

## Preaching the Rod of Discipline in an Age of Abuse

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### Division of Culture

For many generations, corporal punishment remained an integral element of discipline. I remember Dad's belt well. And at Grandma's house, flies breathed a sigh of relief when she turned the attention of her swatter to my behind rather than to their window sill. Today, though, more and more parents choose or feel forced to choose discipline methods other than spanking.

The question of spanking divides American culture. Many parenting experts applaud the move away from corporal punishment as signaling the end to an outdated and abusive practice. In 2006, the Committee on the Rights of the Child approved the total prohibition of physical punishment including "any form of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse to include chastisement within the family environment." The CRC declared corporal punishment as "violent and humiliating" as well as "cruel and degrading."<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Patrick Lenta call for criminalizing corporal punishment, even within the home.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, most Americans believe that corporal punishment is acceptable and at times needed. A Harris poll in August 2013 revealed that 81% of American parents consider that spanking is sometimes appropriate for children.<sup>3</sup>

The sharp divide on spanking carries over into the Christian community as well. Al Mohler asks: "Does the Bible instruct parents to spank their children? The answer to that must be an emphatic, Yes." He argues that to ban spanking is to put "parental authority under assault."<sup>4</sup> Popular parenting books such as *Motherwise* by Denise Glenn, *To Train Up a Child* by Michael and Debi Pearl, and the classic *Dare to Discipline* by James Dobson all encourage spanking as a necessary part of parental discipline. Yet, other Christian experts demand parents stop corporal punishment completely. Nadin Block of the *National Catholic Reporter* calls for a total ban on paddling: "all corporal punishment of children should be ended, even in homes, through education and legal

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (Forty-second Session. Geneva, May 15 – June 2, 2006), Articles 19, 28, paragraphs 2 and 37.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Lenta. "Corporal Punishment of Children." *Social Theory and Practice* (October 2012): 689-716.

<sup>3</sup> The Harris Poll of 2,286 adults surveyed online between August 14 and 19, 2013 by Harris Interactive. Results published at [www.theharrispoll.com](http://www.theharrispoll.com) September 26, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> [albertmohler.com](http://albertmohler.com). June 22, 2004. Should Spanking Be Banned? Parental Authority Under Assault.

reform.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Eric Andrae, writing for *Lutheran Forum*, argues for parents to protect children from violence by avoiding corporal punishment.<sup>6</sup> *Christianity Today* takes a reluctant position:

Some Christian parents will advocate corporal punishment until the peaceable kingdom arrives. But such means should be employed miles short of abuse, without anger, and as an absolute last resort. Given the risks involved—children's bodies are more fragile than an angry adult can fathom—we encourage parents to explore more creative and effective ways to train up our children in the way they should go.<sup>7</sup>

This sea of conflicting views swirls through the pews every Sunday. Pastors who seek to remain anchored in the Scriptures yet desire to launch out to reach our culture seemingly must choose between the two. If we faithfully preach the Word, do we demand or deny spanking?

### **Positions on the Key Biblical Texts: Corporal Punishment Absent from Scripture**

Scholars like Eric Andrae argue that the biblical text never permitted corporal punishment. “There is no example of corporal punishment in all of Scripture.” “Rather, in light of the parental role of protection from violence, while still employing discipline, it is more legitimate to discourage and even avoid corporal punishment.”<sup>8</sup>

Andrae argues that the term for “rod” either refers to discipline broadly or is used metaphorically of divine discipline. The focus is primarily on Proverbs 13:24, 23:13-14, and Hebrews 12:6:

He who spares the rod hates his son,  
but he who loves him is careful to discipline him. (13:24)<sup>9</sup>

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. (23:13-14)

Because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. (12:6)

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<sup>5</sup> “Catholics Should Take Lead in Banning Paddling” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 27-April 9, 2015): 4A.

<sup>6</sup> “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child? Spare Me!” *Lutheran Forum* (Summer 2014): 12-16.

<sup>7</sup> “Where We Stand: Thou Shalt Not Abuse” *Christianity Today* (January 2012): 55.

<sup>8</sup> Andrae, 13, 15.

<sup>9</sup> NIV (1984) is used throughout Scripture quotations.

Concerning the two proverbs texts, Andrae concludes that the use of the more general term “discipline” (מִוְסָר) in the parallel lines determines the meaning of “rod” (טֶבֶט). Thus the rod refers not to corporal punishment, but to all parental discipline. He links the rod here with the use of טֶבֶט in Psalm 23:4 to describe the shepherd’s rod. He then translates Proverbs 13:24:<sup>10</sup>

He who withholds support from his son hates him;  
But he who loves him is diligent to discipline him by instruction, training,  
nurture and care.

The metaphorical use of “rod” undermines corporal punishment support in Hebrews 12:6 and Old Testament divine judgment passages (Isa 10:5; Lam 3:1; i.e.), argues Andrae. Similar to the parallelism argument in the Proverbs texts, he posits that a figurative use eliminates any suggestion of a literal implication.

This view misapplies both the usage of parallelism and the significance of metaphoric language. Parallel term relationships comprise a range of complex categories. Adele Berlin demonstrates that the links between parallel terms fall into categories of morphological, syntactical, lexical or phonological.<sup>11</sup> Within each of these categories are many potential relationships between two parallel terms. Andrae chooses one term (discipline) to define the other (rod). Many other possibilities exist.

The “rod” likely symbolizes a method within a parent’s discipline. Keil and Delitzsch conclude in Proverbs 13:24, “the rod represents here the means of punishment.”<sup>12</sup> So in this saying, the rod represents a method of achieving discipline. This relationship matches the usage of the “rod” in 29:15 where “the rod of correction imparts wisdom” and the “rod of discipline” drives folly from the heart of a child (22:15). In 23:14, it is the “rod” that saves a child from death.”

A metaphoric use of a term does not eliminate its potential literal significance. If biblical authors use the “rod” figuratively of God’s or man’s judgments, that use does not eliminate its possible support of corporal punishment. Andrae argues that the “punishment” (μαστιγῶω) in Hebrews 12:6 “must be understood metaphorically” as God’s discipline “which at all times points to something good and which He always works for our benefit. It is never a punishment.” However, though the term is clearly figurative here, it is used seven times in the New Testament. The other six are literal punishments.<sup>13</sup> The author of Hebrews

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<sup>10</sup> Andrae, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev.ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans): 1985.

<sup>12</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 6: 287.

<sup>13</sup> See Matt 10:17, 20:19, 23:34; Mark 10:34; Luke 18:32 and John 19:1.

here employs a term for physical punishment to describe a beneficial aspect of God's discipline in believers' lives. This punishment (μαστιγῶω) is portrayed as producing temporal pain, but yielding long-term profit (12:11). This chastisement is meted out by a loving father (12:6). If Hebrews' author opposed corporal punishment, why would he utilize this image as a positive description of a loving God?

### **Corporal Punishment Present but Fading in Scripture.**

William Webb followed *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* with *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*.<sup>14</sup> He attempts to employ the same Redemptive-Movement hermeneutic on corporal punishment texts as he did on gender texts in his previous book. Webb focuses on the Proverbs texts on the rod as well as the punishment texts of Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 25.

Webb begins his work by surveying how “two-smacks-max”<sup>15</sup> proponents have already moved beyond the biblical text. He highlights seven ways in which “pro-spankers” go beyond the “specific teachings about corporal punishment found in the Bible.”<sup>16</sup>

1. Age Limitations.
2. Number of Strokes.
3. Bodily Location.
4. Resultant Wounds.
5. Instrument of Discipline.
6. Frequency of Beatings.
7. Parental Emotive Disposition.

In each of these seven areas, Webb claims that “pro-spankers” have invoked restrictions that are foreign to the biblical texts. He applauds their “intuitive sense of moral and ethical virtue” that moves “beyond the Bible biblically.”<sup>17</sup>

The thrust of his argument is that the Bible improved on the ethics of the unbelieving world around it. For example, Deuteronomy 25:1-3 limited beatings of guilty parties to forty blows. Egyptian texts of the time prescribed one hundred to two hundred blows for similar offenses.<sup>18</sup> So the Bible reflected a gentler and more dignified approach to punishment. For

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<sup>14</sup> William Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic) 2011.

<sup>15</sup> His pejorative phrase used throughout the book.

<sup>16</sup> Webb, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Webb, 80.

Webb, this biblical ethic is not the higher ethic believers should follow today, but is the start of a trend we must pursue. As the Bible improved on the ethics of the surrounding culture, so we should improve on the ethics of the Bible. He concludes that following this trajectory, “Christians are under a moral obligation to leave behind two-smacks-max and embrace an alternative-discipline-only option.”<sup>19</sup>

Though Webb’s approach raises broader hermeneutical concerns,<sup>20</sup> two key elements regarding corporal punishment must be addressed here. First, Webb wrongly combines proverbs concerning the judicial punishment of adults with parental punishment of children. He rightly argues that the Scriptures never assign a specific age limitation to corporal punishment. But then he fails to distinguish between the punishments meted out by the government to adults and the discipline carried out by parents for children. For example, he argues that if the rod of discipline is used to drive folly from the heart of a child (Prov. 22:15) and a rod is for the back of a fool (Prov. 26:3), then the punishment must be identical.<sup>21</sup> Further, he takes the forty-lash limit to direct judges in Deuteronomy 25:3 and the death penalty for the rebellious son in Deuteronomy 21:18-21 as assumed guides for parental discipline.<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 25 establishes the maximum flogging penalty for an adult criminal. Deuteronomy 21 describes capital punishment carried out by city leaders on a son who has established himself as unrelenting and rebellious. The text describes him as refusing all parental discipline. In both cases, civil leaders mete out the punishment. These are not parental discipline texts. The parental discipline texts in Proverbs will be addressed in detail below.

A second issue with the trajectory approach is a muddling of hermeneutical steps. Webb seems to build a straw man argument by confusing culturally-specific application statements with interpretation. As noted above, he accuses (actually praises) “pro-spankers” of going beyond the Bible by recommending age limits, stroke limits, bodily location, etc. He concludes their interpretation has already gone beyond the Scripture. However, a pastor preaching on the Lucan passages of Jesus’ prayer discipline may call on his congregation to commit to thirty minutes of prayer of each morning. That is a specific application within the bounds of the meaning of the biblical text, not the interpretation. When James Dobson recommends no more than two swats and suggests graduated frequency based on age, he is

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<sup>19</sup> Webb, 137.

<sup>20</sup> A full discussion of Webb’s troubling hermeneutic is beyond the scope of this paper. See Wayne Grudem, “Review Article: Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2004): 299-346; and Gary Derickson, “Book Review: Women, Slaves and the Gender Debate” *Dedicated* (March 20, 2015). Accessed via <http://blogs.corban.edu/ministry/>.

<sup>21</sup> Webb, 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

attempting application relevant to our culture and flowing from the meaning of the Scripture. To say that he has “moved beyond the Bible” is misleading. Webb, on the other hand, happily moves beyond the Word by arguing that the Scripture’s approval of corporal punishment represents a milepost on the way to rejecting it. Dobson specifies from the text, while Webb nullifies the text.

### **Corporal Punishment Passages All for Parenting**

Some who hold that the Scripture supports corporal punishment apply all Proverbs’ “rod” texts to parenting. Michael and Debi Pearl, founders of the popular parenting ministry No Greater Joy discuss in detail the reasons for and the practice of spanking. They build their case on the expected texts of Proverbs 13:24, 22:15, 23:13-14 and 29:15. However, they also include passages describing harsher punishment, such as 20:30:

The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil:  
So do stripes the inward parts of the belly.<sup>23</sup>

This and similar passages seem to allow for punishment that would be considered abuse today. The bruises and scars describe a discipline that leaves long-term or perhaps even permanent marks. Similarly, *Motherwise* includes 20:30 as well as 26:3:<sup>24</sup>

A whip for the horse,  
A bridle for the donkey,  
And a rod for the back of fools.

This passage clearly uses the rod terminology, but does not specify a parenting discipline context. Compiling all proverbs with the term “rod” without considering potential contextual distinctions may prevent one from discerning wisdom for parents from that for civic leaders.

Just as Webb wrongly combines passages on slavery with wisdom texts on parenting, so this view blends disparate categories within wisdom literature itself. It jumps to conclude that if a passage includes the rod, then it must refer to parental discipline.

The book of Proverbs contains wisdom for many life contexts. Its wisdom reaches from our businesses to our bedrooms, and from our finances to our friendships. It offers a host of proverbs for both parents and princes.<sup>25</sup> A term in one context may signify something quite different in another setting. For instance, crown terminology figuratively describes the

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<sup>23</sup> Michael and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child* (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy, 1984) 46. Note: This book has gone to twenty printings as of 2010, selling more than 650,000 copies.

<sup>24</sup> Denise Glen, *Motherwise: Wisdom for Mothers* (Houston: Winning Walk Family, 1997) 230-1.

<sup>25</sup> For government leader proverbs, see for example, Prov. 16:10; 17:7; 20:8, 26, 28; 25:2-5; 28:15-16; 29:4, 12, 14.

blessing of a faithful wife, grandchildren and gray hair (Prov. 12:4; 16:31; 17:6), yet also describes the passing nature of a leader's power (Prov. 27:24). The shift from family to leadership context shifted the usage of the term. Similarly, the "rod" may represent two distinct types of punishment within Proverbs.

Proverbs uses "rod" and similar terms as means of punishments in two different realms. The harsher punishments do not belong to parenting. A closer look at these sayings reveals that Proverbs describes a different rod for a parent than for a magistrate.

### **Toward a Solution: Differentiating Parental Discipline and Civil Punishment**

A superficial reading of all proverbial sayings on corporal punishment might lead one to conclude that Proverbs supports brutal parental discipline. That is the argument of Webb and the unintentional implication of many parenting programs. However, when this collection is examined, a pattern emerges of two separate settings. The following proverbs clearly specify a parental context:

He who spares the rod hates his son,  
     but he who loves him is careful to discipline. (13:24)

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

Do not withhold discipline from a child;  
     if you strike him with the rod, he will not die.

Strike him with the rod  
     and save his soul from death. (23:13-14)

The rod of correction imparts wisdom,  
     but a child left to himself disgraces his mother. (29:15)

The following proverbs also describe a physical punishment, but do not specify a parental context.

Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning,  
     but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment. (10:13)

A fool's talk brings a rod to his back,  
     but the lips of the wise protect them. (14:3)

A rebuke impresses a man of discernment  
     more than a hundred strikes a fool. (17:10)

It is not good to punish an innocent man,  
     or to strike officials for their integrity. (17:26)

Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence;  
     rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge. (19:25)

Penalties are prepared for mockers,

and beatings for the backs of fools. (19:29)  
 Blows and wounds cleanse away evil,  
 and beatings purge the inmost being. (20:30)  
 A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey,  
 and a rod for the back of fools. (26:3)

The two groups of proverbs share two very common terms: “rod” and “strike.”<sup>26</sup> However, the second group contains statements of severity not found in the parenting sayings. First, Proverbs 17:10 uses brutal hyperbole to show the moral inertia of a fool. The Law limited lashes to forty (Deut. 25:3), yet a hundred fail to move a fool. Second, the use of “back” is found only in the second category. “Back” (גַּב) is found elsewhere in contexts of harsh punishment:

I offered my back to those who beat me,  
 my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
 I did not hide my face  
 from mocking and spitting. (Isa 50:6)  
 I will put it into the hands of your tormentors,  
 who said to you,  
 Fall prostrate that we may walk over you.  
 And you made your back like the ground,  
 like a street to be walked over. (Isa 51:23)

Third, in Proverbs 20:30 the terms “blows,” “wounds” and “beatings” all portray severe retributions. “Blows” (חַבּוּרָה) is “one of several terms relating to serious tissue trauma described as wounds, in which the skin was ruptured, blood was lost, and organs or limbs were disabled or destroyed.”<sup>27</sup> This family of terms includes the other two terms of harm in the saying (מַכָּה and פְּצָע). Fourth, Proverbs 19:29 pairs “beatings” (מִהַלְמוֹת from הִלַּם) with “penalties” (שְׁפָט). The root הִלַּם describes actions such as a trampling by horses (Judg. 5:22), the nailing by Jael (Judg. 5:26) and the smashing of the Temple (Ps 74:6). All connote severity. Another distinction is the use of civil language in this category of sayings.

The term “penalties” in 19:29 (שְׁפָט from שָׁפַט) is the common term (found 202 times throughout the OT) signifying civil judgment. Its other four uses in Proverbs clearly point to government settings:

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<sup>26</sup> “Rod” (שֵׁבֶט) is used 190 times in 178 passages to describe instruments including a shepherd’s rod (Psa. 23:4), soldiers’ weapon (2 Sam 18:14) and a king’s scepter (Gen 49:10). “Strike” (נָכָה) is used 500 times in 461 passages to signify concepts such as physical striking (common), contracting a disease (1 Sam 5:12), and clapping hands (2 Kgs 11:12).

<sup>27</sup> חַבּוּרָה in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 4.



By me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. (8:16)

If a wise man goes to court with a fool, (29:9)

If a king judges the poor with fairness, (29:14)

Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor, (31:9)

To sum up, the parental chastisement proverbs focus on punishment as an element of discipline and correction. They share the broad terms of “strike” and “rod,” but do not incorporate the harsher terms found in the second group of sayings. This second group, while also employing “rod” and “strike” terminology, intensifies the punishment with terms of much more severe beating. They also connect more clearly with civil punishments than with parental discipline.

Proverbs, then, describes parental corporal punishment in general terms lacking the language of severity found in civil punishment, and in a setting of broader corrective discipline. In order to clearly grasp the role of corporal punishment, one must understand this broader discipline in parenting.

### **Corporal Punishment as an Aspect of Parenting in Proverbs**

Spanking is not parental discipline. It represents a single element within a broader strategy prescribed in Proverbs.

Parenting in Proverbs builds on several central truths. The goal of parenting, positively stated, is to train children in the way of wisdom and righteousness (10:1; 23:25, 24). However, folly, deeply rooted in a child’s nature, throws obstacles into the path of wisdom (22:15). Left unchecked, that folly will drive a youth to disaster, perhaps even premature death (19:18). So parents must employ a variety of strategies to instruct and guide their children. Those strategies must shape but not break the child’s spirit (17:22; 18:14).

*Positive Instruction:* The foundational element of parenting is that they must first build their training on the positive way their children should go. The instruction of mothers and fathers serves as an adornment to the lives of offspring (1:8-9). Wise parental instruction leads a child to a reverential knowledge of Yahweh (2:1-5). Receiving that teaching yields a long and prosperous life with an admirable reputation (3:1-4). Section One in Proverbs’ parenting manual is positive impartation of the virtues comprising biblical wisdom (4:1-7).

*Indirect Warning:* Part of parental guidance comprises indirectly warning children by pointing out negative examples. The classic example is the father and son observing the demise of the simple in the arms of the adulteress (7:5-23). The son sees the seduction as well as the devastation. Ideally, the child matures to the point of self-learning from the

mistakes of others (i.e. 24:30-34). These warnings by examples often incorporate direct warnings as well.

*Direct Warning:* Parents also provide direct warnings about life. Financial mistakes must be corrected immediately (6:1-5). Drunkards and gluttons with their wanton dissipation must be avoided (23:19-21). Fathers and mothers guide by calling children to seek virtues and to avoid ungodly vices.

*Rebuke:* Proverbs contains many references describing the benefit of rebuke. Verbal correction can open a child to receive instruction (1:23, 25; 25:12). It also serves as the preceding intervention before physical punishment.

*Corporal Punishment:* The next to last step of discipline is physical chastisement. Chastisement stems from a loving parent (13:24) who refuses to allow neglect to ruin a child (29:15). Rather than sharing the severity of civil punishment, it actually serves to prevent the loss of a life to foolishness (23:13-14). This loss of life may result from the natural consequences of foolishness (11:19; 13:14) or from capital punishment.

*Civil Punishment:* Civil authorities mete out harsher punishment than parents. Punishment had to match the crime (Deut. 25:3), but included up to forty lashes or even death (cf. Gen 9:6). If a child had spurned all parental discipline and demonstrated an incurable rebellion, parents were to submit the child to the city elders. The elders then could stone the rebel to death (Deut. 21:18-21).

So then, corporal punishment is far from the only method of parental discipline. It is one of the later resorts in a range of strategies. It also falls short of the severity of civil punishment for criminals.

## **Conclusion**

The rod of discipline cannot be removed from Proverbs' description of parental guidance. Proverbs affirms it as an integral element of child training. Hermeneutical approaches that argue that corporal punishment was never a part of Scripture or was intended to be rejected by later generations fail to adequately represent the Word. Physical discipline is affirmed by the use of it to describe God's loving correction in Hebrews 12:6.

Hermeneutical approaches must also distinguish between the parental discipline proverbs and civil punishment sayings. The failure to see this difference opens the door to misunderstanding parental discipline as abusive. Only the government has the authority to mete out the harshest punishments.

Physical chastisement must also be understood in the broad context of parenting. Parenting comprises so much more than spanking. Spanking should come only after other methods have failed.

*Application to Preaching:* If Proverbs includes spanking in parenting, then how does one wisely preach the practice? With child abuse filling the news, we cannot risk miscommunication. Three suggestions help us speak with clarity on this crucial issue.

*Paint the Whole Picture:* As noted above, spanking is only part of parenting. Preach it all. And start with the call for parents to be righteous themselves. Love should always fill our parenting (Prov. 3:3). Anger should never accompany discipline (29:11). Righteousness should serve as the goal of discipline (Prov. 11). Our parenting should be “nurture and admonition of the Lord” and should not “exasperate” our children (Eph. 6:4; Col 3:21).

*Preach with Discernment:* The picture of the drunkard flailing a proverb like a thornbush (Prov. 26:9) ought to remind pastors that even the truth can wound the congregation if preached foolishly. Expositors ought to know their congregational parents well enough to communicate the truth of loving discipline in ways that will prevent child abuse.

*Address Abuse:* One way to prevent parental discipline from degenerating into child abuse is to address the damaging presence of abuse today, even within Christian families. Take news reports of abuse as opportunities to clarify what loving discipline looks like versus when punishment turns abusive.

As ministers enslaved to the Lord to declare His Word and to love His Family, we ought to preach corporal punishment administered with the grace and mercy we have received.