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Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child?

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Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child?: The Christian Ethics of Corporal Punishment

Becoming a parent is one of the greatest blessings a Christian can experience. To raise a child is to experience God's love and mercy as He trusts His followers to steward and disciple the souls of the next generation. The Bible is clear that children are a gift from the Lord (Psalm 127:3, NIV), and that they are to be raised to follow Jesus (Proverbs 22:6, NIV), but leaves little specific instructions on the topic of child rearing. The phrase "spare the rod, spoil the child" has circulated Christian families and discussions in parenting for centuries to support the practice of corporal punishment, or "spanking" a child. However, the growing body of evidence reporting negative consequences of physical discipline demand that Christians reevaluate the ethics of this practice. This paper will closely explore the different nuances and perspectives of Proverbs 13:24 and the life of Christ and his view of discipline. It will conclude with evaluating popular counterclaims in support of corporal punishment, as well as the overall efficacy of the practice through a modern lens to conclude that corporal punishment is not conducive to honoring God and children.

The Truth of Proverbs 13:24

A Misquoted Phrase

Christians are quick to quote "spare the rod, spoil the child", but this phrase is not found in the Bible. Samuel Butler, 17th century writer, coined this phrase in his satirical poem, *Hudibras*, which criticizes the behavior of the devout Puritans of the time. The following quote is an excerpt of a conversation Hudibras, depicted as an arrogant and hypocritical knight, has with a rich widow that he is attempting to seduce for her money. She is aware of his ulterior motives, and decides to make a fool of him:

If matrimony and hanging go
By dest'ny, why not whipping too?
What med'cine else can cure the fits
Of lovers when they lose their wits?
Love is a boy by poets stil'd;
Then spare the rod and spoil the child

(Butler, lines 839-844)

There are multiple interpretations of this passage, but some believe that the widow is challenging Hudibras by suggesting that if he really loves her, he will subject himself to corporal punishment to combat the madness that love can bring. It may be seen as a mockery of Proverbs 13:24, highlighting the contradiction that one must use corporal punishment as a way to strengthen love. Regardless, it is erotic in nature, and has nothing to do with disciplining children (Swanson, n.d.). Perhaps Christians would not be so apt to quote this phrase if they understood that they were referencing an erotic satirical poem that is promoting a much different message than they likely intend.

A Case for the Metaphorical Rod

It is true, however, that Butler derived the phrase “spare the rod, spoil the child” from a verse in the book of Proverbs:

Whoever spares the rod hates their children,
but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them

Proverbs 13: 24 (NIV)

The full verse is much more rich in meaning, and demands a proper exegesis. A thorough examination reveals several theological dilemmas when using this verse to support corporal punishment for children. The first matter is to explore the etymology of the Hebrew words mentioned in this verse. Perhaps the most controversial word in this verse, “rod”, comes from the Hebrew word *shebet* which is most commonly translated as meaning “tribe” or “clan” in the Bible (*šēbEṭ* - *Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (Kjv)*, n.d.). While this is most likely not the translation used in Proverbs 13:24, there are two important distinctions by noting this: the familial and ancestral ties that were so integral to Old Testament culture (“spare the [*strong family ties*], spoil the child”), and by highlighting the fact that most of the times that *shebet* is used in the Bible, it is in a figurative context.

The more likely meaning of this word in Proverbs 13:24 is “scepter”, “staff”, or “club”. A scepter is a staff, sometimes elaborately adorned with gold and jewels, used by royalty as a symbol of their authority (*Spare the Rod*, n.d.). A noteworthy mention of a golden scepter is in the book of Esther, when King Xerxes extends his golden scepter to Esther as a sign that he has favor on her and is allowing her into his courts (*Touching The Scepter (The Text)*, n.d.). Noting that the writer of Proverbs, Solomon, was a king, it is plausible to theorize that he was using the metaphor of the authority of a scepter to mirror the authority that parents should exercise of their children. Finally, the most probable meaning of *shebet*, “staff” or “club”, is a nod to the shepherd culture in ancient Israel. A shepherd would carry a tall wooden rod with a curved end to protect their sheep. Sheep are notorious for their lack of discernment in dangerous situations. Left to their own devices, they wander aimlessly and consume anything in their path regardless of potential threat to their wellbeing. The shepherd would use the crook of their staff to redirect the sheep, guiding them towards a safer path. This must be done gently, as striking a sheep would

incite panic for the individual animal and would transfer to others. The staff was also used to protect the herd from outside dangers. In the event of an attack from a jackal, wolf, or other predator, a shepherd would use their staff to defend their sheep from injury or death. The gentle use of the shepherd's staff is also found in one of the most quoted passages of scripture, Psalm 23:4:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

(NIV)

This verse demonstrates the unequivocal gentleness of God's *shebet*. As Eitan Bar, an accomplished Jewish-Christian biblical scholar, writes in his case against the use of corporal punishment, "A rod will only bring you comfort if it protects you against evil, not if it breaks you" (Bar, n.d.).

A Literal Interpretation

Despite the evidence in favor of the metaphorical nature of the Proverbs 13:24 rod, many Christians still insist on interpreting it as a mandate to physically discipline children. Supposing that the rod was indeed literal rather than metaphorical, the idea of using this verse to justify spanking children is still problematic. Firstly, Proverbs is a wisdom literature book, and different rules apply to interpreting its verses from other genres in the Bible, such as law books or the gospels. Dr. Tom Lovorn, pastor of God's Storehouse Baptist Church, summarizes the art of reading the book of Proverbs in this way: "Some passages we understand to be literal truths; they will happen exactly as they're written. Other verses are figurative, symbolizing greater spiritual

truths” (Lovorn, 2011). The issue with the literal argument of this debate is that even those who adopt this mindset fail to consider what this would actually entail. A 2014 poll surveying American attitudes towards corporal punishment found that 61% of people approved of corporal punishment if no implement (belt, cane, paddle, etc.) was used, and 63% approved if it did not leave a mark (Reuters, 2014). In Texas, there is no law that outlaws using implements and leaving marks verbatim, but BHW Law Firm urges parents to be aware of these situations outlined by the Texas Attorney General on what will likely be considered abusive: striking a child above the waist, using implements such as ropes, sticks, boards, etc., and inflicting force that “bruise, welt, swell, or need medication” (Barnett, 2019). In order to inflict corporal punishment in the way King Solomon had in mind, all of these guidelines would be violated, and it would likely be considered child abuse. Dr. Donald Owsley, pastoral counselor at Relavate Counseling Ministry, thoroughly examines the ancient practice of corporal punishment and highlights the unrealisticness of implementing this in today’s society:

One cannot accurately say he is following the explicit command to spank when, as we have seen, the foolish teenaged son in the Old Testament was not spanked. He was beaten with a rod or flogged with a whip up to forty lashes. Bruising was quite acceptable and so was injuring him to where he was incapacitated for one or two days.

Again, punishment of this sort is not found in connection with young children. (Owsley, 2021)

This is a more severe use of corporal punishment than even the most vehement supporters are in favor of, and would undoubtedly result in steep criminal charges. Thus, it is unethical to use Proverbs 13:24 to justify the current man-made edition of spanking.

With all aspects of the metaphorical and literal rod in mind, the most theologically sound interpretation of Proverbs 13:24 is instructing parents to discipline their children, rather than promote a specific method of discipline—spanking. The evidence of the gentle rod vastly outweighs the idea that children should be struck with it. The conclusion that Proverbs 13:24 does not support corporal punishment is also supported by other portions of the Bible, especially in the New Testament. More evidence in favor of nonphysical discipline can be found in the life of Christ.

What Would Jesus Do?

An important element of biblical exegesis is to consider the Bible as a whole narrative, rather than a fragmented collection of verses. This is especially important for modern day Christians who are no longer subject to Mosaic Law reading from Old Testament books such as Proverbs. New Covenant Christians are not to strictly follow or blatantly disregard the Mosaic Law, but to interpret it through the lens of Jesus Christ. This leads to an important question in the discussion of corporal punishment: What would Jesus do?

Jesus was not an earthly parent, so the Bible does not provide a concrete parenting example to strive for. However, Jesus still exemplifies multiple aspects of Godly discipline in the way that he disciplined (root word for discipline) others. Matt Brown, founder of Think Eternity Ministry, comments that in the many instances in the gospels where Jesus catches someone in sin or in need of correction and teaching, he includes these three elements: non-judgment, showing mercy, and never hiding the truth (Brown, 2015). An example of this can be found in John 8:3-11, when Jesus encounters the woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees publicly humiliate and criticize the woman, but Jesus responds to their persistent badgering by explaining that the sinless one among them may throw the first stone. Jesus never denies the sin of the woman, but

rather points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to criticize her when they also sin. Further, Jesus pardons the woman from her fate. He was aware that the punishment for adultery according to Mosaic Law was death by stoning, but he was merciful. Jesus leaves the woman with a command: “Go now, and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11b, NIV). He does not respond permissively, condoning the woman’s actions, but instructs and expects her to change her ways.

However, Jesus was aware that some situations demand more than gentle words and mercy. Despite his most popular portrayal as a radically gentle, loving, and compassionate savior, he never abandoned his commitment to truth, which sometimes required righteous anger. A commonly misunderstood passage cited in the discourse surrounding the ethics of corporal punishment is when Jesus cleared the temple. At first glance it may appear that Jesus resorted to violence and physical punishment, but the proper context of the story reveals this is not true. This event takes place during Passover, when all Jews would travel to make a sacrifice in the Temple. Because some were traveling far distances, they would buy animals to sacrifice in Jerusalem rather than cart their animals from home. The vendors who were selling the animals were charging absurd prices, and converting their currency at low rates. Their actions exuded greed and disrespect (as children sometimes do), and Jesus would not stand for the temple to be abused in this way, so he became righteously angry. The Bible says that he “overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves” (Mark 11:15b, NIV). This event is recorded in all four gospels, but only John mentions that Jesus had a whip. Some scholars have suggested that John may have added that detail for dramatic effect. (More, 2019). Regardless, there is no reason to believe that this whip was used on people, only the animals (John 2:15, NIV). This is also corroborated by the fact that no one could find evidence to charge Jesus with a crime before the Sanhedrin. If Jesus had injured people in this event, this could have been used

against him before Pilate and was not (More, 2019). Even in his moments of righteous anger, Jesus did not resort to physical means to correct people.

The last important aspect of answering this question is to examine how Jesus interacted with children. Jesus was known for boldly redefining social norms, which included treating children with dignity and value in a time where they were considered some of the lowest members in society (Thomas, 2016). While there are few instances in the Gospels to draw on, each one reveals important truths of how Jesus feels about children. For example:

- Value: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:37a, NIV)
- Love: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14, NIV)
- Protection: “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6, NIV)

All of these show that Jesus expected people to treat children with the utmost respect, and to take their well being seriously.

With this in mind, what would Jesus do? There is no way to answer this hypothetical question with certainty. However, when considering a more contextualized interpretation of Proverbs 13:24 as well as principles extracted from Jesus’ teachings about discipleship and children, it becomes apparent that corporal punishment does not align with the information available.

“But I Turned Out ‘Fine’”

After exploring the history of corporal punishment spanning over the course of multiple millenia, it is understandable why parents are reluctant to relinquish this practice. Perhaps the most common statement from those that support corporal punishment is, “I was spanked and I turned out fine”. In order for this to be a legitimate claim, one must define the standard that “fine” sets. For most people, they are referring to the fact that most people that were spanked can function in society as adults, respect authority, etc. However, if “fine” was viewed in a more holistic lens, more questions would arise. Does one have an open relationship with their parents/children? Does one struggle to trust in relationships? Does one act in anger or aggression when they feel out of control of a situation? The growing body of evidence and research that studies adults who were spanked as children show a clear trajectory of increased aggression, relationship and trust issues, mental anxiety and depression, and other undesirable effects (Spock, 2017). While it is likely true that many people were spanked as children and turned out “fine”, raising a child that can one day function in society is a low standard to aim for, and not what God had in mind for parenting.

Efficacy

The final point to evaluate in whether or not a parent should use corporal punishment is to explore whether or not it is an effective method of discipline. It is true that swatting someone, especially an adult to a child, gets their attention. However, this authority is short-lived. A study conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Gershoff that researched both the long and short term compliance rates in children who were spanked revealed alarming statistics about spanking and behavior modification. The first part of the study researched short-term compliance, and showed that

spanking was approximately equally effective to other forms of discipline, such as time out. More alarmingly, the part of the study that covered long term compliance reveals that children who were spanked did not show more positive behavior such as resistance to temptation, obedience to commands, and development of conscience (Gershoff, 2013).

If spanking is deemed to be ineffective and harmful by research, this creates a pressing moral dilemma for Christians who spank their children. Even in the little evidence that shows spanking is effective in the short term, to do so is to unnecessarily expose children to the many negative emotional consequences of this practice. And to rely on this practice for long term behavioral management denies children the opportunity to be positively and lovingly refined by their parents. If the command in Proverbs 13:24 instructs parents to discipline their children, and they employ an ineffective and harmful type of discipline, they are at great risk of misinterpreting the central idea of the verse, and not heeding the wisdom it offers.

Conclusion

After careful exploration of the practice of corporal punishment from ancient and modern perspectives, the consensus is clear: Christians should not spank their children, or use the Bible to justify doing so. The gentle rod in Proverbs 13:24 as well as examples from Jesus' life illustrates that children need to be lovingly corrected and disciplined, rather than physically chastised for their sin and ignorance. Spanking and gaining control of a small child's behavior is fleeting, and a day will soon come where a parent will not be able to spank them for their wrongdoings. Rather than training them to avoid being hit, nonphysical discipline encourages them to build a moral conscience and love for doing what is right. The absence of spanking

allows for parents to raise a child who is not “spoiled” at all, but rather attuned to God and His will, which will follow them all of the days of their life.

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