

No Beating, Please

By Barrington H. Brennen, June 8, 2011

Why should we beat our children? Does the Bible really teach that parents are to “beat” their children? Does “spare the rod, spoil the child (Proverbs 13:24)” really mean that we should indiscriminately whip our children into a frenzy? Does it mean that parents are required to physically punish their disobedient children routinely with a belt, a stick, or a pad? I have observed in The Bahamas and in the Caribbean islands I’ve visited and where I or other health professionals have conducted parenting seminars, when we present the subject of physical punishment, parents cannot objectively discuss it. Their minds are fixated on “what they have been taught or experienced,” or “what works for them.” These parents cannot free the minds of dysfunctional traditions to evaluate objectively and rationally their relevancy in the current environment. Thus we have a locked-in or emotionally crippled society where the chains of unreasonable traditions severely restrict intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional growth. No wonder violence is running loose like an enraged dog who escaped from his cage!

So much violence exists in our society because too many parents are violent themselves. Children emulate parental behavior. Research tell us that when the only response or the very first response to disobedient behavior is always, “let me get that stick,” the chances of producing violent children is greater than for those who use reason and minimal physical punishment.

The Bahamas is one of the nations in the region where parents are holding on rigidly to traditional forms of punishment believing it is scriptural or effective. Teenage rebellion, teenage pregnancy, and pre-adolescence violence are higher than it has ever been in spite of all the beating that is administered. So why still beat? We need to review our strategies. I believe that one reason so many still use “beating” as a form of punishment is because it is easy to apply and requires very little thinking and behavior modification skill. Parents who only resort to physical punishment do not engage reason to transform undesirable behavior. Thus, punishment has limited or no long-term redemptive value.

“DAD, IT’S NOT WORKING”

I have great difficulty reasoning with parents who prefer to stick to the “good old days” of harsh, unreasonable methods of punishment. Even when it is steering them right in the face that the physical punishment is not working, their only response is “perhaps I am not beating hard or long enough.” They still continue, even when their own teenage child is telling them: “Dad, that’s not working.” It is as though these parents have lost all ability to reason. I am often surprised when I hear even highly educated people defend “violent” behavior as a healthy form of child discipline because “nothing bad happened to them.” This is when tradition takes precedence over reason. This is when a society moves from personal discipline and becomes chaotic.

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

As I have written in previous articles, many parents do not understand the difference between punishment and discipline, and they do not want to be taught anything about it. Although some form of punishment is needed when raising children, parents must be aware that no punishment is effective without discipline and reason. What is discipline? Discipline is teaching and modeling moral values. Discipline is an attitude. Discipline is self-control. Discipline is intrinsic or internal. Discipline is establishing and maintaining a well-structured home environment with sensible rules and guidelines to govern one’s behavior. For example, there are set bed and meal times. On the other hand, punishment is extrinsic – only external. If a parent beats a child for stealing cookies, but there is no bed time and the child has not been taught explicitly that stealing is wrong, then most likely there is no discipline in the home.

NO BEATING LAWS ARE NEEDED

Many argue ignorantly that the social problems in the United States exist because corporal punishment is illegal. This is not true. Although there has been some opposition to corporal punishment in the United States, the spanking of children is still legal in all states. The law prohibits some kinds of physically punishment that could be forms of abuse. In other words that law prohibits “beating.”

Socially, there is nothing positive about the word “beat.” The dictionary defines “beat” as “to strike forcefully and repeatedly” or “to hit (a person or animal) repeatedly so as to cause painful injury.” Globally, world social leaders are very much concerned about child abuse and the severer use of corporal punishment—beating. The Bahamas is one of the countries where a significant part of the population is stubbornly holding on to the negative traditions of corporal punishment. Ironically, The Bahamas is one of the countries where the number of dysfunctional families is growing daily and violence seems to go on unabated. If “beating” has been so effective over the past years, why hasn’t the violent behavior been averted?

UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE CORRECTLY

From a theological perspective, genuine Christians—those who are fully guided by the Holy Spirit—understand that Jesus’ approach to disobedience is not harsh and crude. He is firm and redemptive. “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-6). “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4). Wise parents use these Bible texts to balance the one found in Proverbs 13: 24 “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.” The New Living Translations translates it this way: “Those who spare the rod of discipline hate their children. Those who love their children care enough to discipline them.”

If parents focus on the word ‘rod’ to mean the belt or a piece of wood, then it would be difficult understand the true meaning of Proverbs 22:6: “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.” The text does not say “beat your children.” The word used is about an instructional process. It is a process of teaching and learning. Why so many parents resort to beating is because they are too lazy to teach. No wonder a child psychologist, Dr. James Dobson, entitled one of his books: “Parenting isn’t for Cowards.” The word “rod” in Proverbs 13:24 comes from the Hebrew word which means “sceptre” (shebet). This is an instrument monarch uses for something positive. In addition the text uses the definite article ‘the’ in front of the word rod.

Sociologist, John Rosemond, in his article “Parenting by the Book” speaks to this point. He states that “In every case, when the word rod (in Proverbs) is used with reference to the training or disciplining of children, it is preceded by the article “the”, connoting that the usage is metaphorical. To understand it otherwise results in irreconcilable confusion.” Proverbs 14:24 does not use the article “a” with the word rod. Rosemond explains: “On the other hand, “a” rod is always with reference to a concrete object—a straight stick that might have been used as a tool of measurement (1Sa 17:7, Rev. 21:16), a symbol of authority (Is. 14:5), or a staff used in herding sheep (Lev. 27:32). Isn’t it painful and humbling to acknowledge that for centuries we have built our beliefs and practices on a gross misinterpretation of Scripture and by so doing, messed up society!

Unfortunately our greatest challenge with overcoming the “beating syndrome” in The Bahamas is predominantly found among people of religious faith. Until those who claim to be God’s people allow Him to permeate their minds, our country will remain violent. Church leaders wake up and preach about a loving, redeeming Jesus.

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