

## Whipping Boy

Whether or not whipping boys really existed is up for debate, although there are several recorded incidents where whipping boys may have been part of a royal household. The expression, “whipping boy,” has this back story: princes did not go the regular school, but, rather, were educated in their homes by private tutors. As we can imagine the little princes were not always angels, and the tutor might be required to exercise a little discipline, mostly in the form of corporal punishment, a slap or spanking or, as was commonly practiced, a whipping with a willow branch or some equivalent instrument. Being that his prodigy was of royal lineage and from a family of significant power, the tutor might be hesitant to administer the appropriate punishment. The story goes that the tutor ask that young boys of the prince’s age be invited to join in the classroom and befriend him. If the prince did something wrong or did not apply himself to his studies, instead of punishing the prince himself, the tutor would administer a whipping to one of the friends. Hopefully, in seeing his friend suffer, the prince would realize the error of his ways and learn to behave. The unfortunate friend was called the “whipping boy.” Again, it is uncertain how common this practice was, although there are records of others being punished by proxy in place of the prince, including incidents in France, England, and China.

I’m sure I am not alone when I think about how this system could break down. What if the prince is an entitled little imp and revels in the pain of others? Pity his “friends,” for they would receive multiple beatings. Or what if the prince is a bit of a loner and has not become close to his chosen friends? The beating would not arouse the appropriate emotional response in the prince. What if the prince hated school and didn’t apply himself? The whipping boys would become quite familiar with the willow switch.

For the system to work (and perhaps the reason that it wasn’t used all that often was because it didn’t work) a couple of factors had to be in play: the prince must be of the compassionate sort, and he would have to have cared for his friends. If the prince was not, the whole system would fail, and the whipping boys, although they would have received a privileged education, would not have appreciated the role assigned to them.

We have adopted the term, “whipping boy,” often to refer to someone who is punished for something they did not do. or, sometimes, we use it to refer to someone who is the constant object of bullying in the school yard even though they have done nothing to invite the abuse. To be a whipping boy is to receive undeserved punishment. I wonder if there were any boys who welcomed the invitation to become friends of the prince where whipping boys were employed to discipline the prince.

Some have compared Jesus to a whipping boy. He acts in proxy for us when he takes the punishment of the cross. But to what effect? Can Jesus be compared to a whipping boy? It is appropriate to think of him in this way?

Remember the purpose of the beating: it was to move the prince to behave. In the 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, the beating of Jesus lasts for a long time. People complained about the gruesomeness of the scene, but it did evoke a visceral (very physical) response. Many were horrified by

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the depravity of humanity that allowed some to so cruelly torture another human being. I don't recall if the movie stated either implicitly or explicitly that Jesus was suffering for our sins, but even if it did, would it move anyone to better behaviour? Does Jesus' suffering result in better behaviour on our behalf? Is Jesus' suffering meant to cause us to behave better?

Perhaps some who watched the movie were moved to say, "He suffered for me, so I should behave better." But is that why Jesus suffered on our behalf? Did he suffer the beatings and the crucifixion so that we would be moved to compassion and behave better? I think that that misses the whole point of Jesus' suffering and death.

Jesus was not our whipping boy. True, he stood in our place and bore our sins, but he didn't do that so we, out of compassion, would work a little harder at avoiding sin. Jesus' death was much greater than that, for in his death, he actually took away our sin. Not only did he take the punishment that we deserve, he also took away God's memory of our sin, at least figuratively speaking. God doesn't remember our sins anymore, meaning that he will never go back to them and remind us of them again. When forgiven, they are also forgotten.

Watching the beating, as it was depicted in the movie, might give us pause and make us consider what we do. But that was not the goal of Jesus' death. His goal was to free us from our sin, not to make us behave more appropriately. He did not come to this world to become our whipping boy, suffering so that we could behave. He came to this earth to bring forgiveness.

One of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition is that our good behaviour is not an act of contrition (sorry, Jesus, that we caused your suffering and we won't do it again), but as an act of gratitude (thank you for taking my sin and its punishment on yourself). Jesus did not suffer and die so that we would learn to behave. He suffered and died so that we would be forgiven and as a response to that forgiveness, we would gratefully serve him.

I don't think Jesus could be called a whipping boy, although some have done so. He didn't suffer to move us to better behaviour. He suffered so that we could be forgiven, and, hopefully, that may move us toward gratitude so that we serve and obey him. It is because we are forgiven that we are moved to good behaviour, and forgiveness is a much more powerful motivator than watching someone suffer on our behalf.

Pastor Gary