

Auntie's Attic

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Photo by Kathy Monnens

Dear Auntie,

Many times when I discipline my children they shout, "That's not fair!" I find it hard to teach them the concept of justice and the consequences for their actions. How can I help them understand that I discipline them because I love them and want to help them live a moral life? How can I help them learn that when they live a righteous life they need not fear justice?

Signed, Frustrated Parent

Dear Frustrated Parent:

The *Golden Rule* helps us live life without fear of justice.

It seems children think that a shout for justice is their rite of passage. I too used to think my parents were unfair when I was disciplined. In hindsight I wonder if I actually wanted mercy, not fairness. Perhaps I was too young and naive to realize that justice is blind and thus impartial when imposed. I wonder if people really grasp the implications of justice when they cry out for it. In my experience, justice is not about getting what I want, but rather reaping the consequences of my personal choices and

actions. Parents have the unpopular task of guiding their children toward taking responsibility for their own life choices. These lessons are difficult and sometimes painful for children to learn, so using mercy combined with justice can be an effective way to correct wrong-doers without breaking their spirit. If children do not learn the importance of doing the right thing in their formative years, then life as an adult becomes much more difficult and painful.

Justice as defined in the Merriam Webster dictionary is: *the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments; the administration of law, especially: the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity; the quality of being just, impartial, or fair; the principles or ideal of just dealing or right action: conformity to this principle or ideal: righteousness; the quality of conforming to law; conformity to truth, fact, or reason: correctness.* Thus, the two-edged nature of justice requires fair results for each party: right actions result in positive consequences and wrong actions result in negative consequences. Justice is the balancing of scales back to accepted norms or right actions. How one lives dictates what consequences to expect from justice.

My parents played a major role in helping me learn how to make good choices related to justice. Years ago my Dad was diagnosed with bone cancer at the age of 60. It was a shocking diagnosis that threw the whole family off-balance. A person in his same circumstance might lament “why me?” I remember Dad saying “why *not* me?” He was a humble man of faith who understood that God loved him so he chose to trust God and be at peace with this physical challenge. Dad’s legacy was built on his love for God and adherence to what is known as the *Golden Rule*—that is, to treat others as one would like to be treated. He knew that life involved many challenges and it was his desire to respond to them as he felt God would want him to respond. He actually gave us strength during his illness because he showed us mercy and compassion as he fought the disease. He lived six years with cancer. Did he get justice? Dad believed that death, not cancer, was the consequence of man’s sin. He was at peace because he had accepted God’s grace which eliminated the *consequence* of sin for Dad. He saw his own death as a simple transition to his eternal relationship with God. His legacy taught me that taking responsibility for my life, accepting the consequences of my choices and showing mercy to others, is essential to living a life of contentment because it eliminates the fear of justice.

I learned from my parents how important it is to find and embrace a moral standard that effectively measures right from wrong and provides justice for everyone. As I see it, the *Golden Rule* is an effective moral code. My parents played a significant part in helping me decide to embrace the *Golden Rule* as my guide in making decisions. They

taught me that the true value of the *Golden Rule* is that it helps me make wise decisions on how I choose to treat people and that whether I choose to do what is right or wrong, justice will be served. They prayed that I would choose right actions. My parents loved God and used the premise of the *Golden Rule* to guide them in their decision-making. A generous dose of patience and mercy from my parents helped me learn the value of personal responsibility and right living because they modeled it for me. Most of my problems arise when I try to justify actions that are self-centered and inconsistent with how I would want to be treated. If I live in truth and I am honest with myself, the *Golden Rule* is a very effective way for me to make thoughtful life choices and when I make bad choices I need to accept responsibility for my actions however difficult or humiliating.

Over a year ago I faced a serious health scare. I had a chest cold that seemed to get progressively worse, that ultimately turned out to be congestive heart failure sending me to the hospital. The lesson of the *Golden Rule* that my parents modeled for me as a child helped me face this challenge. Although my condition was stabilized during my hospital stay I had to face the truth that my condition was caused by a lifetime of poor choices. I could have dropped dead at any moment. It was my fault. My health problems were largely due to a poor diet and lack of exercise. Because I ignored what I knew to be proper nutrition and physical care and instead ate anything I wanted without considering the risks to my health, I set myself up for this harsh consequence. I made wrong choices, got what I deserved and justice was served. But justice combined with my faith in God's mercy gave me a second chance to do the right thing and to embrace a new perspective about my health habits. To effect a different result I had to choose to be disciplined, change my eating habits and regularly exercise. The doctors were surprised and pleased that my heart recovered quickly. This illness swung my pendulum of justice back into balance. Since my heart failure I continue to learn more about being a good steward of my body. My challenge is to commit to do the right thing for a lifetime.

Even though parents are responsible for helping their children learn how to be accountable for their actions, ultimately every person is responsible for their own choices whether they want that responsibility or not. I maintain that when the *Golden Rule* as a standard is adhered to, then it allows us to live content and at peace in a society based on justice. If parents do not persevere and commit to teach their children this truth, then who will?

...certainly something to ponder...