**Bible-Based Parenting: The Easy Way Out Is Not The Best Way – Food For Thought**

***When Using the Rod Is not Discipline***

Many Christian parents have long hung on to and strongly justified their use of physical punishment on children as Bible-centered. Many people however do not realize that the saying: “Spare the rod and spoil the child” is not in the Christian Bible. It is a secular proverb! Other statements about use of the rod however do occur in the OT, such as:

“*Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them*” (Proverbs 13:24)

“*Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die.*” (Proverbs 23:13)

“*A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother*” (Proverbs 29:15)

“*I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath*.” (Lamentations 3:1)

The most frequently used Hebrew word for “rod” is shebet or shabat, which means: rod, staff, club, scepter, or tribe. A different Hebrew word for “staff” (matteh or mattah) is used, apparently for a bigger staff or rod; that is, shaft, branch, or a tribe. It is the word used in the following text:

“So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and their leaders gave him twelve staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes, and Aaron’s staff was among them.” (Numbers 17:6) As an emblem of authority used to pick a helper for Moses one cannot conceive of this instrument as intended to give the people a thrashing.

As such it seems the Hebrew word, shebet, is used for corrective punishment of children (same as used by a shepherd with sheep and by God with us). It is not suggestive of an instrument for inflicting punishment to the level of suffering. In other words it is a means of guiding away from danger. So in the role of a guidance tool or as a call to obey a rule, the use of *shebet* is always explained and made clear. In this way the goal is clearly preventative as explained when the rule is first put in place as well as explained each time prior to applying the punishment for an infraction. This is the method God uses. The most famous example is His explanation about the Tree of Knowledge to Adam and Eve. From this account we learn that God describes what is not to happen and then states the consequence if the rule is broken:

“*And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day.*”

An aspect of this story Holy Spirit revealed to me was that death is not punishment from God but a logical consequence. Eating the forbidden fruit caused a severing of the life-sustaining link between mankind and God, which meant their death.

***The Old Testament vs. Today’s World***

In the Old and New Testaments however the rule of law was God’s Word, their bible; people believed that all aspects of their lives were under God’s direction and so they behaved in accordance with religious rules 24/7, understanding that nothing was out of God’s sight. Today, Christians do not live this way. As well, rules for the use of the rod occur almost exclusively in the OT. One problem in present-day parents putting this Biblical parental advice into modern day understanding or context is the potential for abuse outside of the constraint of God’s all-encompassing guidance. It’s great to say God would not approve of child abuse quoting in support:

“Fathers (Parents), do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” (Colossians 3:21)

Or:

“Fathers (Parents), do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Firstly, how seriously are these cautionary quotes taken by parents? Secondly moreover, Scripture acknowledges that there are conditions under which a Biblical rule can be applied improperly. For example, according to Paul:

“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8)

The passages quoted at the beginning of this article provide examples of situations in which many children may be at risk of abuse at the hands of unscrupulous or hot-tempered parents. Some may selectively use only those passages that they interpret as instruction from God, which support their cruel or undisciplined actions or they may be prone to misread them. In those circumstances who’s there to protect the child? Should we simply collectively respond to the situation of unprotected children with: “Ah well, too bad; Scripture must be obeyed regardless”? And then some people do not understand that training is not synonymous with beating.

Realistically, passages, which recommend use of physical punishment are not to be understood to mean: “Use the rod (physical punishment) and nothing else as the method of training a child”. They are not advising parents that it is wrong to use any other approach such as discussion, explanation or on the flip side to ever overlook wrongdoing during a child’s upbringing. To the contrary the Biblical message seems to be that it is critical when raising children to adulthood to give them proper discipline starting early in their life. As such a parent needs to use all available, reasonable tools to assist in this process of child rearing from early in the child’s life. Starting early may mean, from infancy. One can train a crawler about physical boundaries, for example. Does anyone believe that using the rod on a “misbehaving” crawler is Biblical? So there have to be guidelines for using this biblical advise. In principle, when appropriate, the rod is best applied as a tool of last resort. The humanity and self-control needed for this disciplinary practice however, does rely on the parent’s perception of their own discipline history. Therefore parents need to be objective and painstaking in that assessment, for it to contribute to a proper use this method.

Giving consideration to how to make physical punishment effective is important because a parent may or may not know whether the physical punishment is working but persists in using it anyway. Habit? It worked for them? They know no other way to discipline? Whatever may be the case using a disciplinary method that is ineffective, that is one not producing the desired result is not recommended. Even when effective a disciplinary method must be humane and safe. The “fallout” from pain-inflicting approaches that are deficient may do much harm by undermining the goal of producing a self-disciplined and adequately socialized adult who will become an effective parent. For example an unfair, rod-happy parent may be setting the child up to disrespect adult authority and values because they have not learned any consistent lessons as to why such punishment was fair or deserved. So they grow up believing in inflicting pain as a personal right and/or that might is right.

Appropriateness of the punishment depends on the age and capability of the child; the type, nature and clarity of the rule they broke; how or why the rule got broken; and the parent’s state of mind when the rule was first put in place and now. Observing these guidelines will help the parent to behave in a way that the child will understand the parent’s love, fairness and patience. Of course children facing physical punishment will look for loopholes to avoid experiencing the pain. Everyone, down to some animals, will do the same by nature. It is the parent’s duty to maintain consistency in establishing discipline in a child. Yes, parenting requires diligence. An undisciplined parent however cannot expect their child to be disciplined. In some cases such is the reason the rod becomes the indiscriminately used disciplinary tool. Unfortunately the destructive effects only show up “in disguise” much later in life.

It is to be borne in mind that the entire Book of Proverbs is just that: proverbs, wise advice, guiding principles, not rules. This is not to say the Book is not God’s Word or is not to be taken seriously. The passages used I this article mainly provide examples of why it is important not to let children grow up without self-disciple or a sense of accountability, guidance or structure. The context (place and time) in which God gave these pieces of parental advice was however steeped in physical ways of deterring non-conformity and of maintaining law and order. It was one in which using execution, chaining, flogging and stoning were acceptable means of enforcing law and order.

***What Are the Rules for Using the Rod?***

It is a different world we live in today in the West. God’s Word still stands; physical punishment is not out of the picture under biblical guiding principles. It is however not the primary method of discipline any more and is not required to be. The goal is to raise responsible God-fearing children. If other methods work well in certain situations why would it be wrong or anti-bible to use them to achieve this goal? The child will be damaged if you spare the rod and as well do nothing else and equally so beating the child along with using no other method of discipline will harm the child’s social development. The impairment in both cases will be observed from the playground to the workplace.

It needs to be pointed out that in the same book of Proverbs where admonitions to not neglect corporal punishment of children occurs there are several statements that the rod is just as effective on the body of adults. For example in Proverbs 10:13 the word shebet is used:

“*A wise person uses tactful speech; but the rod is for someone without commonsense*”. How often and strongly today would parents agree to be physically punished? And how often and strongly today does the church promote this method of correction for adults? Moreover the Book of Deuteronomy even describes how to apply corporal punishment on adults:

”*If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make them lie down and have them flogged in his presence with the number of lashes the crime deserves, but the judge must not impose more than forty lashes…* ” (Deut, 25:2-3)

Public flogging of adults is not an accepted practice today in this part of the world; or should it be because it is biblical?

The truth is that using punishment in general and physical punishment in particular as a training tool is probably the easy way out for some parents. Those people do not appear to care about applying any other disciplinary method, often arguing falsely that because it was good for them it is unquestionably good for their children. Undoubtedly there are examples of adult children who never or hardly received spanking and nevertheless progressed satisfactorily with their socialization and self-disciple. In 1 Corinthians 4:21 Paul asked:

“What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?”

It is interesting that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the OT, uses the same word for “rod” that’s used in Proverbs 10:13, which Paul uses here (rhabdos). Therefore even though Paul never recorded the people’s response, intuitively we know the wrongdoers in the quote most likely did not answer they preferred the rod. We also know that when we adults disobey, offend or wrong God He does not use punishment as the sole or even main means of correction. He also offers forgiveness, gives instruction and warning.

As Paul confessed to Timothy:

“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.” (1 Timothy 1:13)

***Disciple without the Rod***

When God dealt with the sin of the world it was not through punishing us for wrongdoing; and He has not continued to show His love for us by paradoxically punishing us without mercy. God did not take the easy way out! No matter how hard one looks one will never find a passage in which Christ says to us something like:

“With beatings I will show my love for you”

Paul says: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord ” (Romans 6:23). Death! Are we to practice this because it is biblical? The additional information in the rest of the verse tells about God’s merciful response to our sin. It seems therefore that the full context of a text, as much as we can find out about it, not a selected view, is of critical importance for proper interpretation. It is also instructive that in the Book of Hebrews an interpretation of how the discipline by God should be viewed connects discipline with love. The point here is that God talks of discipline, not beating, out of love. Discipline shares the same root as disciple, which means a pupil or learner, follower. The connotations of the Greek word for “discipline” includes “training and education, instruction; chastisement, correction”. All of these can be accomplished without including beating.

A YouTube video by the Food For Life Ministry presents a message from Father Mark Goring entitled: God is Just. It includes a description of his sincere and abundant love for his earthly father. He recalled a time when his father was angry with him and that in bed that night he felt heartache for making his father mad. Even in his anger his father did not use the rod on Fr. Goring. It is also remarkable that his reaction to his father’s displeasure was not to be defiant or angry. This is how the love relationship between father and son played out without a threat of disciplinary collapse in that priest’s upbringing. It seems that this pattern of parenting produced a well-behaved, socially conforming priest, which from his report is also true of his siblings. The regular or mandatory use of physical discipline did not appear to be necessary in that Christian family.

In a nutshell, the tendency to glorify, magnify or fixate on the bible’s advice on using the rod, without proper understanding, is itself not a biblical attitude. In the quote above (Ephesians 6:4) the Greek for “… do not provoke” means: Don’t be in their face pushing their buttons; and in the other passage, “…provoke…” (Colossians 3:21) it is: Don’t irritate or incite them; that is, by the relationship you have developed with them. These may be seen as boundaries for parents’ behavior towards their children that are to guide their understanding of the biblical requirement to teach children discipline.

The bible has other suggestions for parents. If children are to be raised properly all Biblical guidelines are important for Christian parents to follow with correct interpretation. For example in the same Bible that says:

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” (Proverbs 22:15) We also read:

“Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” (Proverbs 22:6) And advice on a way to equip children for proper development:

“My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck.” (Proverbs 3:21-22)

***The Bigger Picture of What Disciple Entails***

Finally, to summarize, parents need to recognize that discipline does not equal punishment of any kind or physical punishment in particular and must demonstrate this in their parenting style. Moreover they need to examine their own behavior to be certain that they are not guilty of punishing their children for the things they have taught the children by example, including non-exemplary statements they make to other people; or when they cause the discipline problem by their provocation.

Being heavily invested in biblical principles, parents need to study these principles and other related issues in the bible in order to apply them correctly. “Related issues” are those truths that apply to everyone including parents, since these are relevant to their parenting behavior. Though inconsistent with their embracing physical punishment on biblical grounds, it often seems many people think that certain biblical expectations do not apply to their relationships within their family, especially to their spouses and/or children. It is important however, for parents to apply these passages as well in the way they approach the raising of their children. Let’s look at three passages, paraphrased, with my addition in brackets:

“Make it easy for everyone (including your spouse and children) to see that you are reasonable in everything you do”.

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love (your spouse and children included).” (Ephesians 4:2) And:

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another (including your spouse and children), forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:31-32)

So to all parents, as you relate with and raise your children:

“… as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Colossians 3:12)