

The Rod of Guidance

by Sue Hille

A phrase often bantered about as though it were sacred is "spare the rod and spoil the child." That is not a quotation from the Bible, but is based on Proverbs 13:24, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son, but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." (K.J.V.) There are people who use this verse as a mandate for corporal punishment of their children. Is that what the Bible really teaches?

Scripture is often quoted, misquoted, or applied in a manner contrary to its intent because the words and/or the context of their use are not understood. Portions of the Bible taken out of context have been used to substantiate both sides of a given argument. Poor scholarship may be the culprit. One of the most popular portions of the Bible is Psalm 23. Verse four of that Psalm states: "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The assurance of comfort is not easily reconciled with corporal punishment.

The Hebrew word for rod used in both the Psalms and Proverbs passages is "shabat." A shabat is specifically the rod used by a shepherd in caring for sheep. The shabat has five common practical uses: 1) it is the symbol of the shepherd's guardianship of the sheep; 2) it can be thrown with great accuracy just beyond the wandering sheep to send the animal scurrying back to the flock; 3) the shabat can be used to ward off an intruder and protect the sheep from any animals which may attack; 4) the sheep are counted as they "pass under the rod;" 5) it is used to part the wool in order to examine the sheep for disease, wounds or defects which may be treated. There is no evidence that the rod is ever used to physically strike the sheep.

Professor E. Johnson, a Biblical scholar and prestigious writer, states, "The rod may stand as a figure for all correction, firm yet kindly discipline and instruction." (John, E.; Funk and Wagnalls' Pulpit Commentary, Volume 9, page 263.) We could interpolate the five uses of the shepherd's shabat into parental guidelines thus: 1) Security—the child knows he/she is loved, cared for, accepted; 2) Guidance—the loving parent will teach the child and keep him/her from going astray; 3) Protection—the parent will not let outsiders hurt the child; 4) Evaluation—the child will be "counted" and progress will be monitored; 5) Diagnosis—the parent will look for signs of anxiety or pain in the child and seek out treatment and healing.

The rod is a comfort to the sheep. Loving, firm discipline can be a comfort to the child. In the second half of Proverbs 13:24, the Hebrew word given as "chasteneth" in the KJV, "yasar," is more accurately translated "disciplines." Yasar has both a positive and negative connotation, each equally balanced. It does mean "to chasten, correct, punish," but it also means "to admonish, exhort (build up), instruct." The use of yasar in the verse injects a thought of love and a thought of appropriateness.

W. Clarkson speaks to the well-moderated correction of love which should be: 1) carefully related to the offense; 2) never administered in the heat of temper, rather in the calmness of conviction; 3) free from physical violence—possibly a look of reproach, a scolding, or a wisely chosen exclusion from some appreciated privilege; 4) fair, always leaning over in consideration of the child, for he states that one unjust infliction will do more harm than many just ones will do good; 5) occasional and of brief duration, since nothing defeats its own purpose more certainly than perpetual fault-finding, constantly repeated punishment, or penalty that is too severe.

W. Clarkson is not a child psychologist, educator, or counselor as his writing might indicate. He is a Bible scholar. The preceding paragraph was taken from his commentary on Proverbs 23:14.

Let those who are eager to follow Biblical principle not forget the words addressed to fathers in Colossians 3:21, "Do not provoke your children to anger lest they be discouraged." The original Greek word which is translated "discouraged" implies a broken spirit. This has been called "the plague of youth." Discipline must always be balanced with encouragement. That is a good principle of child psychology. That is a good principle of Judeo-Christian teaching.

That is a good principle.

(Special thanks to the following reference sources: Dr. Howard Bedmond, Whitworth College; The New Layman's Parallel Bible, The Funk and Wagnalls Pulpit Commentary; The Barclay Study Bible Series, Phillip Keller's A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23.)

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