

Discipline in the Classroom

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We have been interviewing lately for several positions we have open in our small school. One of the questions I ask is: How do you handle the discipline aspect of teaching? The aspiring teacher has had little if any experience in this matter. But this is not asked to trip them up. Discipline is a very important part of teaching and plays a role as we shape and guide these young children, especially in their daily walk. The root cause of this need for discipline is sin and we know that even as we sin and are in need of a Savior, so also do children sin and need the same Savior.

So I got introspective. I asked the same question of myself. How do I handle the discipline aspect of teaching? I have been teaching over fourteen years now and I also have five boys. I have a lot of experience with discipline. I know that new teachers often struggle to “lay down the law” and to be disciplinarians; they have no experience, they want their students to like them, and they want to maintain a nurturing attitude. I know that it takes time and experience to come to grips with this difficult aspect of teaching.

Is my discipline perfect? Not by any stretch of the imagination. I might be right in giving discipline but wrong in my administration of it. So I have to work very hard on what I believe is the proper administration of discipline. Discipline is leading the child (student) to know his or her sin, repent from it and live out of thankfulness for the grace shown in Christ's sacrifice. And, oh yes, sometimes it means punishment.

My method of discipline involves sitting down with the student or students and taking a good look at the reason for being in trouble. Does the student or students understand the sin involved? If I do not have the exact passage of scripture then I reference it and look it up later. This problem is not just a sin against each other or me. It is sin in the eyes of God. Sometimes the realization of this fact is enough to bring the student to tears. But are they tears of repentance?

I try to bring that student or those students to reconciliation and

repentance. Sometimes it is about a disagreement between students. Repentance is giving a heartfelt apology and reconciliation is forgiving. This is something students understand. They apologize to one another and forgive one another. I stress that this sin is forgiven and must be put away. No more does it cause them to fight. They must now live their repentance by loving one another. If they are truly sorry then they will not repeat or fall back into that sin. They will go forward always striving to live in love. As nice as this sounds, it is hard to do. The awfulness of pride will often get in the way. If the issue is between students then they must shake hands and make eye contact before they leave the room.

I do not have many rules for my classroom. But I do have two: (1) Love God and (2) Love your neighbor. If the problem is not between neighbors, then it is against God. Some of these sins include laziness and sloth, anger, disrespect, wasting time, wasting God-given talents, and pride. Even in these cases the student must have his sin pointed out and he must repent. And there are numerous scripture passages that can be used: Proverbs 8:13, 11:2 (pride); Proverbs 18:9, 24:30ff (laziness); etc.

God is not just a God of love as so many want to believe today. He is also a God of justice and he demands justice. Sin does not go unpunished. Even if he has to punish his own Son by way of the bitter and shameful death of the cross, sin does not go unpunished. And there are consequences for sin. David's murder and adultery were covered in the blood of Christ but the sword would not leave his house forever. Adam and Eve were forgiven their transgression in the garden and that was also covered by Christ but they were not allowed to return to Eden. So also in our lives, there are consequences for sin; the drunken driver might lose his license or the adulterous man his wife.

Punishment must fit the transgression; giving a student a failing grade for cheating on a test is an example of the punishment fitting the crime. Giving the student a failing grade because he pushed a student at recess doesn't really fit the crime. Making a student put his head down for being disrespectful might fit the crime but making him put his head down because he cheated might not really apply. Writing lines is not really a way to mete out punishment. It is simply busywork. I avoid it.

I do not like to discipline a student in front of class. It is belittling and humiliating for the student. I will generally speak with the student after class and discipline them then. But sometimes, in the case of public sin, I will deal with it immediately by pulling the student out of the classroom. Discipline should not be a public spectacle.

I make it a point to close all discipline sessions with prayer. In some cases

this is necessary as the offense is before God and we must repent and reconcile with God. But prayer is also the chief means of grace and sin is the great separator, a time when we need God more than ever. So I pray with the student and for the student, and God gives the increase. And what a lesson this is for the student. I follow the same pattern with my own children and the punishment (generally a spanking) is easier than the prayer at the end.

When the discipline is finished, it is also over. No more do I go back and reference it. Does God continue to harp on our sins and errors? No, once it is confessed and forgiven it is put away. This is contrary to human nature where we want to remember sins and bring them up at times advantageous to us. So I must put it away and move onward. God knows the heart. If repentance is genuine or false, God knows. He will deal with that aspect. I put it away.

I believe it is important for new teachers to realize that they will be in charge of the hearts and activities of their students. They need to be aware that they will have to administer discipline and it is part of their calling as a teacher, who stands in the place of the parent. The question is not meant to frighten or even qualify them for the position. How could it? They have no experience. So I evaluate their response and their desire to discipline properly. And I have never been disappointed in their responses. Now, if only they remember to carry it out in their own classroom.