



Clanking Chains: The Concepts of Severity & Benevolence in Child Rearing, Rom 11:22; 2 Cor 13:10; 1 Cor 4:14-16

The definition of “mean” describes a sinful attitude that results in sinful behavior. The Bible indicates that the best English word to describe parental authority, supervision, and justice is “severe.” This needs to be explained. First a definition from:

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “severe”:

Strict in judgment, discipline, or government; a strict or stern bearing or manner; rigorous in restraint, punishment, or requirement: stringent, restrictive. Maintaining a scrupulously exacting standard of behavior or discipline. Implies standards enforced without indulgence (leniency) or laxity.

Severity describes the side of divine justice that applies punishment and discipline on those who reject or violate divine standards. *Benevolence* is the word that describes the side of divine justice that imputes blessing and reward to those who accept and comply with divine standards. This contrast is the subject of:

Romans 11:22 - Behold the benevolence of God [*χρηστότης, chrēstotēs*: blessing and reward from the justice of God] and the severity of God [*ἀποτομία, apotomia*: punishment and discipline from the justice of God]: on the one hand, severity to those who fell [**Jewish unbelievers**], but on the other hand, the benevolence of God to you [**Gentile believers**], if you persist in the sphere of His integrity [**3d class condition for maintenance of client nation status**]. Otherwise you also will be cut off [**5th cycle of discipline**].

A thorough analysis of this verse will follow later. But it should be noted that in this passage Paul is addressing the issue of client nation status. Israel has lost hers due to national apostasy. Gentile nations have replaced Israel as client nations during the Church Age with *Senatus Populusque Romanus* being the first. She fell, or was “cut off” in A.D. 476. The United States is the current client nation under divine benevolence but courting severity. Recovery will restore the former but further decline will invite the latter and the jeopardy of being “cut off.”

The application to our study has to do with the example found in Hebrews 12 where discipline by our earthly fathers is used to illustrate the discipline of our heavenly Father. But for discipline by earthly fathers to serve as a valid illustration of divine discipline then their approach must emulate God’s.

This brings us to a definition of the Greek word for “severity” as provided by:

Friedrich, Gerhard (ed.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 8:106-107:

ἀποτομία, apotomia.

Non-Biblical use.

The noun *apotomia* does not occur until the Hellenistic period. In an overwhelming majority of instances *apotomia* means “strictness.” Legal strictness without *πραΰτης, prautēs* (gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness) and *ἐπιείκεια, epieikeia* (clemency, graciousness, forbearance) is a mark of the tyrant.

NOTE:

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v.:

[*πραΰτης, prautēs*]:

Gentleness: Free of violence; delicate.

Humility: Free of arrogance; submissive to authority.



Courtesy: Respect and consideration; politeness.

Considerate: Given to careful consideration; thoughtful regard for the feelings of others.

[ἐπιείκεια, epieikeia]:

Clemency: Implies a merciful disposition in one having the power or duty of punishing.

Graciousness: Marked by compassion and kindness, tact and delicacy.

Forbearance: Patience and leniency.

The etymology of *apotomia* indicates an original understanding of its application in the context of integrity. Severity is the mental attitude assumed when discipline is necessary and called for. Severity is balanced by a mental attitude of gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness when discipline is not an issue and by clemency, graciousness, and forbearance when it is an issue.

A parent must evaluate circumstances and determine as best he can the necessity of punishment and to what level of intensity the violation requires. Further, wisdom instructs that you pick your battles. Oftentimes it is wise not to see certain things and allow them to slide for a time. This is clemency, graciousness, and forbearance. This allows the child to self-correct. If the behavior becomes repetitive then measures must be taken.

The concept behind the use of the word severity is that when there is an obvious need for discipline that it be consistently imposed. And when there is obvious rebellion that it be consistently administered.

The reason and purpose of discipline at every level of intensity is designed to bring the recalcitrant and the straying back into right thinking and right action that is honoring to the Lord. This concept is addressed by:

Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:108:

ἀποτομία, apotomia.

The New Testament.

The adverb ἀποτόμως, apotomōs occurs in:

2 Corinthians 13:10 - For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when I am present I may not use severity [ἀποτόμως, apotomōs] in accordance with the authority that the Lord gave me for the purpose of edification and not tearing you down.

Paul is giving an unusually sharp warning here. His concern in the letter is to settle the matter so as to avoid the only other alternative: "... that when I am present I may not use severity in accordance with my authority." What apotomōs denotes is a dimension of Paul's authority, namely, the power of crushing judgment, which is not the intention of this authority, but which is materially implicit in it: "... that the Lord gave me for the purpose of edification and not tearing you down."

We have already observed Paul's comments to the Corinthian church in:

1 Corinthians 4:14 - I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

v. 15 - For if you were to have countless tutors [παιδαγωγός, paidagōgos: a guide, or trainer of boys; child-leader, tutor] in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for I in Christ Jesus became your father through the gospel.

v. 16 - I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me.



The word *paidagōgos* refers to a trainer of children who functions under the supervision of the child's father. The pedagogue's duty is to supervise the boy's conduct. He was not a teacher since this duty fell under the authority of the father.

Paul is implying that others may have instructed the Corinthians in the doctrines of Christ but he was their father in that regard. As their spiritual father, he not only has the authority to instruct, teach, and guide "for the purpose of edification" but he also has authority "for the purpose of tearing down" if necessary. The approach taken for the latter is **ἀποτόμως, *apotomōs***: severity.

Now let's return to the column by Rosemond and where applicable we will replace the word "mean" with "severe" and indicate the change by italics.

Rosemond, John. "Defining 'Severe' Parents." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Feb. 8, 1989, p. 6-W:

The mother of a boisterous and very strong-willed 5-year-old girl explains, "I feel so mean. I yell all the time."

"Yelling isn't mean," I said.

Her expression changed to bewilderment, and she stared at me for several seconds before asking, "What is it, then?"

"It's not anything but yelling. As you've already discovered, it accomplishes nothing, unless you consider the guilt you feel afterward an accomplishment. Your problem is not that you're too mean, it's that you aren't *severe* enough."

After another bewildered look, she asked, "Not *severe* enough?"

"Right!" I said, "Not *severe* enough. In order to accomplish what you want to accomplish with this very headstrong and active little girl of yours, you're going to have to get really *severe*."

"I'm afraid I'm lost."

"Let me explain. *Severe* isn't screaming and yelling. That's an out-of-control, end-of-your rope, 'I've had it!' response. *Severe* isn't cruel either. Truly *severe* parents are calm, consistent, and insistent. They do not tolerate misbehavior. Therefore, they do something about it long before they get to the end of their proverbial ropes.

"*Severe* parents are assertive. They don't give second, third, and fourth chances. They insist that children do what they're told the first time they're told. They don't count to 10 or engage in other equally ridiculous games of chance. They don't make threats; they make promises. *Severest* of all, they keep their promises.

"*Severe* parents are consistent. They uphold the same standards from one day to the next. The ways they enforce those standards may vary from situation to situation, but the standards do not. Their children can therefore rely upon them. They learn to trust that what their parents say is exactly what they're going to do.

"*Severe* parents don't shoulder emotional responsibility for their children's misbehavior. When the child of truly *severe* parents misbehaves, the parents don't feel bad about it. Instead, they take whatever steps they must to make sure the child ends up feeling bad about it.

"*Severe* parents don't run interference for their kids. They don't make excuses for them. They let them make mistakes. They let them fall flat on their faces. They allow them the benefits of learning by trial and error, with emphasis on the error.

"It's very simple, really. *Severe* parents make rules and enforce them dispassionately, without any great to-do. Their children may not like the rules, but they respect them.

"But," she said, "my daughter already accuses me of being mean."



"She doesn't know what she's talking about. She uses the word because she's learned it jerks the rug out from under you. When she calls you 'mean,' you get upset, you start explaining yourself, apologizing, compensating and so on. As it stands, the word 'mean' makes you feel like a bad parent. But to a truly *severe* parent, being called 'mean' is the highest of compliments."

"But don't children grow up to resent you if you're *severe*?"

"There you go, confusing *severe* with nasty. *Severe* parents create a loving climate characterized by certainty and security and trust. What's there to resent?"

"It sound's like being *severe* is really being kind."

"You got it! Now, go do it!"

- 65) Using the right vocabulary term, Dr. Rosemond's advice is excellent. The word "severe" stresses the authority that parents possess and their prerogative to use its approach to enforce divine standards.
- 66) As we can see from the comments by Paul toward the Corinthians, parents are not to *be* severe, they are to *become* severe when necessary. Otherwise they are benevolent toward their children.