To Spank or Not to Spank?
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This article is limited in its scope. Its goal is to answer the question, ‘Should we as Christians spank our children as a part of the discipline process?’ In order to provide a more complete picture regarding the issue of spanking, two more articles will be necessary. The follow up article to this one will focus on considerations as to what types of behavior merit being disciplined through spanking. Then, to somewhat complete the picture, an article is needed to examine God-honoring guidelines as to how we should go about the whole process.

Why is there controversy surrounding the issue of spanking? Maybe, there is a bigger question that needs to be asked: Why is the disciplining of children even necessary – especially if they are born good, or at the very least, born with a tabula rasa (blank slate)? Certainly, there would be isolated incidences of children misbehaving, but this would be the exception, not the norm. So why do we find, whatever country or culture we examine, disobedient children?

Much of the controversy might be averted if there was a clear, definitive answer to the question ‘Is my child naturally good or naturally evil?’ Just look at that cute little thing: Cooing; smiling; giggling; bright eyes and unbridled enthusiasm. That child must be naturally good. But the Bible, and even our own experience (time will reveal this), says children are naturally evil, just like the rest of us. No one needs to teach them how to do wrong. It’s genetic. They are born sinners (Romans 5:12; Psalm 51:5).

Why even mention being born into sin? Because if we don’t recognize the seriousness of the core problem, we will struggle with the effort that goes into the remedy. Not only is no one born good, but no one seeks to do good (Rom. 3:10-12; 8:7). The situation becomes bleaker the more we examine it.

Real, lasting, heart-change cannot happen until the child trusts Christ as his/her personal Lord and Savior. This being the case, parents initially play a governmental role in their child’s life – the restraining of evil. But they also play a spiritual role – leading their child to an understanding that a remedy exists for his condition – salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Trusting Christ as Savior will not magically transform your child into a perfectly obedient child, but it will provide your child with the ability to overcome sin through the power of God (1 Cor. 10:13). It is with these foundational truths that we enter our discussion.

Because God’s Word is inerrant, and His complete revelation to us until He returns, we must look to it for insight on all matters – including spanking. We must interpret God’s Word correctly to know if spanking was merely for a particular era in redemptive history, or necessary as long as sin remains on the earth. If we believe that spanking is an outdated form of discipline, what would lead us to that conclusion?

If it was meant for only a brief moment in history, why did God not provide a replacement option? Were those privileged with the task of writing the New Testament so naïve as to not think of time-outs, removal of privileges, groundings, or natural consequences? Have children changed? Are today’s children free from folly?
Although statistics should not be a guide as to how Christians should live, they, at times, can be quite telling. Robert Surgenor’s book, *No Fear: A Police Officer’s Perspective*, details his theory that children that are never spanked by their parents grow up to be defiant. According to records, “Thirty years ago, arrests of children for assaulting their parents was almost unheard of.” The Uniform Crime Report, which includes domestic violence offenses committed by youngsters in the family reported a “348 percent increase in children committing domestic violence offenses.” This was in the short span of fifteen years (1983-1998). Does anyone doubt this percentage has increased exponentially since 1998?

In his city, Surgenor conducts lengthy investigations in every case where a child physically attacks mom or dad. He found that “only 1.9 percent of all children who physically attack their parents have ever been spanked!” Surgenor concludes, “children who are never spanked grow up without any fear of authority. No fear of their parents. No fear of their teachers. No fear of the police or the judge. No fear of God.”

Those opposed to spanking point to cases of misuse as evidence that spanking is wrong. But, misuse by some should not cause us to abandon the practice. Regularly, news outlets decry the misuse of prescription medication, but does this mean we abandon the proper use of medicine? Of course not! The same is true with spanking.

Modern sensitivities tell us spanking seems harsh. It hurts the child. They won’t understand. The list of possible reasons is pretty much endless. But do we think this way about spanking because that is what God tells us about spanking, or because of what some psychologist wrote in the 1960’s? God talks about disciplining His children in His Word. The one thing we can clearly understand is, God’s discipline is serious! Anyone in his right mind would prefer a spanking over being disciplined by God (Prov. 15:10; Heb. 12:5-6; et al).

Oftentimes, parents use spanking when nothing else has worked. If you spank as a last resort, you are admitting that you are at the end of your rope. Generally speaking, this means you are angry and in no frame of mind to spank your child properly. The opportunity to use your child’s disobedience as a teachable moment has been lost. You, as a parent, now have a sin issue to deal with.

Just so there is no misunderstanding, spanking is not for all discipline situations. Scripture discusses disciplining a child without mentioning “the rod” (Prov. 15:5; 19:18; 29:17; Hebrews 12:7-11), but it never provides any other specific form of discipline than spanking. In other words, when Scripture cites a specific discipline method for children, it is always spanking.

There are many today who look at “the rod” in Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; and 29:15 as a metaphor for any kind of discipline. This thinking, though, does not emerge from a proper interpretation of the text. A natural reading of the text makes it quite difficult to conclude this is what the author meant by his use of “the rod.” “The rod” as metaphor emerged historically quite recently. Some modern study Bibles have unfortunately even gone so far as to include a note expressing, “Rod: Probably a figure of speech for discipline of any kind.” Remember! Study notes, as helpful as they oftentimes are, are not Scripture and should not be treated as such.
Let us examine just one of the passages that deal with this issue:

*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* (Proverbs 23:13-14 NIV).

*Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol* (Proverbs 23:13-14 NASB).

The highlighted words in each of these versions comes from the Hebrew word which means “to smite.” It is clear that Scripture is describing spanking and not merely using a metaphor to describe discipline in general.

According to God’s Word, the purpose of disciplining our children through spanking is to…

- Demonstrate that we love them. To spare them (from spanking) exhibits hatred toward our children (Prov. 13:24). Our culture communicates that spanking is cruel and reveals a hatred toward them; this is the very opposite of what the Scriptures teach.
- Drive folly (a lack of good sense, understanding, or foresight) far from them (Prov. 22:15). Folly is such a serious consequence of being born into sin (cf. Prov. 14:8; 17:12; 19:3; 24:9; and 27:22) that it must be dealt with in a serious manner. Words, time-outs, groundings, and natural consequences are not sufficient to drive folly out of a child.
- Spare them an early death as a result of foolishness (Prov. 23:13-14). Children must be taught to obey. In this, folly is driven far from them and they can experience the truism of Ephesians 6:1-3 (“long life on the earth”). Folly that leads to an early death has been removed from the obedient child who honors his father and mother.
- Impart wisdom to them (Prov. 29:15). This is the flip-side to the other verses discussed. In driving out folly, the child gains wisdom.

Spanking is one of many means to demonstrate to your child that you believe God’s Word. When spanking becomes necessary, you communicate the choice your child made to bring matters to this point, as well as the remedy Scripture provides to that behavior. In this way, God’s Word is exalted and the seriousness of sin is established.

Spanking, when done properly by loving parents, is such a mild form of pain in comparison to the heartache and excruciating pain that results from living a foolish life. Let us not abandon God’s directives on matters of such importance!