

Biblical Discipline: Conclusions

Before I post my conclusions based on my study, I want to say that some specific authors (esp. Pearl, Fugate, Ezzo, and Tripp) influenced my desire to do this in depth study. My experience in attending independent, fundamental churches since my youth (although we are not attending one now) is that preaching on child rearing usually lacked any kind of depth and sermons were filled with the "just whup 'em good that's what they need" philosophy. I've heard Prov. 20:30 used to justify abuse in the name of the Bible ("don't worry if you leave bruises when your child is being particularly stubborn... after all, the 'blueness of a wound brings cleansing"). Even though I felt we had a good balance in our parenting I still had a great unease in my spirit with some of the materials I had read and seen recommended in many conservative churches. For the most part, in the conservative churches I've attended (and in the recommended parenting resources) the philosophy taught with regard to corporal punishment/spanking/chastisement is that it is THE biblical way to remove foolishness from the heart of a child (or at least the best way to do so), and it should be the typical response to a lack of obedience in a child. In addition, parents who, for whatever reason, have decided not to spank their children are generally considered not to be practicing biblical parenting (in spite of how well-behaved the children may be).

As I did my study, it became apparent to me that going back to the Hebrew and Greek really did make a difference. I believe it is incumbent upon us to do our best to make sure we really know what God's Word says instead of just accepting what another person thinks it says. I have found in my study that the opinions of commentators vary just as widely as the opinions of authors who write parenting books. With that in mind, I have found that depending on any particular commentator is just as unreliable as depending on any particular parenting author. The most reliable study comes from researching the meaning of individual words and phrases in the original languages. Hebrew and Greek lexicons were the main source for my own study. The kind of study I did takes a lot of time and that is partially what kept me from digging deeper sooner. On top of that, I had this idea that since I didn't take linguistics or hermeneutics in college I wasn't able to do such a study. So without further ado, here is what I found and where I stand until I'm convinced otherwise.

First, I did a brief review of what constitutes proper hermeneutics with the help of a pastor and a book about hermeneutics. In addition, I also learned the difference between exegesis (deriving from the scriptures the meaning that the author intended to convey) and eisegesis (reading into the Scripture our own ideas). Here are the basic rules I found that appear to govern good interpretation of Scripture:

1. Interpret literally giving room for language that is obviously figurative or symbolic.
2. Understand the context of the historical and cultural background.
3. Analyze the linguistic structure, paying attention to grammar, syntax, vocabulary, etc.
4. Compare Scripture to Scripture.
5. Apply the passage practically.
6. Seek the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit.

I learned that there are things to avoid when attempting to interpret Scripture properly:

1. Avoid making my point at the price of proper interpretation--in other words don't simply go on a search for Bible verses that merely bolster my own opinion, experience, etc., but allow Scripture to shape my opinions, and color my experiences.
2. Avoid superficial study. Accurate interpretation takes a lot of hard work.
3. Avoid spiritualizing the text--don't allegorize or spiritualize unless the text itself calls for it.

Understanding the context of the book of Proverbs is essential to considering the "rod" verses contained within it. Proverbs is a compilation of short statements that convey a spiritual or moral truth. It is a book that passes on practical advice much like a father would to a son preparing to make his way in the world. As wisdom literature, the verses are not all meant to be taken literally, nor are they all commands--the proverbs are meant to be general principles--practical advice to help us use knowledge in daily living.

MY CONCLUSIONS:

1. I noticed while doing my study that there is a lack of continuity in thought in Proverbs. There is a lot of jumping around between topics and snippets of wisdom--so much so that it is hard to determine for sure which of the "rod" verses deal ONLY with child rearing or if any of them are a part of a greater context referring to the cultural codes for crime and punishment. A good example of this is Prov. 20:30 ("The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil: so do stripes the inward parts of the belly."). This verse is used by Pearl, Ezzo and Fugate as evidence or support for the fact that spanking children will remove their guilt for wrong doing, but upon careful examination, the verse does not support that. Cleanse in that verse (comes from tamruwq, tamruq, tamriyq: prop. a scouring, i.e. soap or perfumery for the bath; fig. a detergent) is only used one time in the OT, and hardly compares with the redemptive work of Christ that can literally absolve us from guilt and cleanse our soul (there are other words that are also translated "cleanse" that refer specifically to the concept of blood redemption). No physical act by any parent can do what Mike Pearl says a spanking can do. He says: "The parent holds in his hand (in the form of a little switch) the power to absolve the child of guilt, cleanse his soul, instruct his spirit, strengthen his resolve, and give him a fresh start through a confidence that indebtedness is paid. . . . In accompaniment with teaching, the properly administered spanking is as restorative as nothing else can be. . . . A child can be turned back from the road to hell through proper spankings." Why would Christian parents who desire to teach their child about the atonement that comes from the shed blood of Christ want to teach their child to think that his "indebtedness [for a wrong committed] is paid" by a spanking? Scripture reveals that what really removes guilt is repentance and confession of sin and "indebtedness" is released by the blood bought redemption of Christ. In contrast, Pearl's construct is a quasi works-based theology. In I John 1:9 we see that for the Christian confession and repentance brings continued forgiveness of sins. Theologians have referred to this continual confessing as maintaining a fellowship relationship with God. Look at all the examples of correction recorded in Scripture of where God brings correction to one of His own. We don't have any stories of spankings to refer to, but we do have other examples of correction (Jonah, David) where repentance followed correction. To state that NOTHING is as restorative as a spanking is not

supportable by Scripture, it is merely Pearl's opinion. Even if you give the benefit of the doubt and assume Pearl, Fugate and Ezzo are talking about "feelings of guilt," what if a child who receives a spanking does not believe himself to be in error? The spanking certainly isn't going to remove even a sense or feeling of guilt from him. The child must still confess and repent in order to have a clear conscience. In addition to the above stated concerns, Prov. 20:30 does not contain a clear reference to stripes for children.

2. Unlike those Christian authors who say the rod is merely figurative, I found that the word translated "rod" comes from shebet: meaning rod, staff, branch, offshoot, club, sceptre, or tribe. The rod is clearly set aside for punishment (thus exposing the falsehood of Mike Pearl's definition of it as only a "training tool" for swatting a child for each instance of undesired behavior). In Prov. 23:13 ("Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die"), the word beatest comes from: nakah-- to strike, smite, hit, beat, slay, or kill. That doesn't exactly fit in with the idea of a rod only used for comfort and gentle guidance or as an image of authority. That said, however, I've met few people who advise or use the "rod" as it was described in the Old Testament, both in description of the actual tool or in its application (the only clear example we have of application is from Deut. 25: 1-3).
3. There is a lack of consistency in the way different Hebrew words are translated. That means we are depending at least in part on how the translators made their decision. It is not clear to me from the context of the "rod" verses how the word na'ar should be translated (na'ar is the word translated "child" in the rod verses of Proverbs). There is just not enough context to know for sure the age of the child. Most of the time that word is translated "child" elsewhere in Scripture it refers to an older child past the age of weaning. I could only find a few instances out of the 238 times it is used where it referred to a baby. Why does the age of the child matter? For starters, advice in conservative churches and in the materials often recommended by them includes instruction to swat babies as young as six months old for behaviors like wiggling on the diaper changing pad. In addition, those same authors say that most spanking will happen in the early years and be completed as a correction tool by the time the child is somewhere around the early elementary years. In reality, this type of advice is based not on clear Scriptural instruction, but on the philosophies of behaviorism (operant conditioning). Some secular authors refer to this as behavior modification--negative stimulus decreases the incidence of the behavior, and positive stimulus increases the incidence of the desired behavior. While operant conditioning may be "successful" in increasing or decreasing the incidence of specific behaviors that doesn't mean that such advice is rooted in the "rod" passages of the Bible (I believe by-the-way, that even though he is a Christian, that Dobson's discipline techniques are primarily based in behaviorism). Further decreasing my comfort level with such advice is the fact that there are specific Hebrew words that clearly delineate baby, infant, nursing child, etc. in Scripture, and not once are any of them used in a context of physical punishment. Each time those words are used it is in a clear context of comfort or the nurturing care of a mother. Because during that time the typical age for weaning as far as we can tell is somewhere around 2-5 years (we know that Samuel was old enough to be left as a servant at the time of his weaning), it seems unlikely to me that there is a clear biblical command or mandate for spanking babies or toddlers. It is more likely that swatting or spanking babies and toddlers is nothing more than a cultural practice--neither commanded nor condemned in Scripture. There is no

evidence that this practice is even "commended" for use with young children in Scripture as Gary Ezzo states in *Growing Kids God's Way*. Further adding question to what age spanking is appropriate is a verse like Pr 22:15 (" Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."). The word foolishness comes from: 'eviyl [from an unused root (meaning to be perverse) be foolish, foolish] of one who despises wisdom, mocks when guilty, is quarrelsome, and is licentious. That definition leads me to believe that a child must be old enough to cognitively be able to choose or have those motives and that motive or intent is more important than the actual behavior itself in determining the most appropriate response to disobedience.

4. There is no example in Scripture of a child being chastised with a rod. Surely if it was a command or even a very strong commendation for it as THE way to remove foolishness, there would be some examples for us. Consider all the direct commands of God that DO have examples (examples of families/parents who taught their children the Scriptures, what happened when someone violated a command). While it is true that an example must not be given for a command to be valid, it is curious to me that there is no example of this practice being carried out. That fact decreases the ability to really understand the context of the proverbs in question and how they were to be applied--especially with regard to the age of the child.
5. Even the few NT passages that address chastisement lack clear reference to physical beating as opposed to the concept of admonishment or instruction (Heb 12:8 "But if ye be without chastisement [paideia], whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons"/ Heb 12:7 "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"/ Heb 12:11 "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."). The word translated "chastise" or a form of it comes from: Paideia--1. the whole training and education of children (which relates to the cultivation of mind and morals, and employs for this purpose now commands and admonitions, now reproof and punishment). It also includes the training and care of the body; and 2. whatever in adults also cultivates the soul, esp. by correcting mistakes and curbing passions, instruction which aims at increasing virtue, chastisement, and chastening, (of the evils with which God visits men for their amendment). Paideia is also translated chastening, nurture, instruction, and chastisement. Paideia comes from Paideuo--1. to train children, to be instructed or taught or learn, to cause one to learn, 2. to chastise, to chastise or castigate with words, to correct, of those who are molding the character of others by reproof and admonition of God, to chasten by the affliction of evils and calamities, to chastise with blows, to scourge, of a father punishing his son, of a judge ordering one to be scourged. Paideuo is also translated chasten, chastise, learn, teach, and instruct. Other passages containing the same word translated "chastisement" in Heb. 12:8, contain a different word chosen by the translators (see Eph. 6:4, II Tim. 3:16) for examples. There are other verses in Scripture where the word chastise is used that have no clear reference to physical punishment from God towards His children (as opposed to verses referring to actual stripes and the rod). For examples, see Lev. 26:28 ["Then I will walk contrary unto you also in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins." (chastise: yacar-- to chasten, discipline, instruct, admonish or to teach)]. Also see Deut. 22:18 ["And the elders of that city shall take that man and chastise him;" (yacar)]. This passage instructs the elders how

to treat a man who has slandered his bride (by saying she is not a virgin) when the father of the bride comes to them to complain. The next verse talks about assessing a fine on the slanderous husband and taking his wife away from him (unless the charge that she is not a virgin proves to be true). I Kings 12:11 ["And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." (yacar)] is obviously figurative language as the king was not saying he would use scorpions to physically beat or torture the people. Other references to see that do not clearly indicate physical punishment are: Ps. 6:1 ("O LORD, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.") and Prov. 3:11 ("My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction:").

6. I cannot reconcile from my study even a defense that the rod is THE only or even the best way to deal with punishing certain behaviors. That doesn't mean I view the use of spanking as a punishment to be wrong. As a matter of fact, I find that the Bible clearly sets chastisement aside as a possible response for rebellion (the Hebrew word for foolishness in Prov. 22:15 is certainly NOT silliness or childishness). To be consistent in translation, however, chastisement as a response to rebellion does not seem to be applicable to very young children, but to older youths and young men. I also see from my study that God responds to rebellion in other ways so I don't think He intends for us to believe or teach that there should only be one response to rebellion (I'm sure our children are glad we do not follow the command from Exodus 21:15 and 17 and Deuteronomy 21:18-21 to stone a child who will not repent!). To suggest that only one response is appropriate for rebellion is to suggest that God Himself is at fault in the correction of His children. Consider all the examples in Scripture where God allowed a period of time to pass before He even responded to disobedience (ex. Joseph's brothers, Balaam, David and Bathsheeba, Sodom and Gomorrah). Of course there were other times that His response was prompt and decisive (ex. Lot's wife, Annanias and Sapphira, Jonah). What IS clear is that rebellion should not be tolerated (among other things like disrespect, lying, etc.) and our focus should not be on teaching others necessarily HOW to deal with those behaviors (as in prescribing a universal one way approach) but that parents should respond. I continue to believe from doing this study that permissive parents (if they are Christians) are going to be exceedingly sad when called to be accountable for how they trained their children. In addition, if a parent decides to use the rod as a response to foolishness or rebellion, then that places a heavy responsibility on them to be sure that the behavior is actually foolish and not just childish or immature. Otherwise, a parent risks violating Eph. 6:4 by using a punishment that doesn't fit the crime. Also important in the equation is that as parents we must know our child thoroughly. It seems likely that God's differing responses to disobedience are not just a matter of making an example of someone, or only that He knew the motives of the heart, but also because He knows the inner man and what will work best to accomplish submission in the life of a believer.
7. One last comment--the books that I've read on parenting that focus heavily on punishment as a response to disobedience are ignoring the critical TO DO list of parenting. To bring our children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord goes so far beyond how we punish or respond to disobedience (which is not always synonymous with rebellion). We need to be immersing our kids in God's Word at an early age. Teaching and instructing our children in the ways of the Lord involves "line upon line and precept upon precept." It also involves us as parents leading and teaching by example

that we are going to follow the precepts of God's Word too. The most important part of parenting is not our response to our child's behavior per se, but our own heart's relationship with God. If we are not wholly submitted to and reliant upon Him, then we will lack the discernment and character needed to help bring our children into a submitted relationship with God. A parent who excels in the outward control of their child's behavior is not necessarily going to produce a godly child. Our greatest concern should be the heart of our child, not merely the external control of their behavior through the means of secular behaviorism techniques. On the other extreme, the books that I've read on parenting that focus heavily on the emotional bonding of parenting or the relational aspect of parenting seem to lack in providing parents who are searching with good tools or ideas for responding to challenging behavior from children. Honestly, it seems to me that there are too many books out there that are nothing but a pendulum swing from another approach or method.

Other Notes:

*Some of the Hebrew words that are translated "child" in the KJV (I left out words that referred only to a firstborn child, being with child, etc.)

1. yanaq--to suckle, nurse, suck (used 32 times): suck 14, nurse 7, suckling 6, sucking child 3, milch 1, nursing mothers 1
2. `owl--suckling, sucking child (used 2 times): sucking child 1, infant 1
3. valad--child, offspring (used 2 times): child 2
4. na'ar-- a boy, lad, servant, youth, retainer (used 238 times): young man 76, servant 54, child 44, lad 33, young 15, children 7, youth 6, babe 1, boys 1, young 1
5. no'ar--youth, boyhood, early life (used 4 times): child 2, youth 2
6. `owl--child, boy (used 20 times): children 13, infant 3, babes 2, child 1, little ones 1
7. gamal--to deal fully with, to wean a child, to be weaned, to ripen, bear ripe (used 37 times): wean 10, reward 8, dealt bountifully 4, do 4, bestowed 2, recompense 2, weaned child 2, do good 1, requite 1, ripening 1, served 1, yielded 1

Study Tools for this essay

1. New Testament Greek lexicon based on Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary
2. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
3. The Old Testament Hebrew lexicon is Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Lexicon
4. Theological Word Book of the Old Testament
5. Strong's Concordance
6. King James Version of the Holy Bible
7. Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology
8. Smith's Bible Dictionary
9. Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction by Elliot Johnson (plus some other notes on hermeneutics by a pastor)

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