

SPANKING

Editorial Note: Recently, a couple of great-grandmothers spoke to me about the lack of discipline they see in the younger generations of today. It wasn't like that when they were young and they know the danger of leaving young children to themselves. One of these great-grandmothers asked me to write something about spanking as a tool for young parents. This article is in response to that request.

Modern secular thinkers would have us believe that the word spanking is a euphemism for child abuse. In "Plain Talk About Spanking," published by Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education (PTAVE), Jordan Riak says,

Spanking' is a euphemism. That is, it is a pleasant-sounding word for a practice that is anything but pleasant. We use it here because it is the most commonly recognized term in our language denoting violent behavior by adults toward children. "Hitting,' 'beating,' and 'battery' are more accurate and more honest words....

In fact, Riak, the PTAVE and those who think like them reject any form of physical punishment of children. Their idea is that only positive, affirming behavior is acceptable in any adult's relationship with a child. Quoting expert Ashley Montagu, Riak writes,

The sooner we understand that love and gentleness are the only kinds of called-for behavior towards children, the better.

In another article entitled "Abuse In Schools Is Out," Riak lists nearly 70 examples of so-called mistreatment of children. While some of the items on the list represent extreme behaviors and could in fact be described as child abuse, accepting the entire list as such would eliminate virtually every means of real discipline that could help children learn the difference between right and wrong. Following PTAVE's list, a teacher or parent would never again stand a child in a corner, make him sit on his hands, wash his mouth out with soap, or even as much as tell a child that he did something wrong.

The bottom line of this philosophy is that only those actions by adults which affirm children in their self-chosen behaviors and build up their self-esteem are appropriate. In other words, adults need to accept that children are capable of finding their own way through life. And, adults should act only as facilitators who aid children in forging their own way, not as detractors who, through retributive discipline, seek to alter a child's thinking about what he ought or ought not do.

The Bible, though, warns against the dangers of leaving a child to himself.

Proverbs 29:15 - The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

To leave a child to himself is to give him complete freedom to choose his own way without any guidance and direction from a parent or other responsible adult and without any disciplinary action to correct wayward behavior. The end result is the consequence of a depraved heart in which a person, like an unwatched sheep, goes astray, turns to his own way, and is lost in his

own iniquity (Isaiah 53:6).

Unfortunately, modern child rearing techniques, in affect, advocate leaving children to themselves. From Dr. Spock's "never say 'no' to a child" to the branding of corporal punishment as child abuse, "experts" and government officials are gradually taking away a parent's ability to *train up a child in the way he should go* (Proverbs 22:6).

It isn't working. Looking across our society, children are more unruly than they have ever been. Youthful violence is at an all time high. Crimes committed by minors continually dominate the news headlines. And, on a more personal level, children seem increasingly incapable of respect towards adults. Teachers find it nearly impossible to maintain order in a classroom and parents find themselves bending to every whim and wish of their children lest they be the victims of social ridicule.

What does the Bible teach about disciplining children?

The Bible draws parallels between the way an adult disciplines children and the way God disciplines those who belong to Him.

My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Hebrews 12:5b-11

As this passage explains, God's discipline sometimes includes chastisement, and chastisement, as verse 11 explains, is indeed not pleasant in the moment it is received. In fact, it is not intended to be. Nevertheless, the motivation of God's chastisement is His love for His children (verse 6). God says that to leave a person without chastisement is the same thing as rejecting him altogether. Chastisement from Him actually proves that the recipient is a loved son. The objective of God's chastisement is to change His children's behavior. When one of them acts unrighteously, God intervenes with an act of chastisement. This intervention is designed to profit the wayward child of God by directing him away from destructive behavior and toward true holiness.

God uses a rod

In chastening His own, the Bible sometimes depicts God as using a rod to "spank" them. If God is perfect, holy, righteous, sinless, and never does anything wrong, and He uses a rod to administer His chastisement, then we can understand from His example that spanking is not a bad thing.

In Psalm 89:30-33 we read,

If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail.

In this we see that God had established some rules -- statutes and commandments. We see that His people broke or transgressed those rules. In the absence of confession, repentance and godly sorrow that might have brought the outpouring of God's mercy, God had to use His rod to convince His people of the wrong they had done. In the process of His punishing His children, He made it very clear that He was still their Father, He still loved them deeply, and His lovingkindness and faithfulness to them was undiminished. What a wonderful picture of the purpose for using a rod and of the manner in which it is to be used.

Biblical instructions concerning the rod and spanking

The rod, according to Scripture has some very specific purposes. Used properly in spanking a child, it will accomplish the following:

1. It will teach a lesson that can be used later in life.

Proverbs 29:15 - The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

The rod is to be accompanied by words of reproof. Reproof involves verbal confrontation. In reproofing a person, you confront them with what they have done and emphasize how wrong it was. This brings the attention of the guilty to the reason the rod is going to be applied. The rod then acts as an exclamation mark at the end of reproof, further emphasizing the seriousness of the transgression and teaching him that there are consequences for misbehavior.

The result of this punishment is wisdom. The guilty person, duly reproofed and punished is now able to understand that his behavior was wrong and unacceptable. When tempted to do the same thing again, the words of reproof and the pain of the rod will deter him from repeating the transgression.

In order for this to work, the words of reproof must be convincingly stern and the striking of the rod must inflict significant pain. If the words are too soft and the rod too weak, there will be no fear of enduring such "punishment" again and consequently no deterrent to repeating the transgression.

When the rod and reproof are administered weakly, or not at all, it is the same as leaving a child to forge his own path in life without the guidance and direction of parental discipline. The ultimate result may be disastrous.

2. It will drive foolishness from the heart.

Proverbs 22:15 - Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction

shall drive it far from him.

Transgression comes from foolishness that is bound in the heart. The more foolishness that is bound in the heart, the more transgression a person will commit.

The rod is a tool that has the power to drive foolishness from the heart. As the pain from the rod is associated with certain kinds of behavior, a child can learn the kind of choices that are foolish and the kind that are wise. As long as he acts foolishly, the pain keeps coming. When he acts responsibly, the pain stops.

This emphasizes the importance of associating the rod with the proper thing. If the child associates the rod with a parent's anger, then he will miss the point concerning his misbehavior. By associating the rod with the parent's attitude, the child may reason that as long as his parent does not know about it, he may continue his transgression. Thus the parent, in administering the rod, must insure that the child associates the rod with his own misbehavior and not with the parent's attitude.

On the other hand, the child must associate the parents administering of the rod with the fact that his parent loves him.

Proverbs 13:24 - He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.

A parent who loves his child will not look the other way when his child breaks the rules. His love will compel him to do whatever is necessary to make sure the child learns the difference between right and wrong.

The child must also associate the pain received from the rod with the unacceptableness of his wrong behavior. This is the value of using a rod as opposed to a bare hand to spank a child. Using a hand to spank a child may personalize the pain and cause him to miss the lesson being taught. Using a rod, gives the parent a tool to illustrate apart from himself the consequences of disobedience.

3. The rod is not intended to injure the person physically, but it is intended to hurt.

Proverbs 23:13 - Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die.

The objective of the rod is to correct a child's behavior, not injure him physically. By properly spanking your child, you will not damage his physical health, but by not spanking him, you may well damage his ability to live a responsible life. Thus, withholding correction results in worse consequences than the pain that results from the use of the rod.

Spanking, or beating a child with a rod, in no way suggests abusive behavior. God provided a particular part of the body specially padded for spanking.

Proverbs 10:13 - In the lips of him that hath understanding wisdom is found: but a rod is for the back of him that is void of understanding.

The word “back” as it is used in this verse refers to a convex shape as opposed to a concave one. The lower portion of the back generally curves inward and would be a concave shape. The buttocks curve outward and are a convex shape. The padding provided in the buttocks provides a place for pain to be inflicted without causing injury. When Scripture says that

a rod is for the back, this is obviously the part of the body to which it refers.

4. The rod brings comfort to the soul.

Psalm 23:4 - Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

The rod of the shepherd serves as a symbol to the sheep, indicating that the one who leads them will not only protect them from their enemies, but will also protect them from their own willfulness that may cause them to wander off onto a wayward path. The parents paddle will have the same effect on children.

5. Ultimately, the rod may actually deliver a soul from eternal condemnation.

Proverbs 23:14 - Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

Before a person can be saved, he must understand that he is a sinner and needs to be saved. By molding a child’s understanding of right and wrong through the use of the rod, a parent may actually convince a child of the sin which rules in his heart and bring him to an understanding of his need for the Savior. Once this is accomplished, it is an easy step in the heart of a child from conviction of sin to faith in Jesus Christ.

How to properly spank a child

Putting together all of these biblical guidelines for the use of the rod led me to a careful procedure I used each time I spanked my own children. First, I would consider whether or not a specific transgression was an act of defiance and qualified for the ultimate punishment of spanking. Having determined that it was, I took the child with me into my bedroom, away from the rest of the family. In as calm a voice as possible, I made sure my child understood that what he did was wrong. He had to understand also that it was not just wrong in my eyes, but more importantly, it was wrong in God’s eyes. I then made sure he understood why I was going to spank him. I made sure he understood the spanking came from my love for him, and my desire for his life to honor God. After it was clear my child understood these things, I laid him over my lap and swatted him with a substantial wooden paddle, insuring that the spanking hurt and that it brought him to the kind of crying that expressed remorse and repentance. Immediately upon finishing the spanking, I took my child into my arms and reassured him of my love.

Several things are to be noted about this process.

1. Spanking is a personal and private matter and should not be done in a public forum where emotional embarrassment is associated with the spanking in the child’s mind.

2. A child’s understanding is of utmost importance for spanking to be effective. He must understand that he is being spanked because he has done something wrong. He must

understand that the pain he will experience from the spanking is specifically intended to help him change his behavior. He must understand that he is not being spanked simply because his parent is angry or upset or inconvenienced by his behavior. He must understand that his parent's love for him is the actual motivation for the spanking. He must understand that his parent is obeying God in disciplining him, and that the discipline will help him learn to be more faithful in obeying God also.

3. The spanking must hurt. Light, limp, or fragile objects are not sufficient to inflict the kind of pain that brings a child to repentance. The objective is not to hurt a child's feelings, or to simply bring him to tears. The objective is to teach the child that sin has consequences and that true repentance is necessary in making things right.

4. The child's cry should communicate that the lesson has been learned. Children are very perceptive. If they can manipulate a parent with crocodile tears, they can avoid more severe stages of punishment. Thus the Bible warns, *Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying* (Proverbs 19:18). While a parent does not want to break a child's spirit by abusive action, a parent does want to break a child's will by sufficient disciplinary action. Too often, a parent believes proper discipline has been accomplished simply because tears appear on the cheeks of the child. One clue that discipline has been insufficient is the constant repetition of the same wrong behavior followed by the constant repetition of the same insufficient punishment.

5. A rod should be used and not a hand. The Bible carefully specifies that a rod is the tool to be used in spanking children. If a hand is used, the child might associate the pain with the person who causes the pain. If a neutral object is used, the child will associate the pain with the object. By separating the source of pain from the person administering the discipline, the parent can more easily convince the child that love is his motivation for administering the spanking. Thus when the spanking is finished, the tool can be laid aside and the arms of the parent can reassure his child that intimacy in the relationship has not been lost in spite of the disciplinary action.

Spanking is not all there is to biblical discipline

God clearly teaches in His law that punishment should be equal to the crime. This is the often misunderstood point of the famous eye for an eye principle (Exodus 21:22-27). This principle teaches not revenge but justice.

In the disciplining of children, this same principle should be followed in determining what punishment will be administered. Unfortunately, some well meaning parents misunderstand the purpose of spanking and overuse it, spanking their children for every transgression, regardless of its severity, or lack of severity. Excessive brutal spankings, especially for behavior that could be managed in other ways, have the potential of breaking a child's spirit and seriously damaging his soul. At the same time, constantly tapping a child with a flimsy object, though it may be irritating to the child, is ineffective in actually convincing him to change his behavior. Either of these uses of spanking as the primary means of discipline, fail miserably to accomplish the objective of teaching the child proper values in selecting his behavior. Spanking should be only the ultimate form of chastisement of children, used infrequently after other means of discipline have failed.

The first principle in disciplining children is the principle of faith. In our relationship with God, obedience is a product of our believing in Him. *By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed: and he went out, not knowing whither he went* (Hebrews 11:8). Because Abraham trusted God, he believed his Words and obeyed them unhesitatingly. If parents can develop a similar kind of trust in their relationship with their children, obedience will become a standard policy in their children's hearts.

The second principle in disciplining children is the appropriate application of mercy. God applies mercy to our lives in a couple of different situations. On the one hand, it is possible for us to sin out of ignorance. In both Old Testament and New Testament passages (e.g. Leviticus 5:18 and I Timothy 1:13) God is shown to be compassionate and merciful toward those who transgress ignorantly. On the other hand, when we sin willfully, but repent and voluntarily confess our sins, God again readily applies his mercy to our lives (I Corinthians 11:31 with I John 1:9). Parents need to follow this divine example and maintain a readiness to be merciful to their children. In doing so they can point them to the mercy of their heavenly Father as well.

The third principle in disciplining children is the selection of an appropriate punishment that sufficiently deals with each specific transgression. In the Old Testament, if a man injured another man's eye, he was not punished with the taking of his life. It was an eye for an eye -- a punishment equal to the crime. So it should be in the discipline of children. Discipline of children should always begin with verbal reproof, rebuke, and exhortation (II Timothy 4:2). Children need to be informed about which behaviors are right and which are wrong and they should not be punished before they know what is expected of them. However, when a child does not heed the verbal instruction, additional discipline becomes necessary. Each disciplinary action should be thoughtfully selected so that it will communicate the proper lesson. If a child does something wrong with his hands, like hitting another child, he could be made to sit on his hands so he will learn that he must be careful about what he lets his hands do. If he says something wrong, like telling a lie, soap could be put on his tongue to teach him that he must be careful in selecting his words. If he causes a disturbance in a group, spoiling everyone's time, he could be set on a chair away from the group to teach him to be more cooperative in his relationship with others. In each of these disciplinary actions, a specific punishment is selected which is directly related to the specific act of misbehavior. In doing so, the parent gives the child a greater opportunity to learn what he did was wrong and what he can do to correct his behavior in the future.

It is after these steps have been taken than spanking may become necessary. If it is certain the child knows what is right and what is wrong concerning specific behaviors and he commits the wrong in defiance of rule and authority, corporal punishment is the ultimate means of driving such foolishness from a child's heart. Consequently, spanking should be an infrequent disciplinary action that is used only after other means have failed to convince a child to stop doing what he knows to be wrong. In fact, the more infrequent spanking is used, the more effective it will be if it is administered properly.

There is one more important thing to note. Whatever action is taken, it should be immediate and not delayed. Probably the biggest mistake parents make in disciplining their children is that they get stuck on the verbal level like a broken record. They rebuke, and

rebuke, and rebuke, and warn without taking appropriate follow-up action. As a result, the child learns that the parent's words are empty and there is no reason to respond. When appropriate punishment consistently follows immediately after one verbal warning goes unheeded, the child quickly learns that the parents words mean something. When this lesson is learned well, most acts of punishment become completely unnecessary since a parent's verbal rebuke becomes a sufficient deterrent to wrong behavior. The value of this lesson is tremendously significant. It teaches the child the value of listening to the Word of God. If a parent's words are to be heeded, then so are the Words of God. When a child learns to respond to the Words of God with simple obedience, he makes giant leaps down the road to maturity.

Conclusion

Knowing that any defense against spanking must deal with Bible statements which advocate it, Jordan Riak seeks and finds help in the Christian community in stigmatizing this form of punishment. In emphasizing the point of adults having only affirming behavior towards children, he quotes Thomas E. Sagendorf, a United Methodist Pastor in Toledo, Ohio as saying,

The much-touted 'religious argument' to support corporal punishment is built upon a few isolated quotes from the Book of Proverbs....It seems to me that the brutal and vindictive practice of corporal punishment cannot be reconciled with the major themes of the New Testament which teach love and forgiveness and a respect for the beauty and dignity of children, and which overwhelmingly reject violence and retribution as a means of solving human conflicts.

First of all, the fact that a particular subject is mentioned only a few times in the Bible does not diminish its importance. Everything that comes out of the mouth of God, even if only spoken once, is true and enforceable. When God says, *He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes* (Proverbs 13:24), this one statement alone is a sufficient endorsement from God concerning the value of corporal punishment. Yet there are many other statements in Scripture which add abundant validation to its significance.

Secondly, every reasonable person would agree that child abuse is a terrible thing. Even those who advocate the use of spanking in disciplining children recognize that it can be taken to extremes, far beyond what God intended, and result in abuse rather than reasonable punishment. It is irresponsible, however, to categorize every spanking as brutal and vindictive and a violation of a child's integrity. Just as the Heavenly Father chastises His children to bring correction and order into their lives, so we human parents must do the same for our children whom we love dearly.

There are actually two ways to abuse a child. Physical and verbal violence can injure a child and cause serious damage to his body and his soul. But the withholding of proper discipline can just as tragically be considered child abuse. God says

Withhold not correction from the child...

Proverbs 23:13

...a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

Proverbs 29:15

We must not let modernist, liberal, psycho-babble deter us from following the instructions of the Word of God. There is too much at stake. You see, there are no guarantees in rearing children. You can discipline them perfectly every time they commit any transgression and you can teach them every lesson they will ever need to know in order to live responsibly before God, yet when they become adults they may still not make the right choices. As the old cliché says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Likewise, you can give your child every instruction he needs, but if he does not receive it into his own heart, he will still choose wrong over right.

The point is, if children might turn out bad even after growing up in the best possible environment, what are their chances of turning out well if their training is grossly insufficient. In loving our children, we must not make the mistake of withholding from them things that will be most effective in teaching them life's lessons. Giving our children the freedom to make too many choices for themselves too early in life only encourages them to follow a wayward path. Many parents do this under the guise of loving their children. But the Bible says a parent cannot really love his child and spare the rod at the same time. If we don't believe this, then maybe our parents did not teach us how important it is to believe and obey the Word of God. For that matter, maybe there is still some foolishness that needs to be driven from our adult hearts. Maybe there are valid reasons for God to use His rod on us.

