

Sermon for Sunday, January 29, 2012
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Parents and Children
Prov. 1:8; 4:10; 23:19

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching (Prov. 1:8).

Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many (Prov. 4:10).

Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path (Prov. 23:19).

Parents and Children

Shortly before our first child was born, I came across this confession: "When I was young, I had no children, but four theories about the proper rearing of children. Today, I have four children and no theories." Every wise parent understands why someone would say that and everyone, married and a parent or not, has seen that children have a way of undermining theories.

Proverbs says a great deal about parenting. Most of it is clear practical wisdom, stating the duties of parents. But it also addresses the core or heart of parenting, which is mysterious, because the human heart is mysterious. Whatever our age and situation, let's study the principles of parenting and see how they apply to all of us. For all of us are fatherly or motherly and all receive such care in some ways.

1. Wisdom for parents

According to Proverbs, parents have the privilege and obligation of providing four things for their children: Provision, Instruction, Associations and Correction.

Provision (Prov. 13:22)

A good parent provides, plans, and takes care of his children. We meet basic needs. According to Scripture, these are food, clothing, and shelter (1 Tim 5:8, 6:8; 3:5). Today, I believe that also includes an education. No text says this, but the Bible does say that good parents save up for their children's future. Proverbs 13:22: "A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children." Paul says, "Children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children" (2 Cor 13:14).

In that day, saving up meant a well-kept property: a house, a tended farm. Today, the parallel is a good education. It suits the skills and interests of the young man or woman and prepares them for a good, productive life. Parents don't provide so much that we instill laziness or entitlement. But we do the best we can – not the minimum - while training children to be responsible.

Instruction (Prov. 1:8, 4:10, 22:6)

So often, Solomon tells his son to listen: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (1:8). Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many" (4:10). "Listen, my son, be wise, and keep your heart on the right path" (23:19). If children are to listen, then parents have to talk. And if they say something worth hearing it means they are growing wise – listening to God's word and to the wise and contemplating life.

This includes set times of instruction, but more often it's a matter of sharing a life together, as Deuteronomy 6 says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to

be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Notice the sequence, for it applies to all. First, we must know and love God. Then we can impress first principles on others - children. To develop the spiritual life of a child, parents must first develop their own. Many parents prematurely ask about techniques for spiritual nurture. They want to know how to have good family devotions or when to talk to their children about the faith. Good questions! But who we are matters more than our techniques.

Living faith expresses itself naturally, whenever we're with our children. So, when do we talk about our faith? Breakfast is a good time; we gain spiritual perspective on the day. Lunch works, because we can make mid-day corrections. Supper is fitting, because we can review the day. Bedtime is sensible, because tired children are often ready to talk, to say what's on their heart, and to listen.

Wise mothers and fathers know their children. We know when it's time to talk. But we're also opportunistic. At the store, we discuss money and the difference between needs and desires. We watch television and ask what kinds of humor enrich and what kinds humiliate. After church, we recount what we learned.

After athletic competition and report cards we talk about winning and losing. We tell them: "We do our best and leave it to God." Achievement is good, but not life and death. We are much more than our scorecard. Every society has blind spots. People will make us feel that we're only important if we win or achieve or gain recognition. But it's not true. We love our children, whatever the results, and ask for genuine effort, not success. After that, we trust the results to God. I hope you know this... If you do, you can tell others.

Proverbs' most famous text on parenting is 22:6: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." It sounds simple, but to interpret it correctly, we should pay attention to the context and the Hebrew.

First, this is not an unconditional promise: "Train your child right and he will do right. Teach her and she will believe." If this were law plus a promise, it would be frightening. Who will raise his child well enough to claim the promise?

Proverbs is wisdom, not law or universal promise. It's about the way the world normally works. This is clear in the apparently contrary proverbs found in Proverbs 26:24-5. "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." Then "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." Which one? Both are true in their time, but we must discern the time (cf. Ecc 3). Don't answer a fool if the dialogue would waste time and drag you down without lifting him up. Do answer a fool if you must, lest he be so confident that he leads others astray. Should you answer or let it go? Be wise and let both proverbs guide you.

Proverbs offers guidelines for life in godly wisdom not absolute laws. So Proverbs 22:6 does not mean: If a child rebels, the parents clearly failed because "If you train up a child... they will not depart." Children are still responsible for themselves.

The context of 22:6 is the right course in life: "In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares, but he who guards his soul stays far from them" (22:5). Life has many dangers – pride, violence, the wrong

crowd – and children are all too receptive to them. So loving parents try to show the right path. All good leaders want to make it *easy* for people to see and do what is right and good.

Most translations say, "train a child" but the "child" in view is older. The Hebrew word *na'ar* means a youth – eighteen or twenty years old, not a mere child. He or she is still teachable, open to instruction, but ready to choose a life path.

Solomon literally says, "*Dedicate or consecrate* a youth according to his way and even when he becomes old he will not depart from it." The Hebrew *hanak* normally means dedicate (Duet 20:5, 1 Kgs 8:63). Start with a strong commitment to the right course. Yes, there is ongoing training. But, Solomon says, get the *right start*, a consecration, before God to follow the right road.

The proverb says train a child in his way. This is interpreted several ways: #1 *His way* means God's way, the Lord's way. If we raise a child God's way, the Lord will care for our child. We certainly should raise our children in God's way, but this view probably isn't right. We have to expect "his" to refer to the prior noun – which is the youth or child, not God.

#2: The passage is ironic: Train a youth in *his* way, let him go his way, in the sins of youth, and he will never leave them. It's true that parents shouldn't let children do as they please. But there is no hint of irony nearby. It's also despairing, and Proverbs is hopeful. It expects this young man to live long and well.

So it's best to say, "Dedicate a youth according to his way" means according to the physical and mental and social skills that the parent sees in the child, skills that are ripe for development. So a mother sees her child learn Latin in a flash and says, "Honey, let me tell you about Mandarin and Arabic." Or a father sees a child finish a trigonometry lesson in ten minutes and says, "Let's talk about engineering..."

For a child in a godly family, the way begins with the Lord, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Yet good parents try to guide their children through all of life. Proverbs 22 tells parents that their work, training their children, should have a permanent and positive effect.

This is important truth, but it's not the whole truth. Whole chapters – Ezekiel 18, Romans 10 – declare that each one of us is responsible to hear God's voice and answer. No one is saved by his parent's faith. Children can reject the wisest parents and choose evil. Parents instill and encourage, but we don't dictate (2:1-7).

Proverbs says, "a good home may produce an idler or a profligate (10:5, 29:3). A young man or woman "may rebel enough to despise a father, mock a mother" (30:17, cf. 15:20) or even curse both parents (30:11; 20:20). They can be "heartless enough" to rob their parents and turn a widowed mother out of the family house (19:26, 28:24).¹

Still, instruction is vital. "Train up a child," says Solomon. Recently I had a conversation with a young woman who has her first professional job. After three months, she found herself in a room with two other women, her CEO and the CEO of a large corporation. She was startled, but not nervous. Why not? "When I was a child, we had famous people in our house a few times. My father told us, 'A famous person is eating with us tonight. You won't be able to tell because famous, powerful people are basically like

¹ Kidner, Proverbs, 51

everyone else. They have a special talent, maybe some good luck or God's favor.' He taught us to enjoy them, but to remember that all people are essentially the same. I remembered and it was fine and I joined in their conversation."

Solomon would say that young woman listened to her father's instruction (2:1). Children, listen and remember. Teens and college students: You can listen and follow your parents good words example or not. You can hold onto the strengths of your parents and teachers. Or you can fixate on the flaws and failures and decide you don't need to listen. This is an important decision: everyone is a sinner and imperfect. Solomon says, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Ecc 7:20).

We can listen to our parents and decide their weaknesses show they're hypocrites. Or we can overlook, forgive their flaws and learn all we can. We have a choice to be critical or gracious to parents, teachers, grandparents, and youth leaders.

Each of us is responsible. We all hear enough wisdom to take the right path as we face enough temptations to fall (29:3a; 2:1). We are responsible for our lives. Nonetheless, some parents can thank themselves for shameful children – "A child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (29:15).

Associations (13:20)

Solomon wrote three "companionship" proverbs. Each offers a choice. We can walk with the good and grow wise, find joy, or walk with fools and suffer the consequences. Hear them from Proverbs 13:20, 28:7, 29:3:

- Whoever walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm.
- Whoever keeps the law is wise, but a companion of gluttons shames his father.
- He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.

Clearly, Solomon says we should choose our companions wisely. Consider the results. Do you want to grow wise and bring joy or suffer shame and harm? "The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags" (23:21). If you arrive at work hung over, you won't perform well. If it happens enough, you may lose your job eventually. It's that simple. But if you walk with the wise, you will become wise and prosper (11:10, 28:25).

Choose your friends with this in mind. Assess your friends. Hear me! I'm not saying we cut people off. We should be kind and open to our neighbors or co-workers, the folks at our gym who see the world another way. But we should choose our posse, our peeps or role models, wisely. Are you with Bono or Marilyn Manson (Antichrist Superstar)? Who directs, advises, counsels you?

Let's choose our friends carefully. Their lifestyle and patterns of thought have great influence. When children are young, parents have great influence. As we read Scripture and seek wisdom, we have something to share with friends and children.

I once went to a baseball game with a daughter and had seats that put us in position for a foul ball. I told her, "I've been to lots of ball games, but never caught a foul ball. It's a shame we didn't bring a glove, because if a ball comes our way, it will have too much speed and spin to catch with our bare hands. But we might get one if a ball bounces off someone's hands ahead of us." Guess what? Seconds later, the batter sent a hard foul straight toward us. One row ahead, a man rose for the ball. I prepared for the bounce, but at the last instant, he ducked. I threw my hands in front of my face, and, as I had predicted,

the ball spun off my palm and bounced to another fan a few feet away. She looked sad, touched my hand. Sad, but it gave us time to talk about hope and disappointment.

Overall, we spent five hours together. We had fun, but we also talked about school starting soon and friends. Parents, if you have wisdom, walk with your children. Don't fool yourself by trying to schedule *quality time*. Quality time comes through quantity time, living together. And hold hands and hug as you live together.

Correction (29:15)

If you are a visitor, you may wonder if I will address spanking. It's controversial you know! If you're a regular, you know I will, because we try to face difficult questions as the Bible does. I must say – I'd rather talk about playing games, reading stories, hugging and showing love in fifty ways. I don't want to talk about "the rod" or spanking or stir disputes, but Proverbs addresses it, so I must. Proverbs talks about the rod five times for discipline, so I must (22:15): "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him."

Let's realize how some hear this today: So you want to beat children? No! The Bible forbids cruelty and brutality. It says fathers must not enrage or exasperate their children. Violence is a sure way to make a child angry. I know this first hand because my father was violent. Violence toward children is a terrible evil – a great sin that reveals great heartsickness. (If it's in your home, call church or police.)

Today, we think corporal punishment is barbaric. The West scowls at Singapore because caning is part of its prison code. We're more kind. And don't ask if rebel prisoners feel the billy club in our jails. We don't use corporal punishment! A coach can tell a lazy player to sprint up a hill until he's sick. A sergeant tells a recruit to do 200 push-ups for breaking military rules, but that's not corporal punishment. We know this because we are humane and humane people don't practice corporal punishment. No, the truth is that coaches and sergeants understand that some rebellion can destroy an entire team or fighting unit. Physical discipline may get attention in ways that words don't.

The great emphasis of Scripture is that parents speak and set an example to teach, correct, instruct, and improve. But several passages say corporal punishment has a place. I know the studies, the abuses.

James Dobson, Ph.D. in psychology, says there's a difference between sin and defiance, between childish mistakes and assaults on parental leadership. But there is a time when a child acts the fool, does things that could lead to shame and death. We see and think, "I love you too much to let you stay on this path." So, on rare occasions, for defiance, a parent might spank. How? With inward grief, with self-control, with a light wooden spoon, explaining everything. Not with the hand, which blesses. Let your hand hold and love and bless your child! Still two of the five proverbs on the rod stand out: Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Proverbs 23:14 says, "Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death."

The rod is rare - reserved for serious sin – sins that, unaddressed could lead to death. But as we look at Scripture as a whole, the main idea is not the rod, but discipline that suits the offense. The norm is words or discipline that suits the crime. That is the main principle of discipline in Scripture.

In most homes today, we 1) deprive of privileges, 2) banish from society - grounding, and 3) spank. But these don't always work. My wife said it this way as she struggled with a child who was in a rare streak of rebellion, "I don't know what to do with her. She's too old to spank; she hardly notices the television or radio. Take away her privileges? All she does is piano and soccer and they're worthwhile. I'm

not going to ground her – I'd punish myself as much as I punish her." I said, "Good point. I'll get back to you on that."

Six weeks later (theologians answer questions rather slowly sometimes) I was reading Exodus 21:23-25 and found something. It reads:

"If men who are fighting... [and] there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

It struck me: Though it sounds harsh, this law actually brings restraint. It forbids excess: "If you knock out my tooth, my friends and I will knock out five." The law forbids spirals of violence – "One tooth for one tooth, nothing more."

This "principle of proportional punishment" is foundational for the Bible's penal code. It governs property (Ex 22:4-6), personal injury, and manslaughter (Lev 24:17-21). It is clearest in case of perjury, where the convicted perjurer must suffer precisely the punishment that his lie would have inflicted on his victim (Deut 19:16-21).

In the home, the goal is reform, not punishment. So we have the "principle of proportional discipline." Proportional discipline is neither too harsh nor too lenient. It is relevant to the misdeed and measured to suit it. If tooth crimes merits tooth punishment, then "food crimes" deserve "food punishment" and clothing crimes merit "clothing discipline."

So if grade school children wave arms, play at the table, and spill juice day after day, parents warn them to be careful. If they continue, take juice off the menu for a day or two. If they want juice, the spilling will stop.

Or consider that chronic cause of parental distress, a child's habit of dropping book bags and coats on the floor the instant they enter the house. Everything slides to the floor so smoothly, so effortlessly, it seems that it must be made of pure silk. Too often, parents shout and threaten – and pick it all up. Thus children learn that they have a noisy maid. Instead, let book bag crime yield book bag discipline:

"Honey, I see that you don't care very much about your book bag, since you drop it in the middle of the floor so much lately. So, unless you stop, we will put it away for a couple of days."

"But how will I get my books and lunch to school?"

"Well, you can take them to school in a Schnuck's bag."

"But everyone would laugh at me!" - "Well then, you have one more chance, but if you drop your bag on the floor tomorrow, it goes on the shelf a few days."

So we see the parents four duties: **Provision** - needs and education. **Instruction** – the right path of life. **Association** – time together, lots, not as duty, but as joy. **Correction** – so we don't persist in sin.

God calls himself our Father and does all this for us. He provides, he instructs. He is present with us – Incarnation and Holy Spirit. He corrects so we don't persist in sin.