

# THE SIGN OF AUTHORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

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Today we return to our guide passage in Deuteronomy 6 for the next to the last message in this series. We will look at the fourth step suggested here by Moses for the guidance of parents in the raising and training of children to the honor and glory of God. We have seen already in this passage that parents are to take the Scriptures seriously and are to respond to them themselves, that all training and discipline and guidance and development in the home must start with the parents. They are the ones who have to become whole persons first. Nothing can happen through us unless it has first happened to us. That is a primary principle.

The second step which Moses has pointed out is that it is the duty of parents to assume responsibility for the teaching of their children. That doesn't mean that they must do all the teaching. In our present system we have schools and institutions, both spiritual and secular, for help in this task. These are not wrong. I'd like to make that clear. But it is the parents' responsibility to fulfill the major role of oversight, and, if something is wrong, it is their job to correct it, if something is lacking, it is their task to fill it. It is their responsibility to see that their children are being properly guided in spiritual matters.

Of course, a great deal of this must be done at home by the parents. So in the third step, remember, Moses suggested a very natural process of teaching, a way of relating faith to life and life to faith, so that knowledge of the truth about God grows out of experience and out of normal conversation related to that experience, so that faith is not compartmentalized, severed from life, and reserved for Sundays, but grows out of every aspect of life.

Now we come to the last step which Moses sets forth before us, in Verses 8 and 9 of this sixth chapter:

**And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. {Deut 6:8-9 RSV}**

These words of Moses sound strange to us. Many of the Jews took them very, very literally. In fact, the Pharisees in Jesus' day were making a tremendous display of this. They actually took miniature scrolls of Scripture with the Ten Commandments and other passages written on them, made little boxes called *phylacteries* for them, tied them on the back of their left hand and bound them on their forehead between their eyes, and went about with them hanging there. And they literally wrote them on the doorposts, and the gates, the outer entrances, of their houses. Thus they tried to fulfill this in a very mechanical, wooden manner. In Matthew 23 we are told that Jesus rebuked them for "making broad their phylacteries and enlarging the hems of their garments" {cf, Matt 23:5 KJV} in order to attract attention, gain notoriety, and make it visible that they were religious people. They were doing this merely to display how devoted and consecrated they were.

We can laugh at that, it seems absurd to us. And yet I've been in many a home where there is a large Bible lying out on the coffee table, obviously put there for display, but which no one ever reads. The family may have other Bibles that they are reading, but this one is just for people to see when coming into their home. That reflects something of the same attitude which the Jews had as they made these broad boxes and tied them on.

Though this was a mistaken way to show it, these Jews had caught part of the import of this passage. They were trying to fulfill the meaning of a word which Moses employs here: *sign*. His words were to be a sign, he said, upon the hand and between the eyes and upon the doorposts. What is a sign? Well, signs, as we know today, are very important aspects of life. We could hardly operate without them. As I have been trying to think this through, I have detected at least three purposes of signs -- you may come up with more -- and usually they fulfill one or more of these purposes.

The most common use of signs is to impart information. How could we do without signs which do that? Most

advertising signs which we see all around us -- billboards on the highway, etc. -- are to impart information about a product which someone wants us to buy. This is the whole basis of the business of Madison Avenue. Other signs are more useful in the information they impart. There isn't one of us whose heart hasn't been gladdened by seeing the sign REST ROOM at the right time. Other signs are not quite as welcome. A sign which says FREEWAY ENDS tends to give you a little sinking feeling. One which says NO ADMITTANCE may perhaps raise your ire slightly. There are signs which can even frighten you a bit: DANGER: 10,000 VOLTS. Signs, you see, are to instruct and to impart information to us.

Many signs are humorous, some of them unintentionally so. I was in Houston, Texas, yesterday, and at the airport I remembered the time many years before, while a student at seminary, when I had visited the San Jacinto battleground outside Houston where the battle for Texas independence was fought. The Texans had erected a huge tower there, quite an impressive monument, and I was looking it over. I noted a sign in front of the tower which said, with true Texan modesty, THIS TOWER IS TEN FEET TALLER THAN THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT. I never would have known that had it not been for that sign!

Signs also give us directions, and, at times, commands. This is the reason for traffic signs. We are all familiar with those: SLOW TO 25 MILES PER HOUR (which no one observes), STOP signs, TURN ON YOUR LIGHTS, etc. They give commands and exhortations.

And, third, signs can be omens or portents. The miracles of Jesus were signs which were a portent of something to come, the golden age of earth which is ahead, and also were a sign of his Messiahship. Sometimes natural phenomena are considered in this way -- earthquakes, tornadoes, tidal waves, and eclipses -- all have been regarded from time to time as signs. All these show how important the matter of signs is to us.

One singular aspect of signs is that they have a remarkable way of conveying authority, often without any apparent means of doing so. There is no need to have the name of the authority mentioned on a sign in order to have people obey it. We are all so ingrained with the idea of obeying signs that we obey when it is almost absurd to do so. I remember years ago watching a *Candid Camera* sequence on television. They put up a sign at a supermarket which simply said WIPE YOUR FEET. It was so funny to watch everybody coming in, seeing that sign, and almost to a man obediently wiping their feet for no reason at all. Some did it rather openly and without any embarrassment; others looked around and did it sort of slyly or sheepishly; only a very few ignored it and walked on. There is an authority inherent in signs.

That is the idea which Moses is getting at here. There is something which is to be a sign which compels belief -- authority created by integrity, by consistent obedience to the truth. These words, he said, shall be as though they were bound on your hand -- not literally, but figuratively. Your hands, of course, symbolize your deeds, your accomplishments as parents. They are to be governed by Scripture, by the wisdom of the Word of God. And they are to be as though on your forehead, i.e., guiding your thought life, your intelligence. Your reflection upon truth ought to be governed and directed by these words. That is what he is saying. And these two aspects are manifest within and around the home. In other words, the prophet is saying that parents are expected to show loving, honest, open, forgiving, responsible lives, guided by the Scriptures, in the presence of their children.

The doorposts and gates of the house take us figuratively into contact with the outside world, depicting our behavior toward relatives and friends, toward neighbors and society at large. All this to be governed and controlled by the wisdom of God.

When that happens, Moses says, when these things are visible (that is the purpose of a sign -- it is a visible source of information or of the compelling of belief) then parents will have tremendous authority in their children's lives. And it will be authority not derived from their position as parents, notice, but arising out of the respect they engender as responsible persons. That is what creates authority in a home. And that is the whole thrust of this passage.

Now, this is one of the major problems in our day. Many, many homes, as you know, are struggling in this area, Parents will often throw up their hands in despair and say, "I can't do anything with my children. They won't pay any attention to me. They have no respect for me. They do not obey my words. What I say goes in

one ear and out the other." If you suggest certain remedies, they say, "Well, I've tried that, and it doesn't work. My children pay no attention to that. They laugh at that, they mock it." There is probably no problem more pressing upon us in this day than this matter of establishing authority within the home. But here is the secret of it, so let's not take these words lightly. This is the ground of authority: The obedience of parents -- the consistent, visible performance of parents along these guidelines -- or, in case of failure (because parents aren't perfect, either, and the Word of God never treats them as though they were perfect, or were expected to be perfect) then an honest acknowledgment of that failure, and a repentance -- an admission of it and a turning from it in the presence of their children -- this also establishes their authority. I don't know of anything which is more difficult for parents to learn, and more difficult for us to do, than this. Somehow most of us have been brought up with the idea that the mere fact that we are parents gives us authority in our children's lives, and that therefore they are to obey us simply because we are their parents. And we find it very difficult to admit that we have been wrong and have failed in any area. But if you have observed homes where the parents are conscientiously and lovingly obeying the Scriptures themselves, and, when they fail, acknowledging it and saying so openly, without embarrassment, and accepting God's forgiveness of it in the presence of their children, those parents always have authority with their children. This is what the Scriptures suggest here. You see, God can command children, "Honor your father and mother because they are your parents." But parents cannot say that unless they have the ground of authority, the sign of authority in their own lives.

Not long ago I talked with a young man of college age who was struggling. He was from a very fine home. I knew his parents well. He told me that when he went away to college he was confronted with tremendous pressures and temptations, the like of which he had never wrestled with before. He told me how they lured him, and he felt the full force and power of them, and how he was tempted to conform to the attitudes of those all around him. And he did conform for a while. He experimented to some extent, and he thought he sensed a new taste of freedom in doing things which previously he had felt were wrong. He told me how close he had come to throwing overboard all the tradition of his past and all his upbringing by his parents. But one thing held him steady, he said. One thing kept him from going too far. He never could get away from the picture in his mind's eye of the fact that his parents loved God, loved each other, and loved him. That, he said, was what ultimately kept him steady and strong in the midst of tremendous, overwhelming pressures and temptations.

This is exactly what this Scripture passage is saying. The home in which parents are open and honest, and are genuinely committed to following the Word of God themselves, are facing the implications of truth in their own lives, as well as asking their children to do so, will always be a home where parents have authority in their children's lives.

Two things grow out of, and emerge from, this authority. Obedience is the ground of authority. And it is that authority which then gives parents the right to do two things:

- To discipline, and
- To punish.

Now, those are not the same. Perhaps some definitions might be helpful at this point:

Authority, first of all, is the ability to influence another. It can be bad influence, bad authority, or it can be good influence and good authority. God has authority in our lives by virtue of the integrity of his being. God's authority stems not from his power but from his holiness, or his integrity, if you like, And that is to be the basis of authority in our life. But the devil has authority too. He has great ability to influence and to control. But his authority is drawn not from the love and the integrity of his life, but from the hate. Hate is a false ground of authority. Hate can also compel obedience because it arouses fear. But it is false and eventually fails, though it may look very strong for a time. But, in either case, the authority derived is the ability to influence others.

When the people of Israel heard the words of Jesus they said to themselves, "He speaks with authority, and not as the scribes and the Pharisees," {cf, Matt 7:29, Mark 1:22}. They were always quoting someone else, but Jesus' words had inherent ability to compel belief. They sounded right, they struck a responsive chord within. Jesus had authority in his voice and in his teaching.

The second word is discipline. Discipline is the channeling or the training of life. It is intended therefore to deepen or to intensify life, much as a river's force is intensified when you channel it within banks.

A river in flood is spread out over the whole landscape, inundating it, and beyond its natural banks it moves sluggishly and slowly, and hardly seems to have any current at all. It has little force, though it can cause great damage. But if you want to increase its effective force, perhaps to drive a mill or to develop hydroelectric power, you channel it, you narrow it down, and limit it. That increases its drive and its force.

That is what discipline does. It is the channeling of life so that its intensity is greater, its drive is directed, its force is increased, and it is no longer pallid and weak. Often the reason for the boredom in so many people's lives is that they have no discipline. Their lives are spread out in such wide dissipation, they are indulging in what many think to be freedom, but it is really a false freedom -- that of doing whatever they want. A life like that has no boundary. If you do whatever you want to do, and only what you want to do, there will be no drive, no force, no intensity of emotion possible, and eventually everything becomes flat and pallid and boring.

People are discovering this in the area of sex. When sex can be indulged in any time, any place, with anyone, it becomes tasteless and insipid and loses all its zest and tang. But when it is channeled, as God disciplines us to handle this tremendous force, it becomes exciting, satisfying, intensified, beautiful.

Discipline is also intended to enable the avoidance of bad effects or disaster. When you are driving a car you discipline yourself to follow the curvature of the road, to obey the traffic signs, etc. Why? Well, not because you are trying to get a great deal more pleasure out of driving, but because you are trying to get to another place safely. You want to arrive without disaster. Discipline makes that possible. Therefore discipline is a limiting and a directing of life.

That is why parents must discipline their children. If they don't, they will allow them to lose the intensity of life. Life will turn listless and dull and boring to them, and they will find themselves stumbling into disaster. God disciplines us because he loves us. As a wise Father, he sets limits on our life in order that we may both enjoy it more and avoid disaster. Parents are to do the same. That is the whole purpose and thrust of discipline. Sometimes it can be delightful to receive, and sometimes it can be very painful. But, whichever it is, good discipline always originates out of love. Bad discipline (discipline can be bad as well as good, as all these forces can be) originates out of hate or fear. We will see more of that in a moment as we consider the next word, which is related to these: Punishment.

Punishment is the deliberate infliction of hurt in order to teach the difference between right and wrong. To some degree discipline, i.e. painful discipline, is that same thing. But punishment differs from discipline in this way: Punishment is necessary even though there may not be any recovery beyond. People are to be punished even though they may not be turned around, nor cured. The reason for this is that punishment is necessary in order to establish justice. When you wipe out punishment, you also wipe out justice.

That is a very important point which is being missed in our day. There are many voices today telling us that we shouldn't punish criminals because they are really sick people who need to have their minds reoriented or retrained, and that, therefore, punishment serves no purpose. That sounds good; it seems as if we are being merciful and enlightened. But when you examine that notion very carefully you find that what we would actually be doing by adopting it is losing entirely all sense of justice. Therefore we would be treating people not as people any longer, but as mere things, treating them as we would animals. What would be done to them would be just as compulsory as punishment, and oftentimes, to the one who is affected by it, just as distasteful and painful. But nobody would have the right to object except those who are "specially qualified" as "experts." That is the danger which arises when you start losing the sense of retribution, of punishment, as the way by which you call to account and correct those who haven't learned to distinguish between right and wrong.

In other words, what I'm trying to say is that punishment is to occur when discipline fails. The need for punishment means that you have not succeeded in your discipline. Punishment is often necessary in order to get someone to accept discipline, in order to get them ready to yield to discipline, because discipline always involves some degree of cooperation, of voluntary acceptance, on the part of the person undergoing it. That is

the major difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is involuntary, as far as the individual affected is concerned; discipline always requires his cooperation and voluntary compliance.

However, punishment is often wrongly inflicted in order to save the face of the one who has been unable to carry out discipline properly. Oftentimes fathers and mothers spank their children, not because the children have really done something deserving of it, but because the parent is merely expressing his frustration at not being able to discipline effectively. And when that happens, of course, it is merely cruelty. It is bad punishment. Good discipline or punishment seeks to awaken respect, and it is always the action of love. Bad discipline or punishment tries to arouse fear. One of the ways in which you can tell the difference between whether you are disciplining or punishing someone correctly is to ask yourself, "What emotion is being produced? Am I awakening fear? Am I merely making this person afraid to do what I'm warning against here because he is afraid to get into trouble, or am I creating a sense of respect, a willingness or cooperate on his part?" That marks the difference between good discipline or punishment and bad.

This has been merely an introduction to this whole theme of authority within the home. I have simply tried to lay some groundwork for the message that I want to bring next time, in which we will try to pursue the methods of discipline and of punishment. I hope that this introduction has clarified to some extent the issues in what is a very confused problem area today, and helped us to distinguish between these concepts which are necessary parts of this whole discussion. I hope especially that it has helped us to see where the ground of authority lies. If you have no authority, then you have no basis either for discipline or for punishment, and the field is left open merely for the expression for whatever mood you happen to be in at the moment. And that is what is causing so much of the trouble in so many homes. There is no ground of authority.

That is why the Scriptures, speaking so insightfully here, pierce right to the heart of the problem. And they say to us, "Look parents, it is your own personal obedience which establishes that ground, your own recognition of whether these things which God has commanded are important to you. If they are a sign upon your hand, so that your actions are controlled to the extent that even in failure you honestly admit it to your children, then your authority is established. If they are a sign upon your thought life, so that your children see that your thoughts are governed by the wisdom of the Word, and they see that in your relationship to your friends and neighbors and the outside world you are not trying to return evil for evil, as the world around you does, but you take seriously the word of Scripture to return good for evil, and, it is then that your children begin to see you as committed to what you believe, and respect is born in their hearts toward you, a sense of your authority in their lives is created which never leaves."

## **Prayer**

Our heavenly Father, we are so grateful for what you teach us. The minute we hear your word we know that you have put your finger upon things which have puzzled us and troubled us, about which we have been confused and which we don't understand very well. We pray that you will help us further in this respect, and that you will grant to us, Lord, the openness and the honesty which it takes in order to display this sign of authority. We are so glad that you do not require perfect performance of us, that even within the demand for integrity there is room for failure, because we do fail. But, Father, you have taught us how to handle that failure. We pray that we will be willing to do it, to put aside our pride and admit that we, too, have fallen and that we, too, fail, and that thus we can stand with our children in understanding, accepting love, knowing that their struggles are our struggles and our struggles are theirs, that we are all in the same boat together, and that there is redemption and healing and improvement possible in you. We thank you in your name, Amen.

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