

"Spoil the Rod and Spare the Child!"

or, "a study on how not to read scripture"

by

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Wise Bible readers know that it is perilous to pluck a passage out of its proper context, as the following examples show –

- Sally felt that the words of 2 Kg 9:20 (“he drives furiously”) were given to her by God as a promise that he would pay for a car that she could use in visiting needy people. Only with difficulty was she persuaded from plunging her family into debt. But because she did yield to good sense, a few months later someone gave her a car!
- Andrew approached his senior pastor and said God had told him to take over the church. His justification? The Lord, he said, had drawn his attention to De 28:13, “You will be the head, not the tail!” Unhappily for him, the pastor had somehow failed to receive the same message, so that Andrew not only lost the church but also his job, and left the town in disgrace.
- Thomas asked his pastor to marry him to a young lady who was a committed Christian. He said God had shown them they should marry, by “giving” them 1 Ti 5:14. The pastor, knowing they were unsuited to each other, declined to conduct the service. They went off to another church, were married there, but barely twelve months later were bitterly divorced.

The common mistake of those people, and of many others like them, was that of plucking a Bible passage out of its context and applying it to a situation with which it had at best only a tenuous connection.

(A) A SIMPLE SOLUTION

- (1) Every passage must be understood within the framework
 - (a) of the *chapter* in which it is found; then
 - (b) of the place of that chapter within the *book*; then
 - (c) of the place of that book in the *Bible*.
- (2) Note the following examples, which could be multiplied many times —

(a) Compare Pr 22:29 with Ec 9:11. Scripture and life, we soon discover, do not always work out the way we think they will! Often the undeserving flourish while the diligent languish.

(b) Compare Pr 12:21 with *Job*. Despite the bold confidence expressed in the Proverb, many of the righteous *are* crushed by sorrow. How can this be? It is simply because the promises of prosperity and happiness are rather like the laws of sowing and reaping. Normally the harvest is predictable, and the crops abundant; but many things can ruin the farmer's hopes: a poor season, pestilence, insects; etc.

(c) Would you say that Pr 18:22 is always true, even in scripture, let alone life? (Note also Pr 21:9; etc.) And think, too, about Ps 34:19-20.

(d) Many parents have vainly trusted Pr 22:6. They forgot that the Bible also contains passages such as Ez 18:5-17, which show that a righteous man can sire an ungodly son. Note also Pr 17:25; 10:1,5; 13:1; 15:20; 28:7; De 21:18-21; Is 1:2; etc.

(e) Compare De 15:4 with vs. 7; and 29:5-6 with 25:17-18; etc.

(f) Would you take Mk 9:43-48 literally? Perhaps a similar caution is warranted when you are reading other parts of scripture!

(g) There is a need to observe context, culture, and other necessary factors before applying a passage of scripture to the modern world. This can be demonstrated by citing the problem of the *corporal punishment of children*. A young mother in Melbourne was put on trial for child abuse. She had beaten her two young children (aged 7 years and 3 years) with a metre-long rosewood cane. She argued in court that "the Bible says the hand is only for love, and a child should be disciplined with a rod."⁽¹⁾ Her lawyer supported her case by quoting *Proverbs*,⁽²⁾ whose message can be summed up in the 17th-century English aphorism, "*Spare the rod and spoil the child.*"⁽³⁾ The judge was unimpressed; the young mother was convicted of child abuse and fined (with a warning that another offence would put her in prison), and the police solemnly burned the cane.

(3) Now whether or not it is a right thing (or a righteous thing) to inflict corporal punishment upon a young child, I will not judge here.⁽⁴⁾ But I will say this: to use *Proverbs* to justify physical violence is foolish. Such claims are based upon the false assumption that children held the same place in the social structure of ancient Israel as they do in our culture. Rather, children were allowed about the same status as slaves, and were treated accordingly.

Hence the punishment for a rebellious child was the same as that specified for a recalcitrant slave (for example, see *Sirach* 42:1c,5b; 30:1,8-13, which echoes the language of a master and slave relationship, and reflects also the various references in *Proverbs*). (If you don't have a copy of *Sirach*, you can find one at several different web sites, including –

<http://christianity.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?once=true&site=http://unbound.biola.edu>

The position of children had improved by the time of Jesus, but not much (cp. Mt 18:2-4; and note that Christ was not pointing to the child as a picture of charming innocence, which is how we tend to read the scene, but as an example of helpless weakness, of humble status, of a person who lacked any rights).

Only in gradual response to Paul's teaching did the outlook for children begin to improve dramatically. The great apostle took hold of the three lowest levels of society (*wives, children,*

and *slaves*), and insisted that they be accorded full honour and fair dealing (see, among other references, Cl 3:18-4:1).

Yet even Paul, as a man of his times, did not hesitate to use the slave analogy in relation to children (Ga 4:1-5).

For further comment by Sirach see 3:7 ("*serve his parents as his masters*"); 7:20-26, where livestock, slaves, wives, sons, are treated equally and dispassionately as a man's private property; 33:25-30, where the same whip prescribed for rebellious sons is recommended for stubborn slaves (and note also his casual use of the term in connection with wisdom; 22:6; 23:2; and cp. also vs. 10-11).

Proverbs and Fools

Notice that the same harsh penalty (flogging) was prescribed in *Proverbs* for those whom the writer designates merely as fools see 10:13; 14:3; 17:10; 18:6; 19:25,29; 20:30; 26:3.

Why don't literalists quote such passages? The reason often has far more to do with cultural mores than it does with hermeneutics.

So we are confronted by the confusion of someone saying: "I am a Christian, so *of course* I oppose both slavery and the flogging of grown-up people! I am a Christian, so *of course* I believe in taking the strap to a little child!"

Both claims are justified from scripture; albeit by a deplorable inconsistency in reading the sacred page.⁽⁵⁾ Hermeneutics ought at least to make us consistent in the way we interpret scripture!

In the case before us, it is not reasonable to use *Proverbs* to sanction the use of a rod on *children* unless one also approves its use on *adults* ; including grown-ups who are merely *fools*.

Further, if it is proper to read the child-beating verses literally, then consistency demands that we obey also the injunctions to

- stone to death drunken sons (De 21:18-21)
- burn at the stake adulterous daughters (Le 21:9; and cp. 20:14; Ge 38:24), and
- stone to death common adulterers (De 22:20-24).

Shall we practise also the several other gruesome punishments⁽⁶⁾ that are prescribed in scripture for various crimes? How absurd!

But if *those* sanctions cannot be literally obeyed today, why is the command to flog a disobedient child given such immutable authority?

Either accord *all* or *none* of them authority, but at least be consistent.

If we cannot take the injunctions to use corporal punishment *literally*, how then *should* we read them? Do they have any meaning at all?

Underlying every passage of scripture there is some eternal and unchanging principle (Ma 3:6), which remains applicable to every generation. In the case of the references to corporal punishment (whether of children or of adults), that principle is *the divine requirement of an orderly society* (cp. Ro 13:4; 1 Ti 2:1-3; etc). The Lord looks for well-run homes and a peaceful, prosperous, and law-abiding community. How that mandate for public discipline

and order is fulfilled will vary from generation to generation and from culture to culture. In Bible times, the goal was achieved by the rod and the lash. We may hope today to achieve the same goal by more gentle, and more Christian, means.

There are, of course, promises that *are* absolute, and remain so even within the larger context of the whole Bible, such as the promise of salvation (cp. He 6:18).

So a sound principle is the “*whole-part-whole*” method: that is, study the *whole*, then the *part*, then the *whole* again

[1] The first of those two claims of course has no biblical warrant; the second, as the following paragraphs will show, has scarcely any more validity.

[2] For example, 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:15.

[3] Coined by the English satirist Samuel Butler (1612-1680), paraphrasing Pr 22:15; 23:13-14; etc.

[4] We need to distinguish between what is required for good child-rearing by the surrounding culture, or by sociology or psychology (which may or may not include moderate corporal punishment), and what is actually required by scripture. So in answer to the question, “Does the Bible *command* the use of the rod in Christian homes?” I would reply unequivocally, “No!” Then to the question, “Does the Bible *permit* the use of the rod in a Christian home?” I would reply more equivocally, “Perhaps!”

[5] I think the sentiment expressed by the American author and humorist, Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936), is more appropriate. Taking the part of an Irishman (“Mr Dooley”), Dunne is conversing with a fellow Irishman, Mr Hennessy: “Spare th’ rod an’ spile th’ child,” said Mr Hennessy. “Yes,” said Mr Dooley, “but don’ t spare th’ rod an ye spile th’ rod, th’ child, an’ th’ child’ s father.” (From Dissertations by Mr Dooley: On Corporal Punishment [1906]).

[6] Such as mutilations, brandings, harrowings, and the like. For an example see De 25:11-12; along with Ex 21:25; Le 24:19-20; De 19:21; etc.