

Materials for the Faith Community

The following materials can be used in congregation newsletters, religious education classes, discussion groups, and for homilies and sermons. They address the fact that the Bible is often quoted to support hitting children. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is the most quoted biblical endorsement, even though these words do not appear in any Christian Bible. They are simply a phrase from a poem by Samuel Butler, written in 1664.

All of the biblical quotations advocating corporal punishment of children are taken from the book of Proverbs in the King James Version of the Bible. They were written by King Solomon, and presumably reflected his parenting beliefs with respect to his own son.

Proverbs 13:24

"He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes (diligently)."

Proverbs 19:18

"Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying."

Proverbs 22:15

"Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."

Proverbs 23:13

"Withhold no correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die."

Proverbs 23:14

"Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell (Shoel)."

Proverbs 29:15

"The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame."

The Bible itself records the negative effect of Solomon's parenting style on his son, Rehoboam. He became a widely hated ruler after his father's death and had to leave to avoid assassination by his own people.

What would Jesus do?

If you take the Bible seriously, you have to notice Jesus' attitude toward children. It was wise, loving, and filled with compassion. Even when anxious adults wanted to shoo the children away, Jesus rebuked the adults. "Of such," he said, "is the kingdom of heaven." Given this attitude, it's hard to conceive of Jesus hitting a child on any occasion or for any reason. It's simply not consistent with what he taught. If Jesus wouldn't hit a child, why would we? SpankOut Day is dedicated to exploring alternate means of discipline. We believe that Jesus would approve. A simple slogan for Christians to consider might be this: the next time you are tempted to hit a child, ask yourself "What would Jesus do?" Then go and do likewise.

*Submitted by Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Sagendorf,
retired Methodist Minister, Hamilton, Indiana*

Wisdom from the Talmud

Many people who strike their children do so not because they are evil or mean, but because they believe they are doing God's will. They often cite the phrase in Proverbs: "He who spares the rod hates his son." The problem is that pulling one line out of the Bible ignores the rest of the text. Much of the Book of Proverbs is filled with good counsel on how to be a better person. In Chapter 22 we are taught, "Train a child in the way he should behave, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it." Isn't it possible that the rod Proverbs refers to is to be used to point to lessons on the wall? When we fail to properly educate our children, we not only spoil them, we show them the opposite of love. We must use the rod to point out right from wrong, not to beat our children into submission the way slaves have been beaten throughout history. Even the Talmud says, "If you must strike a child, do so only with a shoelace." When taken in its entirety, Judaism can hardly sanction the use of violence against children. Even the famous sentence in Deuteronomy to stone to death the stubborn and rebellious son, was, according to the Talmud, never carried out. Instead, while discipline was and still is crucial for raising healthy children, striking a child need never occur. The mix of discipline and love is the recipe for a good future for our sons and daughters. The Talmud suggests: "A child should be pushed aside with the left hand, and drawn closer with the right hand."

*Rabbi Larry Kaplan
Temple Israel, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania*

The Law or the Spirit?

In the book *Spare the Child*, Philip Greven suggests that our readiness as fathers to strike our sons explains why we men grow up so ready not only to tolerate but to perpetrate violence in our culture. A boy picks up his moral cues from Dad: "Dad hits me when he doesn't like what I have done. Therefore, men resolve differences by violence. If Dad did it, it's OK. I can hit people myself, especially when I think they've done wrong and therefore deserve it." Often a boy who has been spanked won't respond later to love, but only to more spanking. The Law, that is, has supplanted the Spirit within him. God's story of Israel says clearly that a son lost in the Law can be restored to appreciate and respond to a relationship with the Father only through crucifixion. In this case, that might mean the father's dying to his pride and asking the child's forgiveness, then begging Jesus to show him whatever brokenness in himself has led him to resort to the Law and how to become hospitable again to his Spirit's rule.

Reverend Gordon Dalbey, Santa Barbara, CA

*Author of *Fight Like a Man* and leader in the Christian men's movement*

*Quoted with permission from *Fight Like a Man**

Baha'i Training of Children

"Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance. Let them put forth every effort in this regard, for when the bough is green and tender it will grow in whatever way ye train it. Therefore is it incumbent upon the mothers to rear their little ones even as a gardener tendeth his young plants. Let them strive by day and by night to establish within their children faith and certitude, the fear of God, the love of the Beloved of the worlds, and all good qualities and traits. Whensoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary. It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse."

Selections from 'Abdu'l-Baha, page 125, quote #95, submitted by Randy Cox, Little Rock, AR

Christianity ~ A Living, Growing Faith

Remember the beautiful picture of creation in the Sistine Chapel which shows God the Father stretching out his hand to touch the finger of Adam? A parent's hand should likewise always be seen as extended in love. The outstretched hand should never cause a child to flinch in fear of a blow. Jesus taught the children with love and affection.

Let the ancient misused line about "spare the rod and spoil the child" be discarded with other horror stories of old testament days, and terrible misinterpretations of Christian beliefs and practices. Catholicism -- Christianity -- is a living, growing faith and body of teaching -- addressing new and changing conditions and situations. Faith is intertwined with the ever-changing culture of the times. It is interpreted and applied as our knowledge and the promptings of God's grace direct us from one century or millennium to the next. Because certain interpretations or practices were permitted in the past with the apparent blessing or even active collaboration of the church or other religious leaders, does not mean that God cannot enlighten us further in this time.

Churches used to bless war. Popes and bishops used to lead armies. They even used to preside at hangings, beheadings, whippings, and burnings at the stake. Thank God, no longer! God continues to guide and direct his church through his grace and inspiration. So when the church preaches against capital punishment, corporal punishment of students, and even spanking of children, don't say the church is going against its teachings in the past, rather recognize that the church is learning along with each of us through continuing divine revelation. This is the way our faith and moral teachings grow.

Father Alan Sprenger, (deceased)

Father Sprenger was the Director of Syntaxis Youth Homes, Gahanna, Ohio

Suffer the Little Children

Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Mark 10:14) And Jesus warned, "It were better for him if a millstone were hanged around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should offend one of these little ones." (Luke 17:2) Jesus does not advocate throwing child abusers into the sea with millstones around their necks, he just says it would be better for them if it happened.

There are some who cite the bible to populate our schools and homes with rods and paddles. But they were very silent on the subject of millstones. Instead of force and fear, Jesus would bring forth the Divine Power that lay within, for man was made in the image of God. "Be ye perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:18)... "Seek and ye shall find...Call and it shall be answered...Knock and it shall be opened." (Matthew 7:7)

And Jesus asks, "Of what man is there of you who, if his son asks for bread, would give him a stone?" (Matthew 7:9) Yet, for hundreds of years, in the schools of avowedly Christian nations, youths who sought the bread of education were given the stone of corporal punishment.

Excerpt from The Bible and the Rod, by Adah Mauier and James Wallerstein

What Does the Bible Say?

*Submitted by Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Sagendorf,
retired Methodist Minister, Hamilton, Indiana*

As a pastor, I'm often asked about what the Bible says about the way we should live our daily lives. For example, how should we discipline our children? What about spanking? My answer is clear. I can find no sanction in the teaching of Jesus or the witness of the New Testament to encourage the practice of corporal punishment... at home, at school, or anywhere else.

Some take an opposite view, often quoting Old Testament scriptures to prove their point. Those who employ this method frequently misunderstand and misuse scripture. A similar method of selective reading could just as easily be used to justify slavery, suppression of women, polygamy, incest and infanticide. Much of what poses as biblical grounding for corporal punishment is really secular thinking wrapped in religious language. It does not stand the test of what Jesus said and taught. Consider the following:

1. **Jesus was overwhelmingly committed to non-violent response**, even in situations of high stress and conflict. Corporal punishment is a violent act against a child's body. It is not a response which is consistent with what Jesus demonstrated.
2. **Jesus was committed to the beauty, sanctity, innocence and life-giving character of children.** "Unless you become like a child," he said, "you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It is hard to imagine that Jesus would sanction the practice of hitting those in whose very presence the kingdom is made real.
3. **Jesus was committed to love and forgiveness as both the means and the end of all human relationships.** These two qualities form the very foundation of his ministry. An action such as spanking which is clearly intended to cause pain hardly qualifies for what Jesus would call an "act of love."

For these reasons, I am convinced that corporal punishment is opposed to biblical teaching. People of faith are encouraged to find different methods to provide structure and direction for their children's lives. **Discipline is important!** Children must learn how to be accountable. But when parents hit children, no matter what the pretext, the opposite often happens. Instead of learning values, children simply observe the capacity to be mean and harmful. Fear and resentment follow.

Parents who work to establish a gentle and non-violent environment will find good results. Nurtured in an atmosphere free from fear and threat, children will be able to better learn and embody the values which are most important.

Spare the Rod . . . Spoil the Child

An excerpt from Michael Jost, M.Div., LMSW

Assumptions are very dangerous in human relationships. They allow us to carry the same mistakes from generation to generation. They fool us into thinking that we truly know something, when in reality, we don't know it at all.

The statement, "Spare the rod -- Spoil the child" is one that most people assume deals with corporal punishment. It is not about beating!

This saying comes from a Proverb which reads, "Those who spare the rod {*shebet*} hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them." (Proverbs 13:24, NRSV1). The Hebrew word here is "*shebet*" that can be translated scepter or staff. If a rod for beating was meant here, the more direct term of "*muwcar*" would have made the meaning clearer.

So, what is this "*shebet*"? As noted above it can mean a scepter or a staff as in a shepherd's staff. It is a sign of authority and a tool to shepherd the sheep. According to Easton's Bible Dictionary, "the scepter originated in the idea that the ruler was a *shepherd of his people*."

What does being a shepherd entail? The earliest meaning in the Bible is that a shepherd is one who cares for his/her sheep: "But made his own people to go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. And he led them on safely, so that they feared not: but the sea overwhelmed their enemies." (Psalm 78:52-53) As parents we are to guide our children in the wilderness of the modern world. We need to provide them with a set of values and with ways of approaching life that has integrity and respect for others as a cornerstone. We certainly don't do that by beating them. A shepherd who beats his/her sheep, will have no flock. The sheep will run from his/her voice and flee from his/her calling.

But what about the second part of the Proverb? That phrase about "discipline" can be also misunderstood. For some people, the only concept of discipline which comes to mind is vengeful and punishing. Its sole purpose is to break a child's spirit. This kind of parent confuses the fear that their children have of them with respect which they think they deserve. What they do not understand is that fear drives out respect. Respect is earned through loving interaction, not with beatings.

So what does "discipline" mean? One only needs to look at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs to find the definition: "For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity..." (Proverbs 1:2-3). The Hebrew word used for discipline in the proverb is used here for instruction. Discipline has to do with teaching, not beating.

We parents are the shepherds for our children. By applying the rod of protection, guidance, care, and nurturance, we can guide them into adulthood. But if we spare the rod, children are abandoned to their own devices and limited experiences for guidance.

Discipline is about instruction, not beatings. A child cannot listen to someone he/she is afraid of. Lessons cannot be integrated by one who is in shock from having been struck. What they learn is distrust, fear, and violence.

It's funny how much wiser our parents get as we grow older. Fifty years ago my father wrote, "You wouldn't take a hammer to a television set that doesn't work anymore, so why beat up a child that is much more delicately adjusted?"¹ He got the point, I only hope other parents can too.

All quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹ Hudson Jost, quoted in the weekly news magazine, *Quick*, vol. 5, No. 11, September 10, 1951, p. 23.