

September 20, 2009

Train Up a Child

a sermon on Proverbs 22.1-16

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

I marvel at the way children from the same family can turn out so different. I know a man who has four sons. Two are model citizens. Both are solid family men. Both are in ministry as a profession. The other two took a different path. One has been on and off drugs and chronically unemployed. The other is in prison, or at least he was last time I heard. Can anyone explain this to me? Nature versus nurture doesn't come into it. All four had the same parents, who raised them with the same values. No doubt you know similar cases. Two or more children from the same family take radically different paths through life. I know the explanation, and you do too: Our choices matter. No matter how much our genes, our family of origin, and our economic background shape us, they do not determine us. We make choices, and those choices also shape us, and ultimately they determine our destiny.

We feel this to be true. It fits our experience. And yet ... it would seem to contradict the most famous proverb from the biblical book of Proverbs. "Train up a child in the way he [or she] should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." That sounds as if I do my job as a parent correctly, then my children will choose the right path. But what happens if I do my best, and they do not?

Christians who are disappointed in their grown children agonize, and this verse, which is meant to encourage, becomes a source of frustration. By the way, I hope I am expressing my thought correctly. When I say they are disappointed with their children, I do not mean they do not love their children. I mean simply that their children's choices in life bring hurt or grief to the parents. For example, when a child of Christian parents grows up to reject the faith—doesn't believe in God, is not part of a church—that hurts, because the parent knows how important a relationship with Jesus Christ is. Another example I have seen too often: a kid from a good, solid, Christian home gets into drugs and absolutely ruins his or her life. It happens. There are plenty more scenarios. The fact is, we do not always approve of the choices our children make, and when they persist in a lifestyle or a habit we see hurting them, we hurt too.

I have seen parents in this situation take this proverb in two ways. One is: "The Bible says, if I train up my child right, he will not depart from it. He has departed from it, so I didn't train him up right. I am a failure as a parent." The self-recrimination can become brutal. The parent assumes responsibility and guilt for every choice the child

makes. The other way requires a bit more self confidence, “I raised my child right, and the Bible says that when she is old she will not depart from it. Therefore, sooner or later she is going to turn around, straighten up, and fly right.” ... I think both these conclusions misinterpret the text.

The Bible is a wonderful gift from God. It has beauty, depth, and power. I love to study the Bible; that’s one reason why I am a pastor. Scripture contains such riches. It also contains a variety of different kinds of writing. We call them genres. In your local bookstore you can find lots of genres: biography, history, mystery, and so on. The Bible is just as diverse. It contains narratives, biography, prophecy, law, and more. When you are interpreting any part of the Bible, you must keep in mind the genre you are dealing with. The book of Proverbs is part of the Bible’s wisdom literature. Other wisdom writings are Job, Ecclesiastes, and some of the Psalms. In Ancient Israel, three groups dominated religious and cultural life: the priests, the prophets, and the sages. Wisdom literature comes from the sages.

The book of Proverbs is a special kind of wisdom writing. Ecclesiastes and Job use longer reflections to ponder the deep questions of life: Why are we here? How can we make sense of suffering? Proverbs leaves the big questions aside and tries to tell us how to get by in the world. Proverbs puts practical wisdom into short, memorable maxims of two lines.

The sages based their wisdom on observation of how the world works, not on divine revelation. And they were not shy about that. Recall how the author of Ecclesiastes describes how he learned about different lifestyles by trying them out. The prophet says, “Thus says the Lord!” The sage says, “I have seen ...” Proverbs is about how to get on in the world based on wise observation. Therefore it deals in generalities, not absolutes. It describes for us how things generally work, but it does not give us any ironclad guarantees. For example, it says hard work is better than laziness because those who work hard prosper and the lazy suffer want. Generally this is true, but there are exceptions.

Also, proverbs require wisdom when applied to life. Take a look at Proverbs 26.4-5: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” In other words, don’t stoop to a fool’s level and dignify his foolishness with a response. On the other hand, if you don’t, he will assume he is right and you do not answer because you can’t.” So which do you do? Do you answer the fool or not? Well, you have to decide that on a fool-by-fool basis. So you see, applying proverbs demands not just knowing the proverbs but using your own wisdom as well.

One more thing about Proverbs: The sages did believe in God and in moral absolutes — right and wrong, good and evil. These things factored into their observations. “The

fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” Proverbs 1.7. Also, although the sages did not claim to speak for God, divine providence saw fit to include their writings in scripture. Therefore, these books are God’s Word to us. Now here is the heart of this sermon and what you may find most valuable: The Bible is God’s Word, but that does not mean we read it as if all the parts are just alike. *When we interpret God’s Word, we must pay attention to the genre we are dealing with, just as we must pay attention to the rules of grammar.* That sets up my big question: Is this verse about training up a child a promise from God ... or is it a proverb?

If it is a promise from God, then Christian parents disappointed in their grown children have the two options I mentioned, self-recrimination or blind optimism. If it is a proverb, an observation of what is generally true but not a guarantee backed by the full authority of God, then a new possibility opens: Maybe you did raise your child in the way she should have gone, but her own choices determined another path. The book of Proverbs itself leans this way. It is written for the young. The primary audience is adolescents, standing on the brink of adulthood, their futures about to be determined by their own wisdom and choices. Over and over a parental figure pleads with them to heed wisdom.

I believe this verse is a description of what generally happens, but it is not a promise from God. You might object, “Well, if it is not a guarantee, what good is it?” My answer is: It tells us how to raise children! Instruction and discipline do a child good. Christian parents can be confident that their efforts are worth it. Yes, a child might wander from the path. He or she might disappoint terribly. You are responsible for your efforts, not necessarily the results, which you cannot control. But you can know, long before you see a child grown, that instruction and discipline are good. They are worth the effort.

I need to explain something else about this verse, because in modern times a great silliness has arisen that misinterprets this passage in another, potentially more destructive way. What does the proverb mean when it says, “Train up a child *in the way that he should go*”? Traditionally this was taken to mean, in the right way, in God’s way – teaching faith, good morals, solid values, that sort of thing. A generation ago, some well intentioned people – they were not Bible scholars, but pastors and counselors – began saying “in the way that he should go” means you raise a child according to his or her natural inclinations. The child’s own desires and interests should determine how you raise her or him. These folks meant well. They no doubt wanted to relieve disappointed parents burdened by guilt. They had soaked up a lot of pop-psychology, and this kind of approach sounded good. So the proverb came to mean almost the opposite of what it was traditionally supposed to mean: “Do not burden the child with instruction, values, and discipline, but rather let the child unfold however he or she will, like a beautiful little flower.” It sounds nice, but it doesn’t work.

One problem is, regardless of whether this is a sane approach to parenting, you cannot support it from the proverb. The proper way to interpret a proverb is in accordance with the rest of the wisdom literature in scripture, not pop-psychology. In the biblical wisdom tradition, there are only two ways: the way of the wise and righteous and the way of the foolish and wicked. That's it. Read Psalm 1. Read the book of Proverbs. They may oversimplify, but they certainly speak with clarity: The way of the foolish and wicked leads to death and destruction. The way of wisdom and righteousness leads to life and blessings. If you want to know what the proverb means by "in the way that he should go," it means building character through religious and moral formation.

If the modern interpretation only meant, if you child shows aptitude for art, encourage him as an artist – or, if she has a passion for sports, let her play sports – then I would say that's good common sense, even though it is not what the proverb means. The modern interpretation usually goes far beyond common sense, however. It encourages a hands-off style of parenting afraid to instruct or discipline for fear of inhibiting the child's natural blossoming. It assumes that each child is wholly pure (not only innocent, but without moral flaw). It argues that children go wrong by learning from us. If left uncorrupted by grown-ups, a child would grow to be a good, kind, loving, moral person.

That is the other problem with the more modern interpretation. It is based on an unrealistic, naïve assumption about human nature. It assumes that people are basically good and have to learn evil. The reality is, children learn to sin the way they learn to crawl or walk. They may have a bit of help from us, but they do it on their own. Yes, we corrupt them as they see our bad examples. But rest assured they would find sin anyway.

That is why we need a Savior and why Christ died for all, even children. That is one reason we baptize infants. We know that someday little Elijah [Davis, who was baptized after this sermon] will need forgiveness. We all do. We also know that God's grace has already been poured out for him like the water in this font. Christ died for him. He has a Savior. Even before Elijah needs a Savior, he has one. Christ has called him and made him his own. Baptism by itself will not save him. He will need faith in Christ. Ultimately that will be his decision, but we have a lot to do with it. His parents and family, the people of this church – we will promise, as he is baptized, to raise him up in the way that he should go.

One last question: Where is the gospel in this proverb? If I were counseling Christian parents disappointed by their adult children, I would tell them this: The seed is good. Remember Jesus' parable about the sower who cast seeds and some grew and some did not? The seed is the gospel. You planted that seed. You watered that seed. You can be confident that the seed itself is good. What can you do now? You can encourage in

whatever way you are able, and above all you can pray. In some mysterious way, God's calling and human freedom work together to bring a person to Christ. Never give up, because no one is beyond God's reach. Never stop loving, because love is powerful.

"Train up a child in the way he [or she] should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." That's not a guarantee, but it tells us how to raise children. As parents, as a church family, we have not only a responsibility but also a divine mandate to instruct our children in the way of wisdom and righteousness. We will fail, at least in some respects; and so will our children. The Good News is God's grace. Christ died for us all. He is risen. He lives and reigns and gives eternal life to all who belong to him. By baptism and faith, we give ourselves to him, and he gives himself to us. Therefore, let us celebrate this sacrament with great joy. Amen.

rev_mauldin@yahoo.com