

## First Step

Proverbs 13:24 (TAB): *He who spares his rod [of discipline] hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines diligently and punishes him early.*

Matthew 5:15–16 (RSV): *Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under a bushel, but on a stand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Brian was larger than most boys his age. He had been that way since about third grade. It was always a temptation for him to throw his weight around—a temptation he seldom resisted. He was known around school as a bully. He did a lot to live up to that label.

“Give me that ball!” He snarled one day at his classmate Phillip.

“But Todd and I had it first,” Phillip snapped.

“Give me that ball or I’ll kick you, bonehead! And you know I will!” He moved forward slowly, stealthily, like a cat stalking its prey. Quickly he grabbed for the ball, saying loudly, “I want it now!”

Phillip held on to the ball like a mother protecting her baby. Brian kicked him with all his might in the stomach, forcing Phillip to drop the ball. Phillip fell to the ground with a bloodcurdling scream.

“I saw that, Brian!” Mrs. Mercer, a teacher at the school bellowed as she strode toward the three boys. “I am sick and tired of your being such a bully.”

“You’re cracked! Todd kicked Phillip, so I picked up the ball.”

“I am not cracked. I saw you with my very own eyes.”

“So what?” Brian mumbled meanly.

“You are disobedient and unruly, young man. I will be calling your mother.

“Go ahead,” Brian said sullenly, “She don’t give a d—!”

“On top of everything, Brian, you are now swearing,” Mrs. Mercer said, shaking in spite of herself, knowing what Brian was capable of doing.

“My mom won’t give a d—!” Brian repeated sullenly.

"I'll get to you in a minute," Mrs. Mercer said, really trembling now.

"Give Phillip a hand up, Todd. Let's see if he's hurt very badly. That was quite a kick."

Brian wandered off to harass someone else. At that point all Mrs. Mercer could do was stare after him and wonder intently what she would say to his mother, her gourmet cooking classmate.

She turned to Phillip and asked, "How do you feel?"

A groan was all he could manage.

"Go to the school nurse and let her take a look at you. Todd may go with you. You're excused from classes for the rest of the day. I want you to relax in the nurse's station. Todd, you will attend classes as usual."

The boys trudged off with Phillip still holding his stomach. Mrs. Mercer wondered if Phillip had been hurt worse than it appeared. She had seen the vicious look on Brian's face as he kicked the boy. Her real concern was calling Brian's mother, who he said wouldn't care what he did. Sadie Mercer knew differently, and she was loaded for bear. She was going to make a difference in Brian's life no matter what it took.

The bell rang. Her thoughts turned toward her class. Where was Louise? Why was Mabel limping? Robby must have fallen off of the swing. He'll have to wipe off that dirt before he goes into the building. She stood there, still shaking.

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Mrs. Mercer got her class settled and busy. Then she went to the nurse's station to check on Phillip. The nurse had taken him to the emergency room at Trinity Memorial, because he was in a lot of pain. Sadie Mercer was no fool. She knew she had to have some hard, cold facts for Brian's mother. She went back to class, asking to be notified about Phillip as soon as the nurse returned. The class was quietly working.

It wasn't too long before Mrs. Thompson, the school nurse, came to her door and gestured for her to come out into the hall. Mrs. Mercer told the class to complete the math assignment and wait for her return. Rodney and Susan would be taking names. Any name that appeared on both lists would be punished. Rodney and Susan were on opposite sides of the room. This arrangement had worked before.

Out in the hall, Mrs. Mercer could tell something was wrong. Wanda Thompson explained Phillip's diagnosis and said, "Sadie, this is serious. Are you planning to call Brian's mother? Because I will call her if you want me to."

Sadie Mercer sighed. Phillip had a lacerated liver and would be kept for observation. This was more severe than she had thought.

“No, Wanda. I’ve been watching Brian bully the other children all year, and I think I want to place this call. I can’t leave my class long enough right now. So if it’s all right, I’ll call right after school before Brian has a chance to get home and lie about what happened.”

“I want to check with Phillip’s doctor and find out some more details. He really must have kicked him hard, because the orderly said they hardly ever see damage done by a kick that way. Breathe deep. Take another deep breath and count to ten ... relax. Go back in there and treat those kids with the love you always do.”

“Thanks, Ms. Wanda-who-we-couldn’t-do-without school nurse.” Mrs. Mercer smiled in spite of herself and returned to her no-names–on-the-list class. She told them not to worry, that Phillip was under a doctor’s care. Nothing else was said.

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When the bell rang signaling the end of the school day, Mrs. Mercer waited for her last pupil to get on the bus before she went to see the principal. Andy Sandifer was the best thing that ever happened to that school. He was warm, kind, thoughtful, supportive, and worked on a personal level, which means he treated his teachers with respect. She tiptoed up to his door and knocked lightly.

“Come on in!” he said with his beaming smile. “I was just talking to Wanda and getting a few medical details. Now you’re here to tell us how it happened. I have already talked to Todd.”

Mrs. Mercer smiled at his organization, relieved it wasn’t something she had to do, and went into the tiny office to sit. She and Wanda smiled at each other and the meeting began.

“What I saw was some sort of trouble over the ball. Then suddenly Brian violently kicked Phillip in the stomach.”

“Todd basically had the same story, except he was close enough to hear. He told me it sounded to him like Brian had come up against Phillip at least once before. Oh, and Wanda finally got a call through to Phillip’s doctor. Wanda, would you like me to repeat to Sadie what you just told me?”

Wanda shook her head. She looked so tired.

“Oh, are you testing my listening skills?” asked Andy.

Wanda smiled, and Andy continued, “Phillip’s doctor says he must stay under observation for a few hours to watch for signs of internal bleeding. If there is bleeding, they will have to perform surgery, Sadie. Brian’s mother’s insurance will cover anything Phillip needs. Whatever it takes to get Phillip well and back into school will be done.” He paused, took a deep breath, and said firmly, “I don’t want you to get sick over this. Are you okay, Sadie?”

Mrs. Mercer smiled at his respect for her awful state of mind. “Yes, Andy. I saw Brian walk up to Phillip and Todd and then rear back and viciously kick Philip in the stomach before

grabbing the ball. At that point I came rushing to the scene and could do nothing with Brian. He indicated his mother would not even care and then he cursed.”

Wanda opened her mouth to say something but decided better and shook her head, as if to communicate that she did not want to say whatever was on her mind.

Andy said, “You’re the nurse, Wanda. I want you to feel free to say anything.”

“Andy, I almost don’t want to say this,” Wanda said carefully, “but do you want to notify the police?”

“That will only be necessary if Phillip’s parents want to pursue it,” he said.

“Good,” Wanda said. “That takes a load off my mind.”

“Glad to be of service, my dear.” Andy mimed tipping his hat.

“Andy,” Sadie broke in, “Brian is a minor. Could he be arrested?”

“With his record here at Macedonia Middle, it is likely Brian will be arrested for assault. Juvenile Hall is a strong possibility,” he said. Then he added, “We are obliged to report such violence when it happens, but I am waiting until I hear about the extent of Phillip’s injuries.”

“I need to call Mrs. Murray immediately, Andy. Before Brian gets home.”

“I understand being expedient, Sadie, but are you prepared? Can you handle this? I want you to know I am ready to call any student’s home at any time. I also know you were on the scene, and I know you know his mother.”

“I have to admit a personal interest, Andy. Mrs. Murray and I are in a cooking class together. I really like the woman, but when Brian swore at me, and I saw the look on his face, I shuddered. He’s a mean little boy. And on top of everything else, he’ll be in my class next year. I’ve known him to harass children ever since I got here two years ago, wondering what I would do if I had to handle him and love him, too. This time I caught him red-handed. I want to make the call. It won’t scare her as much.”

“Go to it. Would you like to use my phone?” he asked.

“Thanks, Andy, but I need to do this solo. I’ll be right back.”

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Mrs. Mercer left the principal’s office feeling fortified to face Melissa Murray. She went to the teacher’s lounge to place the call.

*Good, she thought, No one is here.*

She prayed for several minutes before she called Mrs. Murray. Sadie was sure she should be the one to call, but just the same a tiny bit of fear crept into her heart. She prayed again.

Finally she was ready to call. She dialed the number. It was ringing. Brian's mother answered.

"Hello, Melissa, this is Sadie Mercer from the school."

"Hello, Sadie. I hope Brian isn't in any trouble."

Sadie paused. Melissa knew about Brian, at least to some extent. Sadie said determinedly, "Well, he is. He's in quite a bit of trouble, and I asked to call you because not only was I on the scene, but, you know, we take that class together, and I thought it would be easier for you if I called rather than the principal"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Sadie paused. "Today at school I saw Brian kick another boy in the stomach. Phillip Long is at Trinity Memorial Hospital for observation due to a lacerated liver. Surgery is pending if internal bleeding is discovered."

Mrs. Murray gasped.

"I've never seen a nastier look on a boy's face in my life. I do not know if Phillip and Brian fought before, but I would place a bet on it. Brian was furious he wouldn't give him the ball. Brian also used bad language."

"He cursed?"

"He told me you wouldn't give a d— about his behavior. Not strong language, but not language for schools either."

Melissa began to cry. "Please. Give me a minute to think. I knew Brian had been paddled a couple of times by the principal, but nothing like this has ever happened before."

Sadie said soothingly, "I thought it would be best to tell you everything up front. Do you want me to call you back?"

There was a brief silence. "No. We can talk now. Brian will be home soon, and it wouldn't be as easy to be open."

"I almost had the principal call," Sadie said softly. "He knows everything, but I thought you could take it better from me." Mrs. Mercer went into more detail with Brian's mother.

"What should I do?" Mrs. Murray asked suddenly.

Sadie took a deep breath before saying, "You realize Brian could be arrested for assault with his record? How do you usually punish your son?"

Melissa Murray was quiet for a moment and then said, “Ever since Brian has gotten so big, I have given up on disciplining him. When John left three years ago, I wasn’t too worried, but now I think Brian would hurt me. He has a sweet spirit really, but he is mixed up because of our divorce. He’s mean and small-minded sometimes, and I can’t get him to behave.”

“What is his favorite pursuit?”

“That would be television. He can watch it for hours. He behaves well enough then.”

“It may not work, and I know it is a small gesture, but I want you to take it away from him.”

“Oh, my goodness he *lives* for TV. What are you suggesting?”

“I believe you must take away his TV privileges for a solid month. Do you think you could do that without coming to harm?”

Melissa sighed deeply, “Sadie, I honestly don’t know. He scares me with his temper.”

“Melissa, I’ve never asked you about your beliefs, but so many people believe the Bible. I believe the Bible is the Word of God.

“I believe that, too.”

“Let me tell you something I have always found helpful with my own children. In Proverbs, it says, he who loves his son disciplines him diligently. Melissa, parents have the unenviable position of being character builders. You cannot build character in Brian unless you begin punishing him when he does wrong. Your son will end up ...” she trailed off.

“What are you saying? That I don’t love my boy?”

“I’m saying you will love him best by building knowledge of right and wrong in him.”

Melissa said firmly, “Sadie, I love Brian. He is the only child I have now that Martha has passed on. She was very sick before my husband left. She died a few months ago. I didn’t realize how I overlooked Brian when she was dying. I love Brian. Please help me save my son!”

Sadie was silent. Then she said, “All right, you say you love Brian. Right now we don’t know about his assault charge. You have to punish him the best you can. Then take away his TV privileges for however long you decide.” Sadie paused, “Now write this down ...”

“Let me get a pencil.” She returned, and Sadie Mercer repeated the Proverb word for word. The two women sat quietly for a few seconds. Then Melissa spoke in a hushed tone, “Brian is home. I will need everyone’s prayers, Sadie.”

“That is not a problem. I think Brian will be the most prayed for student in this school. We’ll be watching him. I will pray for him, and I will pray for you.”

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When they sat down to dinner that night, Mrs. Murray opened a conversation about what happened at school that day. Brian was in a terrible mood but said everything was fine. She did not want to confront him. The words stuck in her throat. Finally she picked up the piece of paper with the proverb and read it out in a clear voice, "He who loves his son disciplines him diligently."

"What in the h— does that mean?" he snarled at his mother.

"Disregarding your foul mouth, it means I spoke with Mrs. Mercer today, and you were very bad at school today."

"Sure. What's new? I'm a bad kid."

"Don't you talk like that! You have a lot to be troubled about. Never think you are bad." She continued by saying, "Phillip Long is in Trinity Memorial Hospital pending surgery."

When she spoke Brian's eyes got bigger. He shook his head from side to side. His lips formed the word "what?"

"Yes, Brian. I hope you realize how serious this is."

"Phillip is in the hospital? Surgery?"

"Yes, and you are grounded from TV for one month. You can watch the news with me and that is all."

Brian jumped up and screamed, "No way!"

Melissa said calmly and powerfully, "Yes! And my love for you could not be more, Brian. I am going to punish you—you are grounded for one month from all TV but the news."

Brian left the table, went into the living room, turned on the TV, and sat down sullenly. Mrs. Murray walked over and turned it off. Then she stood in front of the television, ready to physically fight her son if need be.

"Mom," pleaded Brian, "I'll go nuts without the TV. Move!" He took both hands and tried to shove her away from the TV.

Mrs. Murray took a step she had never taken with her son. She pushed him back and then slapped him as hard as she could. He was so stunned he just stood there.

"Now go to your room and stay there until I come to see you."

Brian was in shock. He honestly didn't know what to do. He lowered his head and left the room. His mother had never done anything like that to him before. Where did Proverbs come from? He went to his room and cried for the first time in a very long time.

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He tried to clear his brain and think clearly, but he kept seeing the look on his mother's face when she slapped him. He couldn't comprehend her anger. She hadn't punished him since his dad left. Then he remembered the scream that Phillip made when he kicked him during recess. He couldn't believe he was in the hospital and might have to have surgery.

There came a knock at the door.

"Brian, may I come in?" his mother asked.

Brian grabbed an old T-shirt and wiped his eyes. "Sure." He spoke in a husky whisper.

Melissa Murray could see Brian had been crying. She didn't mention it, but she wondered if they were tears of anger or repentance. She sat carefully on the chair by his desk. Brian was sitting up on his bed. They were quiet at first, neither one knowing what to say to the other.

She broke the ice. "You're angry with your father and me. You should not take it out on innocent kids. You're a big boy, Brian, but you must learn to be more gentle. You are also hurt by Martha's death."

Brian pretended to be indifferent but listened to every word she spoke.

"Brian, from now on both of us are going to start finding out more of what is in the Bible. That is where those words I spoke to you came from. I knew instantly when I heard them today that I was harming you by not doing what it says to do. Taking away your TV privileges is a form of discipline to make you realize that what you did to Phillip today was wrong, bad, and unacceptable. It was very wrong, and by the end of a month I will get a report from school to find out if you have tried to change. You will be very aware of the seriousness of going around bullying others.

"I don't blame you, Brian. I was so hurt myself when your daddy left. I thought of little else. I have not been eating well since your sister died. But the situation has been bothering you because you are not thinking clearly. You have become a bully ... a *bully*, Brian. Your behavior here and at school is getting worse and worse. I am not passing the buck to school or your dad or the loss of Martha. I am responsible for you, and I will do whatever it takes to help you see who God is and how important it is to love people."

There was a long silence. Brian was nodding his head as if he understood. Mrs. Murray was thankful that her son seemed to be trying to understand. There would be lapses. She might even have to get a counselor to help him but she knew one thing. "Brian, I love you. I will never stop loving you. We have taken our first step toward God today. I remember something from many years ago: 'Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you.'"

"Momma, who is God?" asked Brian softly.

Melissa Murray bit her lip to keep from crying. She instantly saw what her own pain had caused. She had not taught her son about the Bible and all she loved and had nearly forgotten.

“God is your Creator, my son. Can you make a tree? A flower? A rock? He created this whole world you see, and everything in it. Men have made it very ugly in places, but creation is beautiful. There are many steps to understanding all about God. Let’s settle for this first step tonight.”

They embraced each other, each with their own thoughts. Melissa Murray wondered at how she had nearly lost the most important thing in her life. Brian was numb and even a little curious about what was going to happen. His pain filled world finally made some sort of sense. Then suddenly he realized that those people at school were trying to help him, too. Otherwise they would just have expelled him. Maybe one day he would understand about God. He wasn’t sure, but maybe one day God could take away the pain of losing his dad and baby sister.

They broke their hug and looked at each other for several seconds. Then Melissa Murray did something she hadn’t done for years. She kissed her son on the cheek. He did not return it but inside he desperately wanted to and knew one day he would. He had done what he could at this point. Maybe one step at a time would be all right. Listening to his mom talk about God had been his first step.