

Parents and Children: Proverbs

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This morning we're going to look at the theme in Proverbs that addresses parents and children. There are many exhortations to children to walk in the way of wisdom and to follow the guidance of their parents. And there are many exhortations to parents as to how we ought to shepherd our children. These are very important matters, and we need God's wisdom to instruct us.

The family structure is something God ordained for our good and for His glory. He ordained marriage to be between one man and one woman for life, and for that union to be a picture of Christ and the church. And the parent – child relationship is also a pointer to our relationship with God the Father. He is our heavenly Father. He has given us life, and He cares for us, communicates with us, instructs us, and also disciplines us for our good.

“My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” (Proverbs 3:11–12, ESV)

The writer of Hebrews quotes those verses in Hebrews 12 and then elaborates on them:

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:7–11, ESV)

As we approach this theme of parents and children, we need to first see it in its Gospel context. God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be punished for our sin. And we need to see that Jesus Christ's punishment was different than the discipline we receive from the Father. Jesus was separated from the Father as He suffered under divine wrath. He was condemned. He was forsaken. All so that we don't have to suffer under divine wrath or be condemned or forsaken. Rather, the discipline that the Father exercises in our lives is not to push us away from Him, but to draw

us near. The Father's discipline is not to make us pay for our sins, because Jesus accomplished that on the cross. The Father's discipline is simply a piece of His loving instruction and guidance in our lives. He wants to free us from bondage to idols. He wants to pry our fingers from clinging to those things that will hurt us.

The goal, then, in our families is that parents would emulate the Father's loving care and discipline, and that children would honor and respect and love their parents. I want to speak to the children first, briefly. And then we'll look at the wise instructions given to parents.

Children

A month ago I talked about wisdom and folly in the book of Proverbs and specifically geared that sermon toward the young people here. I love it that there are so many children and youth here, and I care about you guys. I love you, and I want you to live an exciting, joyful life of following the Lord. It would grieve me deeply to see any of you go down a path of worldly misery. Seek wisdom. Turn away from folly. And one very important way to do that starts right in your own home, with your own parents. Some of you might cringe at that thought. You may not like the idea of obeying your parents, honoring them, respecting them, humbly seeking their advice.

In that sermon a month ago I quoted Mark Twain who said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years." As a teenager you may feel that your parents are ignorant. But I'm pleading with you, on the authority of God's Word, to recognize that God has put your parents in your life to help you. And you have to recognize that you need their help.

(Sadly, there are parents who abuse their children, and that is a great dishonor to God and it is very harmful to the kids. If you're in a situation like that, or know someone who's in a situation like that, it shouldn't be allowed to go on. Talk to someone in the church, or call the police. The Bible is not calling children to submit themselves to physical or verbal or sexual abuse by a wicked parent. If there are things going on in your home that just don't seem right, talk to someone about it.)

I hope it's safe to say that most of you here are not in a situation like that. You have parents who love you and care for you. No parent is perfect, of course. We all have our faults and our weaknesses. Your parents are not perfect, but God does call

you to respect them. So you need to overlook their faults and learn to appreciate the things they are doing out of love for you. It should be your goal to walk in wisdom, which will make your parents very happy.

“A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.” (Proverbs 10:1, ESV)

“A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish man despises his mother.” (Proverbs 15:20, ESV)

“The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.” (Proverbs 23:24–25, ESV)

It is a wise thing to listen to your parents:

“A wise son hears his father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.” (Proverbs 13:1, ESV)

And hear these warnings:

“If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.” (Proverbs 20:20, ESV)

“The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.” (Proverbs 30:17, ESV)

It’s very simple. The path of wisdom includes obeying your parents, and that path will lead to much blessing. Disobeying your parents is the path of folly, and that path will lead to much hardship and heartache.

God’s Word says in Ephesians 6, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right.” The God of the universe is commanding you to do what your parents tell you to do. That means when you disobey your parents, you are not only disobeying your parents, you are disobeying God.

You see, God knows what He’s doing, and He’s a lot smarter than we are. And He designed families in a way that the parents have the authority in the home. God has given your Mom and Dad the responsibility of taking care of you and raising you in a godly way, and teaching you how to grow up and be a responsible adult. That’s not an easy job, and it’s especially not easy when you’re disobeying them and disrespecting them.

So you need to obey your parents. When they ask you to do something, you need to obey right away. Don’t complain or

whine or try to come up with reasons why you shouldn't have to do it.

The last thing I want to say to children is this: I hope you will see the value of being protected by your parents. As your parents are telling you to do this or that, and telling you not to do this or that, you may get annoyed by those instructions. But the whole point is that they want to protect you from harm. They want to help you thrive. That's a huge blessing as a child living in your parents' home. You have that covering of their protection over you. They give you a place to live. They give you clothes and food. They help you in your studies. They talk with you about life and God and the Bible. They bring you to church.

The sinful response to that is, "I'm fine on my own. I don't need your help. I'm going to do things my own way." That's foolishness.

The wise and godly response is, "Thank you Mom and Dad for everything you do for me and provide for me. I know that one day I'm going to be on my own, and I'll have to work hard to put a roof over my head and clothes on my back and food in my stomach. Thank you for helping to prepare me for that and for caring for all my needs while I'm young."

Parents

"Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6, ESV)

As I said in a previous sermon concerning the nature of proverbial literature, this cannot be taken as a promise. Proverbs don't function that way. Proverbs are general truths, but they are not without exceptions. So this verse should not be used as a guilt trip for parents whose children are not walking with the Lord. Nor should this verse be a source of pride for parents whose children are walking with the Lord. What it should do is encourage all parents to do all we can to train up our children in the ways of the Lord, in the way of wisdom. And thankfully God's Word gives us much instruction concerning this.

There are two things I want to talk about concerning parenting: communication and discipline.

Communication

I have been very helped by Tedd Tripp's book entitled *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. Even the title is so helpful. That should be our aim in parenting. We want to shepherd the hearts of

our children. Parenting is not merely about behavior modification. It's not about our selfish and prideful desires, that we want children who will not annoy us or make us look bad in public. It's really about the heart. We should want our kids to know God. We want to point them to the Gospel. We want to shepherd them in a way that they will see their sin and see the forgiveness that was purchased by Jesus on the cross.

In order to do that, we must cultivate a life of healthy communication with our kids. If the extent of our communication is barking orders and rebukes, that's not shepherding. That's not going to develop a close relationship.

Listen to the way the Proverbs speak in a fatherly, shepherding manner toward the child.

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.” (Proverbs 1:8–9, ESV)

“My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.” (Proverbs 2:1–5, ESV)

“My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My inmost being will exult when your lips speak what is right. Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off. Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way.” (Proverbs 23:15–19, ESV)

“My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.” (Proverbs 23:26, ESV)

Do you see the way in which the father is speaking to the son? These are not orders that he shouts at his son. These are words of instruction that are part of an ongoing relationship between the father and son—a relationship that grows through meaningful communication.

A few weeks ago we talked about the power of words, which is another theme in Proverbs. We saw the importance of speaking thoughtfully and also listening carefully. That is another thing that parents need to realize. Communication with our kids is not just us speaking to them. We need to learn to listen carefully

to our children. This is not an easy thing. We're often in a hurry, and we don't feel like we have time to really listen. Or there are many things on our minds, and it's hard to focus on what our child is really trying to communicate to us.

Tedd Tripp writes, "The finest art of communication is not learning how to express your thoughts. It is learning how to draw out the thoughts of another. Your objective in communication must be to understand your child, not simply to have your child understand you. Many parents never learn these skills. They never discover how to help their children articulate their thoughts and feelings. There is a certain irony in all this. When children are little, we often fail to engage them in significant conversation. When they try to engage us, we respond with uninterested 'uh huh's.' Eventually, they learn the ropes. They realize that we are not interested in what goes on in them. They learn that a 'good talk' for us is a 'good listen' for them. When they become teens, the tables turn. Parents wish they could engage their teens, but the teens have long since stopped trying."¹

That doesn't mean you should give up hope, no matter what the age of your children. But this should be a rebuke and an encouragement to all parents that we need to take the time to really listen to our kids. They need us. And we need them. What a blessing it is to be able to develop a deep level of communication within our families.

Through regular family devotions, and family dinners, and praying for the kids before bed, and times driving in the car, we can be listening to our children and looking for teachable moments to point them to Christ. We can instruct and exhort. We can share our own weaknesses and failings. We can share our joys and our sorrows. We can pray together. There needs to be that bond built by a life of communication, and it's in that context that discipline can be effective.

Discipline

Communication and discipline are both essential components of shepherding a child's heart. It's like the two wings of a plane. Without one or the other, we'll spin out of control. But with both in place, we can stay on course and hopefully avoid a crash.

"The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." (Proverbs 29:15, ESV)

¹ Shepherding a Child's Heart, page 73.

As parents we have the God-given responsibility to train our children. They need correction from us. That correction will come in the form of words, and will also sometimes come in the form of the rod—spanking. This is a controversial issue, but the Bible is clear that this is a part of wise parenting.

We do have to make sure we understand it rightly, though. These are verses that could easily be taken out of context and used in wicked ways by angry parents. So as I read these verses remember the context in which they are given. They're in the context of this book of wisdom which also includes the verses I just read about loving communication with our children. Remember, the proverbs convey wisdom, and they also require wisdom to apply them rightly. So let's listen to what God's Word says about the rod and then talk about how this applies in the context of shepherding our children with both communication and discipline.

“Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.” (Proverbs 13:24, ESV)

“Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death.” (Proverbs 19:18, ESV)

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.” (Proverbs 22:15, ESV)

“Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.” (Proverbs 23:13–14, ESV)

The way of wisdom is very often the path between two opposite errors. That is the case here. On the one side, there is the mentality that any form of physical discipline is abusive. There are many in our culture (and maybe some of you here today) who are strongly opposed to the idea of parents spanking their children. On the other side, there is the sad reality that many parents sinfully abuse their children (and they might even cite these verses as justification for their actions).

The way of wisdom is to understand that physical discipline, done in an appropriate way, is a very important means of shepherding our children. God instructs us to do this. I want to talk about this in some detail, because I fear this issue is misunderstood by many.

My wife found herself in a disturbing situation a couple weeks ago. She was coming out of a store into the parking lot and saw a woman beating her young daughter (the daughter appeared

to be about 3 years old). The woman was swearing and hitting the child all over her body. She put the child in her car and continued to smack her around. Stacy said, “Do I need to call the police?” The woman came over and got in Stacy’s face and said, “I’m disciplining her! Did you see what she did? She was about to run out in the street!” Fortunately, as this woman was yelling at my wife, a man came over and others intervened.

I tell that story as an illustration of what is NOT godly discipline. Maybe that child did need to be disciplined, but not in that way. That’s abuse. Don’t you ever take this biblical instruction as a license to hit your kids just because you’re ticked off.

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4, ESV)

I think one of the keys here is remembering that my position of authority over my children is not about me. It’s about God. So when my children disobey me, the more significant issue is that they have disobeyed God. Tedd Tripp gives another helpful insight here, “If you correct and discipline your children because God mandates it, then you need not clutter up the task with your anger. Correction is not your showing anger for their offenses; it is rather reminding them that their sinful behavior offends God. It is bringing His censure of sin to these subjects of His realm. He is the King. They must obey.”

If I think of my children’s disobedience primarily as an offense against me, then I’ll be more prone to get angry and then provoke my children to anger. But if I recognize that God has put me in the position of authority, and He has commanded my children to obey me and my wife, then I can deal with disobedience by pointing out the sinful attitude or action that has been done against God, and reminding my child that I’m under God’s authority, too, and it’s my responsibility to discipline them.

We should also distinguish between childishness and defiance. You don’t spank a kid for spilling a cup of milk, assuming it was an accident. You don’t discipline for childishness. But if the child is defiantly disobeying a clear instruction you have given, then the child needs to be disciplined. And especially for younger children, a spanking can be a very effective means of getting their attention and making the point that they need to obey. Each child is different. Again, we will each need wisdom in how to apply this. It’s hard to give an exact age of a child when you should stop spanking and only use other forms of discipline (like taking away certain privileges). It does seem that as a child grows

and can better understand other types of consequences, then spankings will not be necessary anymore. But for toddlers and preschoolers and early elementary kids, spanking really helps to communicate what may be very difficult to communicate in words at that stage in their lives.

The Bible speaks of the “rod” or “stick.” So it seems appropriate to use something like a wooden spoon to give the spanking. It should be in private, like the child’s bedroom. This is not about humiliating them in front of others. The child needs to understand what he or she is being spanked for. This all happens in the context of communication. First, you have to check your own attitude and make sure you’re not disciplining out of anger. You may need to step away from the situation to take a deep breath and remind yourself of what your focus should be. This is not about you. It’s about God and this child. You then explain to the child what they did and the seriousness of disobeying parents, and even more importantly the seriousness of disobeying God. You tell the child how many swats they’re going to receive, “Because you’ve disobeyed, you’re going to get 2 spanks.” That’s something else you’ll need to gauge based on the temperament and pain tolerance of your child, and the severity of the offense. Spank on the backside or the back of the thigh. If you haven’t done this before, you should probably smack your own leg a couple times to make sure you’re using the right amount of force. You certainly don’t want to bruise your child, but you also need to make it sting enough to be memorable. If the toddler has training underwear on and a thick pair of pants, it will be pointless. Or if you just swat the kids’ backside as they’re walking by you in the living room, that’s not what we’re talking about either.

It has to be intentional. You’re going to have to interrupt whatever else you’re doing. It has to be consistent. It has to be accompanied with clear verbal communication. And it needs to be painful. In most cases, it should result in the child crying, at which point the parent hugs the child and says, “I love you. I forgive you.” And that could be a good time for a prayer. That’s a teachable moment to talk about Christ and our need for Him.

For further instruction about these things I would encourage you to read Tedd Tripp’s book, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*. I’d also be happy to talk to any of you about this. I know this is a controversial subject, so if there’s anything I said that you disagree with, please give me a chance to clarify. There are many wise parents in this church, so if you’re a younger parent and trying to figure this out, please seek out some older, wiser parents who can share what they’ve learned along the way.

In closing, I want to remind parents what a precious gift we've been given, and what a great responsibility, to raise our children in a God-honoring way. These kids will not be in our homes for very long. Believe it or not, they will not wear diapers forever, they will learn to feed themselves and take care of themselves. And before we know it, they'll be heading out the door to start a life of their own. So don't waste these years. Make these years count, for the good of your children, and for the glory of God.

And one last thing to remember: as these children grow up and set out on their own, our main hope and prayer for them should be that they follow the Lord. And if they are following the Lord, we should be very grateful, even if the Lord takes them far away from us. We certainly shouldn't try to direct our kids toward the idol of the American Dream. We must point them to something far greater than that—the joy of following Christ, wherever that may lead.

Dr. Michael Oh is the founder of Christ Bible Institute in Nagoya Japan. He is not Japanese, though. He is Korean. His father grew up in poverty in Korea through World War II and the Korean war, but was then able to enter medical school and eventually came to the United States and made a life here for him and his family. Michael, then, grew up in the Philadelphia area, and because of his father's success he had many opportunities available to him. He went to college at University of Pennsylvania, and then went on to get graduate degrees from Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. And I give you some of this background because Michael shares a story of when he told his dad that he wanted to be a missionary. It was on a Sunday during his senior year, and over lunch he shared this news with his dad. Dad, I want to be a missionary. His dad responded, "No." He said, "Michael, I want you to stay in America. And I want to see you at church every Sunday with your children and have lunch together like this." Michael responded, "Dad, I appreciate everything that you have done for me. That's why I can be where I am today. But I refuse to live my life to try to get into a good college, so I can get a good job and make lots of money so that my kids can have every opportunity to get into a good college and get a good job and make lots of money so that their kids can have every opportunity to get into a good college and get a good job and make lots of money!"²

² From his address at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors (2009). Manuscript can be found here:

I want to encourage all of us, as Michael is wanting to encourage us, don't be limited by the American Dream. It is a dream far too small. Think bigger than that. And think bigger than that for your kids. Live a life in front of your kids that is focused on far more than possessions and prestige. God may call your kids to the mission field. How would you feel about that? Would you be devastated? Would you discourage them from making such a foolish choice? Or would you rejoice (even though you would certainly miss them)? Let's check our priorities. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus. And let's be diligent to train up our children in the ways of the Lord.