

***Question: Do the biblical proverbs say that a child should be beaten with a rod? Would Jesus actually endorse that kind of disciplinary punishment?***

Tragically, some people have taken a few statements from the Old Testament book of Proverbs and misused them to justify cruel and abusive actions toward children. The biblical proverbs do mention the use of the “rod” of discipline four times. For example, we are told: “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15; cf. Proverbs 13:24 and 29:15). However, some translations of Proverbs 23:13-14 do say: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you beat him with the rod, he will not die. Beat him with the rod and save his soul from death.” Instead of “beating,” other Bible translations speak of “punishing” or “spanking.”

In today’s culture, “beating” is a cruel and abusive act. This is not what the writer of the biblical proverbs had in mind. The word translated “child” encompasses everything from an infant to a young man or woman almost old enough to marry. I find it difficult to believe that the writer of these proverbs had in mind the use of a “rod” on a young child.

Appropriate discipline of children is vital to their protection and development physically, intellectually and spiritually. That is the primary objective of the proverbs in question; but to properly understand these proverbs, we need to understand the nature of the proverbs, examine the actual words and interpret these statements along with others in the Book of Proverbs. The Proverbs are statements of general truths that have been derived from life’s experiences. They are not statements of law like “Thou shall not steal.” In other words, no one has been commanded to use spanking or “beating with a rod” as a form of punishment. These proverbs on punishment of children should never be used to justify abusive discipline.

In addition, these proverbs are addressed to parents who exercise their discipline only from hearts of love, not to others. For example, Proverbs 13:24 says: “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Other proverbs point out that “anger is cruel and fury overwhelming” (Proverbs 27:4), and that a “patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly”

(Proverbs 14:29). Therefore, wisdom suggests that a loving parent should never strike a child in a moment of anger. Instead, he should patiently wait and determine the most appropriate discipline depending on the age of each child and the nature of this child's wrongful behavior. Often a well-spoken verbal rebuke from a trusted and beloved parent can be more powerful in bringing about a change in behavior than physical punishment. Proverbs 25:15 says, "Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone."

In light of the above, I believe that Jesus would suggest to us that there can be two extremes. One extreme is found in the parenting that resorts to physical punishment as the primary form of discipline. This discipline may often be administered quickly in a moment of anger as opposed to patiently weighing the best interests of the child's future development. This kind of discipline usually results in an embittered and resentful child who may think that the way to deal with disagreement is by use of abusive force. The New Testament says, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4; cf. Colossians 3:21).

The other extreme says that physical punishment is never an option. The proverbs teach the importance of disciplining our own children in love to keep them safe from harm. In fact, the primary emphasis in the proverbs that speak of physical punishment is on the need for discipline and not on the means of discipline. However, there are situations in which spanking can be appropriate after all other efforts at instruction and correction have been exhausted. Even then, Jesus would never justify angry, unloving and cruel abuse of a child under any circumstances. In the final analysis, loving and thoughtful discipline is the only real option for the gentle Jesus who welcomed children into his presence.

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