

# COMMAND OR CHOICE?

By Karin Litchfield

“My kids don’t listen to me! I’ve tried to teach them right, but they are choosing another way!”, the frustrated mother complained. How many times have I heard this disappointed cry? It is sad – these parents are very sincere in their efforts, but after all they’ve invested, things are falling apart with their children. What an unspeakable tragedy to lose our precious treasures to the world when we’ve worked so hard to home school, get them in the right church and around the right friends.

In this article, I would like to address a reoccurring problem which, if present, will greatly undermine a parent’s credibility with their child...which then undermines the child’s sensitivity to what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell them as well. This is a simple issue of understanding the difference between a command and a choice.

When a parent gives a command where a choice should have been offered, problems arise. This is a parent who speaks to their child like everything is a command...even though they don’t mean it that way. An order to the 16 year old to take out the trash sounds no different from the admonition to the same teen to take their vitamins or to dress warmly on a cold day. This is the mom/dad that needs to learn discernment. This parent is a nagging one. Advice, admonitions and rebukes spew out of their mouth almost incessantly...and they could all sound urgent. She/he thinks they’re doing the job a parent is supposed to do, but it’s overkill that sabotages their intended results. All day long he/she is giving one command after another, and the child’s sensitivity has been lost. The child has been badgered all his life with orders, and he gave up a long time ago trying to fulfill all of them. To try to please his parent seems impossible. Just as bad, his ability to discern priorities in life is damaged. EVERYTHING seems to be a priority to mom/dad and there’s no way to keep up. And, even if you do things right, there’s still a lecture.

Adversely, when a choice is given when a command is needed, training is thwarted. If a child is told all his life that it’s his choice as to whether he obeys his parents or not, too much power is put into his hands from too young of an age. Yes, they may have a choice the first time they are told something, but if they choose not to obey, discipline ensues until they “choose” to obey. Whether it’s vacuuming the living room, picking up toys or not watching certain movies, there are commands that must be given and must be obeyed. Isn’t that the way we want them to obey God? Sure, God is merciful and longsuffering, but even in disobeying God a person will suffer consequences to themselves and their influence on others. How much better is it to have ingrained in us early to cheerfully and immediately heed His commands rather than to think that they are only requests which are optional? This training comes as we are firm on the things that matter and also as our language reflects this urgency. Contrary to popular belief, it is okay to say, “You need to do that because I said so! No other option!”

So, make it clear! This takes some careful thought and discipline on the part of a parent who has been raised themselves with blurry lines in this area. What makes a

command a command and a choice a choice? First of all, is it a solid moral or Biblical issue? Lying, dressing modestly, attending church, kindness to siblings and respect to adults are all examples of strong moral/Biblical issues which you can (I mean must) give a command for. But, I didn't say a lecture! Oh, maybe a few times you will discuss lying, and you will give them scripture and an explanation before you discipline them soundly, but if you're still giving the same rhetoric when it's the umpteenth time they've lied then it's time you woke up, Mom/Dad, and realized your methodology isn't right! There's been too much talk and not enough disciplinary umph! So bite your tongue and put into practice a stronger deterrent. You see, you're not giving your child enough credit for their own brain and conscience. Yes, they were born with a decrepit nature, but they were also born with a conscience that is tender. This tenderness is something you want to nurture and protect. The first couple times you properly disciplined them and instructed them in lying, your words and actions rung so true to their little hearts. They KNEW you were so right and they were so very wrong. Discipline keeps the heart tender when done in love and thoroughness. Constant lecturing can harden the heart and is a lack of confidence that they can figure things out in their own heart and mind. You think they didn't know it was wrong anymore? Ha! The problem was they just did it anyway. Tell them you know they are aware of what's right, they just need disciplinary help with their will power.

When a child is young, there are far less choices and many more commands, but that will change as they get older. Gradually, you give them more and more choices. Notice, I said *give them*. Not because they are demanding them, but give them a choice when they're not expecting it. This tells them you are thinking of them and their wishes even when they don't realize it. They will appreciate it!

As they grow older, things will change. If you make it a command that your 4 year old put a jacket on during a cold November day, that is certainly your parental duty. However, by the time your child is getting around an adolescent age, it may be past time to start loosening the reins on these non-biblical, non-moral issues. Instead of giving your teen a lecture on how they're going to be freezing and then they're going to get the flu and miss that piano recital they so want to go to, just say, "Jill, it's 45 degrees out there, you might want to wear a jacket." *Then drop it!* Let them use that brilliant brain they inherited directly from you, and make a decision, right or wrong. And when I say drop it, I mean don't even say, "I told you so!" if they *do* get a cold or if their nose looks like Rudolph's when they come back in the house. They will respect you if you will respect them. You made it optional and you're not going to renege on that. Why scold if you're the one who handed them the choice? If their cheeks are rosy just smile and cheerfully say, "Did you have fun out there? How about some hot chocolate?" with no undertones or use – or use humor, saying with a chuckle, "Oh my! Who would have thought you would have needed a coat?" ☺, and have a good laugh together. Not "That's why I wanted you to wear a jacket!!"

If you are consistent in your respect for the choices you give them, they will be much more free to talk with you about poor choices they've made without fear of being degraded. A child rarely wants to discuss failures with a nagging, know-it-all parent. You're human too and you're on their side! So whether they choose not to take vitamins, not to wear their mittens, or not sign up for that optional woodworking class you wanted them to take, respect that choice which means no lecture is needed. Let

your conversation with them be about things they enjoy and are concerned about rather than always being about what they can do better.

Mutual respect, firm, loving discipline, and good communication go further than I can tell you in causing your child to want to please you. Yes, there are other factors in child training, but I certainly wouldn't want to go without these three. I can assure you that you cannot offer healthy respect, effective discipline or deep communication unless you as a parent learn to differentiate between commands and choices. These go a long way in preserving your child's sensitivity toward you and the Holy Spirit. It is giving them the gift of discernment. God wants every parent to succeed in training their children, but it will take humility, self control and soul searching on your part. Is it pride and a need for control that's driving your nagging? Do you have an inordinate fear that your child will fail without constant badgering? In holding on so tightly, many parents have lost what they were fighting for. Let go and trust God. Ask the Spirit for wisdom and strength, and He will help you follow His commands and make the right choices.