

“Should Christian Parents Spank Their Children?”

My wife shoved the list into my hand and off I went. Few, if any, husbands enjoy going to the grocery - I am no exception! Arriving at the local supermarket, I began the arduous task of finding the "listed items." My leisurely stroll up the vegetable aisle was abruptly terminated by a small child lying in my path kicking and smacking the floor like a WWE seasoned professional. A few feet away stood his parents having a conversation on their best strategy to persuade their little boy to exit the vegetable aisle. Dad lowered himself to the boy's level and tried reasoning, "Johnny, you're disturbing other people. Big boys don't act this way. Remember what we talked about before we came in. You won't get your candy if you don't get off the floor." Johnny was unmoved. Finally, dad scooped him up like a football and proceeded to the checkout with Johnny still kicking and screaming.

Many parents no longer view spanking as an option in training their children. Because of adverse media coverage, there is a growing number of Americans who are afraid to employ this "time-tested" tool. Who wants to be accused of child abuse? What parent searches for developmental techniques that may result in long-term psychological damage? So, spanking has fallen on the scrap pile of outdated methods.

Is There a Case for Spanking?

Most Americans would say, "Probably not." The public media frequently cites studies which attempt to link spanking with child abuse, violent crime and low self-esteem. However, there is a growing body of evidence which indicates the reverse. For example, an American Academy of Pediatrics conference on corporal punishment concluded spanking may be an effective tool in disciplining children. When Sweden outlawed spanking in 1979, reported incidents of child abuse actually increased 400% over a ten-year period (taken from "When to Spank" by Lynn Rosellini). Even those studies cited by the anti-spanking proponents are often seriously flawed due to their lack of considering other factors which may shape antisocial behavior.

Research is not the basis for a Christian's conclusion on the subject. A Christian's final "court of appeal" is the Bible. If the work done by social scientists conflicts with the clear teaching of Scripture, there is only one option for the Christian - he/she must accept biblical principles. So, the real question is: "What does the Bible say about spanking?"

The Bible and Spanking

The Bible's teaching on spanking can only be understood in the context of the Bible's teaching on the nature of humankind. All people are born sinful. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." What does that mean? Romans 3:11 says, "There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God." Men and women are born with a nature that rebels against God. They bristle at authority. Their primary goal is to govern themselves. They are self-centered, not God-centered.

It is hard for us to imagine the infant sleeping in his/her crib is a sinner, but it is true. David said, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Ps.51:5) Some well-meaning parents object, "You can't look at a newborn and see anything but innocence. How

could you possibly say a precious infant is a rebel against authority - a sinner?" First, it is the clear teaching of Scripture. Second, our experience confirms it. I have yet to see parents instructing their little ones on the art of throwing tantrums. It comes naturally. What parent ever taught a child to say, "Me first!" As captivated as we are with our children, we dare not allow our feelings to color the truth.

This brings us to the key question: "How do we remove the natural rebellion present in every child's heart?" Proverbs 22:15 says, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." The Bible recognizes it is impossible to "reason" with rebellion.

Why is there such a monumental conflict between modern-day social scientists and the Bible regarding spanking? Because modern-day social scientists hold a non-biblical view on the nature of a child. They believe children should be treated as "little adults" capable of understanding good and bad behavior, capable of being reasonably persuaded. They believe each child should choose his/her own path without strong interference from mom and dad. Behavior can be modified by techniques to motivate their thinking skills; such as, "time-outs" - a consequence designed to help little Susie analyze her disruptive behavior. The Bible shouts, "No!" The core problem is a rebellious nature. And rebellion demands stronger measures. Christian parents sometimes shudder at the thought of laying a hand to their children, "We love them so much. How could we spank them?" Scripture responds, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." (Prov. 13:24)

What about Abuse?

Some say spanking is a form of child abuse; that it teaches a child hitting is okay and solves problems. They contend that no adult should strike a child. Are they right? The Bible answers, "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope..." (Prov. 19:18) Again, in Proverbs 23:13-14 we read, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death." The Bible describes spanking as a disciplinary method used by a loving parent to achieve healthy results in a child. Spanking does not teach violence; rather, it produces wisdom - "The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother." (Prov. 29:15)

The Method of Spanking

It is important to view spanking in the total context of child development. While the Bible advocates corporal punishment, it also places stern restrictions on its use. When Jesus was teaching His disciples the nature of humility, He took a little child in His arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37) After witnessing His disciples turn away parents who brought their needy children to see Him, Christ declared, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mark 10:14) Could you imagine our Lord ever striking one of those children in anger? The Lord Who inspired the writer of Proverbs (Solomon), is the same Jesus Who tenderly cares for children. Spanking is one method by which parents are to instruct their children in the ways of God. It is that "last measure" reserved for displays of rebellion that defy all other measures. It

is the means employed when reasoning is impossible. It should always be exercised in love. The wayward child should be told how much he/she is loved before and after the punishment. Verbal instruction should surround the act. Spanking should never occur when a parent is angry. Two or three swats on the "rear end" or extremities (hands, legs) should be sufficient to drive the point home. No child should ever be struck in the head, back, stomach, chest or face. If a parent has a problem with "anger/self control", he/she should never spank.

Children are a precious gift from God. They should be treated as treasures loaned to us for safekeeping. Our responsibility is to polish the gems. The Lord will not tolerate abusing His treasure. Neither will He tolerate leaving His treasure to secure itself. Christian parents must lovingly shape their children according to God's standards. Occasionally, that shaping involves compassionate correction - spanking.

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