

Pop Psychology

I recently heard a talk-radio guest discuss motivating children. His approach to the problem was bribery. In fact, he used the term bribery to identify his method. His counsel was to make deals. Use your power as the adult to make bribes that encourage the behavior you desire.

Your son won't clean his room. Bribe him. Each week he keeps his room clean, buy him a new Nintendo game, or give him \$5. All you have to do is be creative enough to find a bribe that works with each of your children.

Another variety of this method is contracts. Make a contract with your daughter. Spell out an agreement that commits you to perform certain things if she performs certain things. Make contracts that ensure that the things that you want are done. (We quickly forget that the child's mind can circumvent any contract the parent's mind can conceive.)

These approaches are superficial. The point of appeal in bribery and contracts is crass self-interest. The child is not taught to look out for the interests of others. The child learns nothing about being under authority because God is God and the parent is His agent. The child does not learn biblical reasons for integrity, responsibility or neatness in one's room.

These methods will not be satisfying to a parent who understands that the heart determines behavior. Such methods do not deal biblically with the heart. They are only concerned with instances of behavior. Unfortunately, the heart is being trained, but it is not trained in biblical motives or goals.

Behavior Modification

Some pop-psychology methods apply behavior modification. The idea is simple. Reward good behavior in some tangible way; ignore or perhaps punish bad behavior. While I am not against praising children for doing what is right, I reject the notion that children should be rewarded for fulfilling normal responsibilities.

In the behavior-modification scheme, there is random reward for doing what is deemed good. Junior does well with a household chore and so he gets to go out for ice cream. If he fails to do some assigned task, he receives some privation. The hope is that the child will respond to the rewards and privations by becoming well behaved.

Since the heart and behavior are so closely linked, whatever modifies behavior inevitably trains the heart. The heart is trained to greed and selfish interests and to working for rewards. The point of appeal is to Junior's greed. Because Junior lives a lust-driven life in which he will perform for ice cream and other goodies, the program will seem to work. Our methods inevitably instruct the heart - the heart determines behavior.

One family I know developed a very clever application of behaviorism. Each time their children responded to anything in a good way they put the child's name on a piece of paper and put it in a jar.

If the child brushed her teeth, helped with dishes, cleaned her room, set the table, or did anything commendable, her name went into the jar. If she did something wrong, her name came out of the jar. At the end of the week a name was drawn from the jar and the winning child got a present.

The children quickly learned the point of the game. Get your name in the jar as much as possible. The more times your name was in the jar, the greater your chance of winning.

You're wondering how it worked. It worked great. It was an effective tool for teaching the children. It taught them to be selfish. It taught them to do things for improper motives. It taught them how to earn parental approbation and therefore, a name in the jar. They quickly learned what would get their name in the jar and how to maximize the number of times for a minimum amount of effort. They became manipulators of the system. When Mother wasn't around to notice good behavior, there was no point in being good. It moved this family away from biblical action springing from biblical motives.

Let me note in passing that biblical incentives and rewards are not an end in themselves, but rather the outcome of obedience to God. There is temporal blessing attached to obedience. The God who knows our hearts calls us to right behavior for the purpose of honoring Him. He honors those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30).