

Seeking the Faith Quotient

Obedience

In terms of emotional intelligence when we teach children to obey what is being fostered is self-regulation. This is a complex skill that allows us to know what is appropriate, to keep our behavior and emotions under-control, to delay gratification, and to put the needs of others first. Self-regulation is a tall order and is a skill that is developed throughout our lives. Just like the process of sanctification does not happen outside of God's direction, our students cannot develop self-regulation without outside help. It is important that we see this as a process and that we understand God's role in helping children to obey.

Children who cannot self-regulate cannot learn. They are unable to focus and pay attention, they lack the ability to set goals in learning and to accomplish them, and they struggle with social skills. These children have great difficulty thinking of anything other than the "here and now" and for them the "here and now" changes with a whim. Learning to obey means that you are learning there are rules and guidelines outside of what you want at any given point in time. Learning to obey means you learn to pay attention and follow rules, learn to watch for the unspoken rules of social interaction and learn to set goals and delay your own gratification. When we teach children to obey everything from walking in a line at age three to handing in a research paper on time at age twelve we are helping their brains to organize and make sense of the sensory information they take in each day.

However, learning to obey is much more than learning to follow the rules. Learning to obey is about both Law and Grace. In our classrooms, we teachers are very good at the law part of discipline. There are rules and expectations and we are there to gently help our students follow the rules and meet the expectations. They don't always like it, but we know that what we do is good for them. We find many ways to help children to remember and follow rules. Some of them are negative in nature, such as consequences for misbehavior or falling short of expectations. Some consequences are natural such as having to redo a math paper that was lost, and some are imposed such as in school detention as a result of fighting. Consequences are a helpful aspect of learning to obey.

Some of the ways we help children to obey are things that they enjoy. We have many means of extrinsic motivation that encourage our students to remember and follow the rules. I enjoyed "catching" my class doing something good so I could give the class a point toward earning a popcorn party. We also look for ways to praise children when they have met a goal or changed a behavior. And how could early childhood teachers survive without stickers? We have many ways to positively reinforce children to develop self-regulation skills that help their learning and help the learning environment in the classroom.

The mistake we most commonly make, however, is that we have covered all the bases by using both consequences and praise to help our students to obey. In terms of seeing things from the viewpoint of Law and Grace, Law is what God expects of us. It is easy to see classroom and school rules as being law. It is

For it is God who
works in you to
will
and to act ac-
cording to His
good purpose.
Philippians 2:13

easy to understand that holding students accountable for our expectations is law. But it is a little bit more difficult to identify the grace part of Law and Gospel. What about praise? What about rewards? Students like praise and reward and respond to them; aren't they grace? No, they are not. Praise and rewards are law because they are about what you expect of your students. Remember, God does not reward us with heaven for a life well lived. He grants us salvation through the sacrifice of our Savior, because He loves us. We are saved in spite of our good deeds, not because of them.

When considering the role of grace in classroom discipline we are brought back to the concept of unconditional love. Our students need to know that they are loved no matter what. They need to know that there is nothing they can do to make us stop loving them and there is nothing they can do to make us love them more. They need to know and feel God's agape love. Grace is the safety net that catches us when we fail. Grace is also the ladder that carries us up to the high wire. God did not just give us the Ten Commandments and walk away after instructing us to follow them perfectly. He powers us with the Holy Spirit who works sanctification in our hearts. As the Philippians verse indicates, God makes it possible for us to obey and He is there to catch us when we fail. This is the role He models for us in our classrooms.

Certainly our students will break the rules. They will forget, they will disappoint, and they will do the same things over and over and over again. It is a fact of our profession that we put so much work into helping one group to achieve a level of self-regulation and then just when they start to learn we hand them off to a different teacher and start all over again. We must pray for the patience and the discernment to know when we apply law and when we apply grace.

Group Discussion

1. Why is self-regulation an essential emotional skill for learning?
2. Is it possible to be academically intelligent but not have self-regulation skills?
3. How does the secular world fight your efforts to teach students self-regulation skills, especially the ability to delay gratification?
4. Share a classroom management technique that you use to help students self-regulate.
5. What self regulation skills do you expect your students to know coming into your class?
6. What self-regulation skills will they need to learn before they can pass to the next class?
7. Do your expectations and plans fit with the teachers who work with students before and after you?

Putting it into practice

Teachers

List the things you use in discipline that are law.

List the things you use in discipline that are grace.

How much of your day is spent in law?

How much of your day is spent in grace?

What changes do you need to make?

Putting it into practice: Administrators

Items to discuss with your board:

1. Think about your school's parent student handbook. How much of it is law and how much of it is grace? Is it an accurate reflection of the Law/Gospel climate at your school or center?
2. For a school, grace would take the form of what is given to the student and the family. What aspects of grace do you promise your families?
3. Do you make a point of communicating this to your families or is it implied?
4. If you require parents and students to sign an agreement form with your handbook does that form include items of grace? Does it include what your school or center promises to do for the students and families? What about the way your board deals with your teachers? Do these policies include both Law and Grace?

Assessing learning with follow-up discussion

These questions can be used for a follow-up discussion after teachers have completed classroom observations:

1. What changes have you made in your discipline program that reflects a more intentional use of Grace?
2. What affects have you seen because of this?
3. In what ways can you practice both Law and Gospel with the parents of your students?
4. Do you need more law in your life? Do you need more grace?
5. What are your personal weak areas in terms of self-regulation? Does this affect your teaching and planning?

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