

Have you ever noticed that people who are extraordinarily gifted and successful in some areas of life can fail miserably in other areas of life? David was a success story in many ways. He's regarded as the greatest king the nation of Israel ever had. No one's even a close second. He was the greatest poet and musician the nation of Israel ever produced. He wrote most of the psalms in the Old Testament book by that name. He was a brilliant general and charismatic leader who inspired the deepest loyalty from others. Most importantly, he was a deeply spiritual and godly man. God even called David "... 'a man after my own heart.'" (Acts 13:22 NLT) Now David wasn't perfect by any means. He could be a man very much against God's heart on occasion, too. He committed some terrible sins; nevertheless, he repented and God forgave Him. Despite those sins, God never changed His overall opinion of David. He was a great man.

But I want to suggest to you that despite David's many successes, his many noble character traits and his authentic love for God, he was a failure at being a father and a parent. The central story that illustrates that failure revolves around the tragic story of David and one of his sons, Absalom, that runs through 2 Samuel chapters 13-18. Obviously, we don't have time today to read all those chapters, so let me tell you the story quickly. In those days, kings married women of nobility from other countries in order to form political alliances. As a result, David had lots of wives and children. It was a huge family with lots of half brothers and half sisters. David's oldest son and heir to the throne of Israel was Amnon. Amnon got obsessed with the thought of having sex with his gorgeous half-sister – a woman by the name of Tamar. The Bible tells us that Amnon raped Tamar and then kicked her out of his palace apartments like she was a piece of garbage. Tamar was utterly devastated and sought comfort from her full brother, Absalom, who was David's third son. David heard about this terrible event, got really angry – and this is important – did precisely nothing about it. Absalom nursed his rage against Amnon for violating Tamar. Two years after the rape, he murdered his brother, Amnon. Then, Absalom took off and lived with his maternal grandfather, the king of a country called Geshur, for three years.

David finally allowed Absalom to return to the capital city of Jerusalem, but he wouldn't meet with his son face to face. It was like an internal exile that lasted another two years. Absalom finally asked the obvious question, "Why did I ever leave Geshur? I might as well have stayed there." Finally, there was a very superficial reconciliation between David and Absalom – more staged than real, more cosmetic than genuine. Shortly after that, Absalom convinced himself that he would make a better king than his father. Why wait until Dad died? The time to rule is now! So Absalom conspired against his own father and almost succeeded in taking the throne away from David. So successful was this attempted *coup d'état* that David had to flee Jerusalem and run for his life. Then Absalom reveals his utter contempt for his father by setting up a tent on the palace roof and having sex with all of his father's concubines. What was a

concubine? They were sort of like official mistresses of the king who didn't have the status of a wife. By doing so, Absalom declared that he was now the king of Israel and he'd rather die than give the throne back to his father, David. Ultimately, Absalom and his army were defeated and Absalom was executed despite David's order to spare his life. All this is in the Bible? Yes, indeed.

It's Mother's Day today, as you know. And we honor and thank God for our mothers. But being a mother – indeed, being a parent - is a very important task that rises above and beyond greeting card sentimentality. Today's message applies to dads just as much as moms. What can we learn from this tragic, heartbreaking story of David and Absalom? Much. These stories in the Bible aren't meant to amuse or entertain us, but rather to help and instruct us. God wants you to be an effective parent. To be more specific, God wants you to learn how to discipline your children in a way that honors God and builds them up. David failed miserably when it came to disciplining his children and it caused unspeakable heartache and pain in his family. He's a negative lesson on what it means to discipline your kids in a godly way. God tells you this story in His Word to help you succeed where David failed. First of all...

### **GODLY DISCIPLINE MEANS GIVING LOVING REBUKES.**

From the Bible's perspective, a rebuke is a loving and helpful confrontation. The purpose of a rebuke is to warn someone of an attitude or a behavior that's going to result in tragedy for that person if it's not abandoned. The purpose is to redirect someone not humiliate him. It's a warning sign telling a person that she's headed in the wrong direction. Cheryl and I love to hike in the Metro Parks. She's better at spotting little snakes that appear once and awhile along the trails. When she grabs my arm and jerks me away before I step on a snake I hadn't seen, I don't get offended. I'm thankful for the warning. A rebuke is like that.

The Bible says that wise people appreciate godly rebukes: "A single rebuke does more for a person of understanding than a hundred lashes on the back of a fool." (Prov 17:10 NLT) Aren't you grateful for the people who rebuked you for behavior or for attitudes that would have resulted in tragedy? It might have been a parent, a spouse, a close friend or a boss who rebuked you. You probably resented it at first. After all, rebukes sting. But the more you thought about it, the more right that rebuke seemed. That person cared enough about you to warn you. A rebuke isn't punishment. An effective rebuke usually takes place before you do something that will need to be punished.

David was either incapable or unwilling to rebuke his sons. After hearing about Amnon's rape of Tamar, the Bible says, "When King David heard what had happened, he was very angry." (2 Sam 13:21 NLT) That's a start. What did he do next? Nothing. Nothing? That's right, he didn't punish Amnon, hold him accountable for his sinful behavior or even rebuke him verbally. After Absalom killed Amnon, fled to Geshur for three years, came back to Jerusalem and

endured two years of internal exile, David has to be cajoled into even speaking to him. David and Absalom literally “kiss and make up” but it’s this half-hearted, “fakey” reconciliation. The underlying conflict is never addressed. Absalom’s behavior and attitudes aren’t even discussed much less confronted. David completely ignores his son’s need for correction. Nor did David seem to learn from his mistakes. After the death of both Amnon and Absalom, the son who is next in line for the throne – Adonijah – gets into a power struggle with his half-brother, Solomon, and he tries to grab the throne even before David is dead. After David himself dies, Solomon kills his half-brother, Adonijah. There’s a most revealing verse in the Bible that says, “Now his father, King David, had never disciplined him (Adonijah) at any time, even by asking, ‘Why are you doing that?’” (1 Kgs 1:6 NLT) There was a pattern of parental failure in David. David’s approach was to ignore it and pretend wrong things didn’t happen. David didn’t want to upset or anger his sons. He refused even to rebuke his sons.

Mom and Dad, don’t turn a blind eye to your child’s misbehavior or bad attitude. I’m not suggesting you have to jump on them for every mistake. Kids are going to be kids! But some things have to be confronted and rebuked. Wise parents know the difference between behavior that can be tolerated and behavior you have to flat out go after. For instance, a child doesn’t grow out of a chronically rebellious spirit, he just develops a more sophisticated and socially acceptable way to buck proper authority. If you see a persistent pattern of destructive behavior, Mom or Dad, confront it with a rebuke. What will you do if you catch your child telling lies? What will you do if you see him or her doing or saying things that humiliate other children? What will you do if you catch him or her torturing a frog, a bird or some other living creature? What will you do if you catch your adolescent son looking at pornography on the Internet? What will you do if you see your child developing a “take it or leave it” attitude towards the things of God? Ignore it? Be silent about it? Hope they grow out of it? That was David’s approach to parenting. How did that work out for him?

What does a godly rebuke look or sound like? First, it warns a child against a specific behavior or attitude. Two, it describes the ultimate result of such behavior and attitudes if left unchecked. Three, it focuses on the action not the child. You don’t say, “That was a terrible thing to do. You’re a horrible person. How’d you ever get born into this family?” A rebuke like that will do more harm than good. The Bible says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.” (Eph 6:4 NLT) Instead, you look that beloved child in the face and say something like this, “I cannot and will not accept what you’re doing. It’s wrong and it must not happen again or there will be consequences. This is not the way we’re going to do things in this family.” Loving. Firm. Direct. Clear. That’s how God treats you, by the way. “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” (Prov 3:11-12 NLT) But, Mom and Dad,

sometimes a loving rebuke isn't enough, is it? Rebukes are often ignored. When that happens ...

## **GODLY DISCIPLINE MEANS TAKING CORRECTIVE ACTION.**

Punishment is a controversial subject in our culture. The Bible recognizes the place of judicial punishment. There are chapters in the Bible that outline how someone who breaks either God's law or society's laws should be punished. Now, as a parent, you don't usually ask judges or courts to deal with your child's misbehavior. Instead, you apply something we might call corrective action. Corrective action means applying some kind of painful or negative result to your kid's sinful behavior or attitudes. By doing so, you teach a child that wrong behavior has painful consequences. That's an important lesson to learn in life.

Now, like it or not, the Bible does support the controversial practice of spanking. "Those who spare the rod of discipline hate their children. Those who love their children care enough to discipline them.... A youngster's heart is filled with foolishness, but physical discipline will drive it far away.... Don't fail to discipline your children. They won't die if you spank them." (Prov 13:24, 22:15, 23:13 NLT) Many people today argue that spanking a child makes them associate violence with solving problems. The Bible's assumption is very different. Spanking helps a child early on associate pain with wrong actions. That's a lesson for life. Sin, in whatever form, ultimately causes pain to yourself and others. When you're a kid, your parents teach you through corrective action to associate physical pain with wrong actions. Because you want to avoid pain, you learn to avoid wrong actions and attitudes. Later on, you learn that sin causes other kinds of pain - emotional, spiritual, psychological - and you want to avoid that kind of pain, too.

Can't physical punishment turn into something abusive? Of course, it can! For instance, you don't ever spank a child when you're enraged. Cool down, get in control and then deal with it. You don't rebuke or physically discipline a child in public. Punishment might well be appropriate, but shaming a child is not. You don't spank a child when your kids have merely frustrated or inconvenienced you for some reason. You don't spank a child because he or she accidentally broke something or caused a mess. In other words, you don't physically discipline a kid for being a kid. I agree with those who believe that you reserve physical discipline for those times when a child commits some kind of defiant, "in your face", willful disobedience to a known rule. Is physical punishment the only kind of corrective action? Absolutely not. It should be the corrective action of last resort. Parents are usually pretty good at figuring out how to hand out some kind of pain and inconvenience for a child's wrong behavior - making him sit in a corner, impounding her toys for a week, denying them access to TV, computers or cell phones. What's the purpose again? Corrective action by a parent wants to teach a child to associate sin or foolishness with pain. A child must learn early on that it might be fun at first, but it will ultimately result in stuff I don't like.

As a child gets older, wise parents allow their kids to experience the natural results of wrong actions. A neighbor's broken window gets paid out of the child's allowance. A serious infraction at school results in suspension. It's a serious mistake for a parent to step in and try to prevent a child from suffering the painful results of his or her misbehavior. I still recall taking a middle school age youth group on a skiing trip and later discovering that one of the girls had brought along a bottle of booze with her. Her family didn't attend the church, but I felt her parents still needed to know. I went over to the girl's home and explained both to the girl and her mother that her behavior wasn't acceptable. If she wanted to continue to be a part of the youth group, I believed she needed to apologize to the group for her behavior. Immediately, her mother disagreed and told me that offering an apology might well humiliate her daughter and cause life long damage to her fragile self-esteem. I excused myself soon after. The problem in that home was not with the girl. The problem was Mom.

The key word here is action. It can't be hostile, abusive, impulsive or inconsistent action. It must be firm action, private action, emotionally controlled action and appropriate action, but it must be... action! David never took any corrective action with his sons, Amnon, Absalom or Adonijah. I suspect they turned out to be the kind of men they were, because their father, David, never corrected them when they were toddlers and adolescents. Mom and Dad, you are called upon by God to take the initiative to do something concrete and specific to stop the wrong behavior of your kids. Now, very quickly...

### **GODLY DISCIPLINE MEANS HAVING A HEART OF LOVE.**

We live in a culture where the most cruel, unspeakable and insane acts are committed against children. As a result, abuse gets easily confused with godly discipline. Biblical discipline always seeks to build a person up and never to break him or her down. Here are just a few important contrasts between abuse and discipline. Abuse breaks down. Discipline builds up. Abuse is unfair and unexpected. Discipline is fair and expected. Abuse is degrading. Discipline upholds dignity. Abuse is extreme – it's too harsh. Discipline is balanced – it has limits. Abuse leaves physical and emotional scars. Discipline leaves no scars of any kind. Abuse destroys a person's self-esteem and causes permanent damage. Discipline strengthens a person's self-esteem and enables a person to discipline himself. Abuse is given out of hatred. Discipline is given out of love.

Here's another important difference. Abuse never offers full reconciliation. Discipline is only content with full reconciliation. Here, again, David failed. David had to be forced to deal with Absalom face to face and even then it was just a superficial reconciliation. The issues between father and son were never discussed or resolved. David either didn't know how or refused to take the initiative to bring about a real and lasting reconciliation with his son. He withheld complete forgiveness and Absalom knew it deep down inside. But godly, biblical

discipline desires complete forgiveness and full restoration of the relationship as the final result and isn't content until that's achieved.

Because godly discipline is prompted by a heart of love, it prevents tragedy. Mom and Dad, don't be like David! Don't just get mad and leave it there. Don't fail to rebuke your kids in love. Don't assume your kids will just grow out of sinful behavior and attitudes. Don't fail to demonstrate to your kids that sin has painful consequences. When I think about David and his failure as a parent, there's no more sobering, sadder scene than the one recorded at end of 2 Samuel 18. When David hears the news of Absalom's death, he is wrenched by grief and remorse. The Hebrew word there is "rah-gaz" meaning "to quake, to shudder, to shake." It's like the emotional equivalent of the physical pain of giving birth. The Bible says, "The king was overcome with emotion. He went up to the room over the gateway and burst into tears. And as he went, he cried, 'O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son.'" (2 Samuel 18:33 NLT) Too late. No second chance. No way to start over. Mom or Dad, if a great man like David could fail at being a parent, then anybody here can fail as well. Godly discipline takes time, effort, discernment and great dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Sure, you'll make some mistakes. But avoiding godly discipline isn't an acceptable alternative. The end result will be worth it all and will prevent the kind of tragedy that David suffered.

When I was in college, I did some volunteer ministry at a home for runaway boys. Ben Stone was the director. Ben was easily 6'4" and 250 pounds. He did not have any gift of administration whatsoever and he was no great theologian. But Ben Stone loved Jesus and he had the biggest heart of love for troubled kids you can imagine. The boys called him Uncle Ben. He went to court with them. He went after them when they ran away from his home. He prayed and cried with them. He also disciplined them. Ben wouldn't tolerate the breaking of rules. When a rule was deliberately and knowingly broken, Ben would bring out a big, wooden paddle. You did not want to get paddled by Ben Stone, because he knew how to use it. Just one swat from Ben with that paddle could turn a smug, rebellious adolescent into a blubbering, repentant kid. But after every paddling, Ben would take that boy in his big arms, hug him and hold him close. Then, with tears in his own eyes, he would ask two questions. "Who loves you, son?" "Jesus loves me, Ben." "That's right, son. And who else loves you?" "Uncle Ben loves me, too." A lot of boys got straightened out at Ben's home, because he was willing to exercise godly discipline with a heart of love.

I'm reminded that God invites us to think of Him as our Father – as the perfect, most loving Parent in all of the universe. God loves us enough to rebuke us and to apply corrective action to our lives. He does it out of an infinite heart of love. May every parent, grandparent and great-grandparent here today treat our children as He treats us for His glory!