

The Bible and Discipline

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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.

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.