and wonderful gift parents give to their children. It’s **not always easy**. Two kids from the same gene pool may require different styles of discipline. It’s complicated by bad marriages, broken homes, absent parents, and the stress of life. Discipline is work. We parents make mistakes. You can give your child toys and bikes and a brand new car. You can give them $150 pairs of shoes, the latest fashions, and a college education. But there’s no greater gift you can give your child than discipline.
Isn’t that one of the great gifts God gives His children?  Before Proverbs talks much about parents disciplining their children, it talks about God disciplining His children. Our discipline of our children is grounded in God’s discipline of His children, of us. Proverbs 3:11-12 reads, “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”

And lest you think that’s just Old Testament talk, the writer of Hebrews quotes this text and expands upon it in Hebrews 12.

- Hebrews goes so far as to say that if a Christian is left without discipline, he better check his birth certificate because God may not be his real daddy. God disciplines His children. God disciplines those He loves (12:7-8).

- Hebrews tells us that God the Father’s discipline of His children is for our good, so that we may share in God’s holiness (12:10).

- Hebrews also tells us that discipline usually hurts in the moment but in time yields the fruit of peace and righteousness (12:11).

Discipline is a good and glorious gift of love from our heavenly Father for us. God’s discipline isn’t punishment for our sin. Jesus bore that punishment in the cross. God’s discipline is grace—grace that makes us better Christians, more tender, more gracious; grace that enables us to love and serve others better; grace that teaches us the right way and the best way to live our lives. The NIV translates Hebrew 12:7 in this way: “Endure hardship as discipline.” Discipline gives our hardships purpose. It means they’re not random, not accidental, not empty of the mercies of God or outside the presence and work of God. God’s discipline, even when it comes in hardship, comes not out of the anger of God but the grace of God.

On October 14, 1987, in Midland, Texas, eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure was playfully dangling her feet over an innocent-appearing eight-inch opening in the ground. But this was no innocent hole; it was a well shaft. When she went to stand she fell into the darkness. With one leg up and the other leg down, Jessica was wedged in the narrow shaft above the water but
some twenty-two feet below the ground. The whole country watched as rescuers fought rock, equipment failure, and time to reach Jessica. They drilled a twenty-nine-foot vertical shaft parallel to the well and then bored a five-foot horizontal tunnel through solid rock to reach her. It took fifty-eight hours to get to her. And by this time, medical personnel feared that shock and dehydration were becoming greater risks than the entrapment. And when they finally reached her, they couldn’t pull her out. The way her body was wedged in the shaft foiled all their efforts. The EMTs checked her vitals one more time and then gave the awful order: “Pull hard! She has no more time. You may have to break her to save her.” So they pulled. And with no additional injuries, Jessica McClure was saved.6

The story had a happy ending, but the counsel of the EMT is a little haunting: “You may have to break her to save her.” Read the Bible for a while and you’ll discover that God does that a lot to His people: He breaks us to save us. God’s discipline is grace.

And so is the discipline we offer our children. Some parents are afraid to discipline their kids for fear their kids might resent them or not like them anymore. But if you want to be a parent instead of just a buddy, you will do your God-given job and discipline your kids. Sure, they won’t like it much. They may not feel the love and the grace of it at the time. But keep the big picture in mind and love them enough to discipline them. It will be okay.

V

Most every Father’s Day or Mother’s Day or birthday or anniversary, Dayna and I get notes from our kids. And they thank us for the way we raised them, for the faithful love they have always felt and knew was there for them no matter what, and for the discipline we offered them even though they admit they didn’t much like it or understand it at the time. They say that they hope they can do as well by their kids as they feel we did by them. And when we read their kind notes, we usually get a lump in our throats, shake our heads, and say, “It wasn’t us. It was the Lord.” The Lord supplied the wisdom and the strength to love and discipline our kids like He has always loved and disciplined us.

6As told by Bryan Chappell, Christ-Centered Preaching (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 178-179.
And mom and dad, if God could do that through such imperfect parents as Dayna and me, God can certainly do that through you. Learn God’s wisdom. Lean into God’s strength. Let Him love your kids through you as you discipline them even in those times when you may have to break them to save them. They may not like it much now. They may consider it hardship. But if you stick with God and do things God’s way, when they’re adults, they’ll rise up, call you blessed, and thank you for it.

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