



*Discipline: Right Decisions for the Right Reasons*¹

Ted Ward

Observing Senator Ervin in his role of chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Watergate, one senses that the man has a profound respect for the law. He is aware that the Constitution and the laws of the land discipline his life. He believes that law is important.

Visiting Frank R. in the county jail is, in some respects, similar. One senses that Frank has gained a profound respect for the law now that it has finally demonstrated its ability to outsmart him. He is aware that the laws of the state discipline his life (to a very great extent for the next 90 days). He believes that law is important.

What are the similarities? What are the differences? Senator Ervin and Mr. R. respect the law, but the basis of their respect is different. They both are aware that they are disciplined by the law—one is happy in that condition, the other is not. Law is important to both, but in different ways.

Whether it is the law of man or the law of God, to be disciplined by the law can be two very different things: a matter of joy and appreciation or a matter of sorrow and resentment. In the study of human values and how they develop in children, a distinction is clear between “the right decision” and the “right reason” for the decision. For example, the classical hand-in-the-cookie jar problem: Willie says, “Let’s don’t get into the cookies now because Mommie said not until supper”; little brother Chuck adds, “Besides, I think I hear her coming.” There is no difference in their decisions; they are both “doing the right thing.” Perhaps they both fear punishment. But the older and somewhat more mature Willie has an importantly different reason. Assuming that he meant what he said, his reason for “the right decision” reflects a more advanced stage of value development underlying his decision: obedience is better than disobedience since he loves his mother.

Big sister Molly also heard mother ask that the cookies be left alone until supper. She also makes “the right decision,” but for three reasons: she values obedience, she respects the need to have enough cookies for the company coming for supper, and furthermore, she’s avoiding calories! If this last thought were the main reason for Molly’s making “the right decision,” we would have to judge that she is as immature as little Chuck. Selfish or self-protecting reasons for “the right decisions” indicate a low level of value development.

Discipline is evidence that a person has learned to make “the right decision,” and this is good enough for the army and for many camp counselors; but parents and teachers shouldn’t stop with concerns about “the right decisions.”

Discipline, itself, is a matter of dispute. For generations discipline was the key word for successful teachers and parents. About twenty-five years ago the word began to lose favor and its use by

¹ Ted Ward. *Discipline: Right Decisions for Right Reasons*. Sponsored by Department of Christian Education, Synod’s Program-September Christian Education, 1973

professional educators almost ceased. Laymen complained that the educational leadership of the country was heading the nation down the wrong path, since anyone knows you can't bring up children without discipline. Actually, while this argument is obviously true, it misses the real point.

The word discipline had become nearly useless because it had fallen into bad use. For so many people, discipline means what you do to someone when he steps out of line. Discipline, in this sense, has become a substitute word for commands, requirements, orders, and punishment. At the same time, research was unfolding the real essence of discipline; it is the regulating authority of a person over himself. No wonder that the word became of so little use in conversations between laymen and professional educators! Laymen wanted discipline for their children—teachers should do it to them. Competent educators wanted children to learn to discipline themselves. What a difference!

But wanting children to learn to discipline themselves is not enough. How can you turn these good intentions into accomplishments? For quite a few years many well-intentioned teachers failed to instill self-discipline in children. Their methods were inadequate to get the desired results. For the most part, their methods were really permissive non-methods.

In fairness, a good word must be said for permissiveness! Since an over-emphasis on punishments and “paying the price” for wrong-doing can and often does slow down a child's development of more mature values, observers of strict and overly-strict homes, schools, and Churches have noticed that “the right decisions” are often made for “the wrong reasons.” In this sense, a “wrong reason” is one that is based on an immature or low-stage value. Such persons can grow up believing that it is worse to get persons caught than to do wrong. When a child has been kept “under control” and yet has been stunted in his moral and ethical value development does finally assert himself as an adolescent, he can go wild until he gains a bit of maturity the hard way—if he ever does. Advocates of permissiveness point out that children who are allowed to develop their value systems in an atmosphere free of force and punishment will move more rapidly out of the lower stages of self-protecting and self-gratifying values.

But it doesn't happen by accident—and neglect is no solution for moral needs. Children need some direction and plenty of counsel. Direction is concerned with “the right reasons,” and counsel is concerned with “the right reasons.” And of the two the latter is more important. Those who believe in structure and those who believe in permissiveness can agree on at least this one point!

Children want to know where the limits of their freedom are. Give them some clearly defined reasonable structure and they will usually adapt themselves to it. Pretend that there are no limits and they will keep testing until finally someone blows up.

A return to “law and order,” and “spare the rod and spoil the child” doctrines isn't the answer either. What is needed can be provided to teachers and parents today. Thanks, in large part, to those who have been carefully studying the way of a child's value system develops as he matures, we have a clearer understanding of what will and what won't work as we help a child develop his awareness and skills of self-discipline.

It is now clear, for example, that fear of the consequences of wrong-doing is a normal stage—the earliest and most childish stage. Mr. R. in our opening illustration respects the law inasmuch as he fears the consequences of violating the law. His moral and ethical development is “stuck” at this level. He is thus immature in terms of values. Jail experience will help him to seal him up at this stage. It will

make him even more aware that “it hurts to do wrong.” When we impress people with the bad things that will happen to them if they do or don’t do certain things we are treating them as if they were still at this early level in values development. More important, we are not helping them stretch out of this stage; we are operating at a jail mentality level.

The next level up sees the reason for doing right as a matter of pleasing someone important. For example, if a child is at the first level wherein he doesn’t want to lie because he might get punished if he is caught, we can help him move upward by making him aware that it pleases his teacher, his mother, his father—yes, even pleases God when he tells the truth. It is important to play down the fear of punishment while emphasizing the desirable value of doing things that please others. This level matures over a considerable period of time. It needs to be extended into the awareness that when many people working together are concerned about doing things that make life more pleasant for each other they all gain. Thus moral and ethical become useful words to describe good in contrast with bad behavior but also, and more important, to distinguish the behaviors that make it possible for people to work and live together happily.

The third level is marked by an even more basic sense of right and honor being associated with one’s privileges to live at peace in the family of man. At this level of moral development, justice and law take on the esteemed and joyful importance that Senator Ervin seems to exemplify...

...as does the psalmist:

“But their delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law they meditate day and night.” (Psalm 1:2)