

## **WISE PARENTING**

## **PROVERBS 22:6**

Nobody ever said that being a parent was going to be easy. Mark Twain, the great American author, gave his unique perspective. “Things run along pretty smoothly until your kid reaches thirteen. That’s the time you need to stick ‘em in a barrel, hammer the lid down nice and snug, and feed ‘em through the knothole. And then, about the time he turns sixteen, plug up the knothole!” Mark Twain was probably more successful as a writer than as a parent!

We’re considering some of the major themes found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs and calling it “How to Live Wisely and Well.” One of those major themes has to do with parenting. Solomon, one of Israel’s great kings, thought it very important to pass along sound principles that had to do with being a parent. Why so? The strength and stability of Israel as a nation depended upon young people being trained and taught appropriately. Not much has changed in 3,000 years. Has there ever been a time when we need wise parents and wise parenting more than we do now? Can we afford to be ignorant of or to ignore what God has to say on that subject in His Word? Here’s four simple truths from the book of Proverbs about being a wise parent. Number one:

### **WISE PARENTS KNOW KIDS REQUIRE DISCIPLINE.**

Underneath every statement about parenting in Proverbs is a fundamental assumption: kids need discipline. For instance, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” (22:15 NIV) Kids are not born wise. Wisdom about life and how to live it must be taught to them just like you teach them how to dress, how to read and how to drive a car. Now you might look at that word “folly” and think of it as a kind of mischievous, childish or “kids will be kids” kind of thing. But that word “folly” comes from “foolishness” – an attitude of heart and mind the Bible takes very seriously. You don’t have to be a kid to be foolish or have a heart that’s full of folly. Foolishness essentially is an approach to life and living that resents God, rejects His authority and has no place for Him in your life. Foolishness hates instruction or correction. Foolishness is intent on getting your own way regardless of who gets hurt. Foolishness is living life from a self-centered platform. In other words, every person is born a sinner which is exactly what the Bible says in many places.

How can this be? Every child – every person – reveals his or her heart by his or her actions. Proverbs says, “Even children are known by the way they act, whether their conduct is pure, and whether it is right.” (20:11 NLT) Certainly a kid is shaped by his or her environment – family, friends, neighborhood, school – but not entirely so. According to that verse, God holds kids responsible for their actions even as He holds adults responsible for their actions. Behavior reveals the heart. And as a parent, that verse is both an encouragement and a warning. Here’s the encouragement part. When you see in your child loving behavior, kind actions and gentle words, you want to encourage that in every

way possible. Be all over that with words of praise and pats on the back. Why? That doesn't come naturally to any of us! When you see good stuff in your child's life, it means God is at work in them in some way, shape or form. Praise God when you see that and make sure your kid knows that you're pleased and blessed to see godly attitudes and actions coming out in his or her life.

Now here's the warning part. When you see sinful, self-centered behavior from your child, don't be shocked. Your little darling is, in fact, a sinner – a spiritually lost little creature who needs salvation through Jesus just as much as the next person. Don't ignore sinful, self-centered behavior. God says that foolishness is so integral to being a human beings that it's "bound up in the heart" of every child – of every person – from day one. Someone needs to confront that built in foolishness. Guess what, Mom and Dad? That "someone" is you!

Solomon calls it "the rod of discipline." When I hear that phrase, I envision a great big stick being used on a child's backside. But I don't believe that's the deepest meaning. We're going to get to the issue of physical punishment in a moment, but I don't think that was Solomon's primary thought when he talks about "the rod of discipline." Instead, I believe "the rod of discipline" was sort of a blanket phrase to cover anything and everything a wise parent does to confront foolishness in a child. Mom and Dad, you are called by God to confront foolishness when you see it in your kid. Discipline is needed to separate the heart from folly so that the heart gets the chance to get connected to wisdom at some point. If that doesn't happen, foolishness tightens itself around the heart and it's much harder to disconnect it from the heart over time. That leads to a second simple truth about wise parenting in Proverbs.

## **WISE PARENTS KNOW THEY MUST PROVIDE DISCIPLINE.**

If kids require discipline according to God, then it's just as true that He makes parents the primary people to provide it: not schools, not society, not the government and not the church. Parents. The stakes are very high according to Proverbs. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." (22:6 NIV) That word "train" is the same word for "discipline." It's a mistake to think "discipline" is just another word for "punishment." No, discipline is your entire parenting approach or mind-set towards your kid. Discipline or training is concerned ultimately about shaping your kid's habits and desires. Discipline or training is interested in shaping your kid's ambitions and values. Discipline or training is passionate about helping your child relate to other people and to God in healthy ways. Punishment, on the other hand, is just a part of discipline – an important part, as we'll see, but not the whole thing by any means.

There are some important assumptions in that verse – Proverbs 22:6 – we need to drill down on. First, God assumes that habits learned early in life have a way of becoming ingrained and set in a person as they get older. Whether the habits are good or bad depends largely on that person's parents. How you treat other

people; how you express anger; what you do when you're disappointed; how you deal with stress; what you do when you're faced with a decision to act morally or immorally – all that begins in childhood. Mom and Dad, let's face it. That adorable munchkin is born foolish. If you're a wise parent, you step up to the plate when praise is needed, when affirmation is needed, when sympathy is needed, but just as much as when correction is needed, warning is needed and punishment is needed. Your ability to step up shapes your child's inner character correctly. By all means, you do it as lovingly, as positively and as gently as possible, but you do it. Why? The stakes are too high not to do it! Foolish parents overlook or ignore sinful attitudes and actions in their kids. They ignore foolishness. They shrug their shoulders and hope the child just grows out of it eventually. But the fact is that no one grows out of being foolish. You just find increasingly sophisticated ways of expressing your foolishness.

Second, God assumes that wise parents start training and disciplining their kids early in life. Let me tell you about Bradford the Barbarian. Real kid. Real story. A young couple invited a friend over for dinner. Mom and Dad were highly intelligent people with advanced degrees who had decided to create a "child-centered" home. Bradford, their five year old son, had everything at his disposal. When the guest arrived, he accidentally stepped on one of Bradford's dolls and was greeted by this statement from Bradford, "Watch where you're walking or you'll have to buy me a new one!" Entering the front door, the guest discovered quickly that this was Bradford's place, not his parents. The furnishings had once been of high quality, but now looked as if the Terminator had passed through. Mom, Dad and the guest attempted to have a cup of hot cider in the family room, but Bradford was busy running his video games. Trying to find a place to sit down was virtually impossible.

Bradford got to eat first in the living room so he wouldn't be lonely. At the age of five, he still had to be strapped into a high chair to get through one meal. As the adults started their salad in the dining room, Bradford dumped his dinner on the carpet and proceeded to pour his milk on top of it to ensure that the peas and carrots would go deep down into the carpet fibers. Mom begged, "Brad, honey, don't do that. Mommy wants you to grow up strong and healthy like Daddy. I'll get you some more dinner while Daddy cleans up." While Mom and Dad cleaned up, Bradford unstrapped himself from his high chair and joined their guest in the dining room helping himself to the guest's dinner.

The guest said politely, "I think you should wait for your own dinner," and then removed Bradford's hand from his salad bowl. Bradford swung his leg to kick the guest in the knee, but the guest moved so quickly out of the way that Bradford missed, came off his feet and landed hard on his backside. He screamed and ran to his mother, sobbing, "He hit me!" When his parents asked what happened, the guest explained that Bradford had fallen accidentally and then added (tongue firmly in cheek), "I'd never hit the head of a household!" The guest realized it was time to go when Mom and Dad placed granola cookies on

the stairs as enticement to get Bradford to go to bed. He literally ate his way up to bed! Sure, Bradford the Barbarian is an extreme example, but that's what can happen if, as a parent, you assume that kids grow out of self-centered, foolish behavior. Can you imagine Bradford as an adult, as a husband or as a father?

Notice a third assumption from Proverbs 22:6. God assumes that wise parental discipline is intentional, planned and consistent. You don't just hope your kid turns out OK. Wise parents observe their child closely and nip foolish attitudes early in life. They confront foolishness before it begins to express itself in major ways. For instance, a wise parent refuses to see exaggeration as just being cute. Why? Exaggeration is lying and a wise parent lovingly confronts that tendency before it becomes a habit. A wise parent refuses to allow a child to slip out of an assigned chore or take all day to get it done. Why? Laziness and procrastination develop into bad habits. A wise parent refuses to tolerate harassing or hurting an animal. Why? You learn to be cruel just like you learn to be kind. Wise parents realize God has placed them in the unique position of confronting and challenging foolishness in their kids the best they can. They do it as lovingly, humbly and gently as possible, but they do it. Here's a third truth.

### **WISE PARENTS KNOW THAT PUNISHMENT IS PART OF DISCIPLINE.**

We hear today of so many tragic, horrific stories about the physical abuse of kids. The Bible never advocates violence against or abuse of children in any way, shape or form – be it verbal, emotional, physical or sexual. Children are made in God's image and they have a God-given right to nurture, protection and love. But it's a mistake to conclude that every form of physical punishment is abusive. God's Word is pretty clear on this issue. Proverbs says, "A refusal to correct is a refusal to love; love your children by disciplining them.... Don't fail to discipline your children. They won't die if you spank them. Physical discipline may well save them from death." (13:24 MSG, 23:13-14 NLT)

Physical punishment done God's way is only ever done out of loving concern for a kid's ultimate welfare never out of hatred or uncontrolled anger. That's how it's different than abuse. Godly physical punishment is motivated by love. Physical abuse is motivated by anger and a desire to hurt. There are other major differences. Proper punishment is fair and the child knows why he or she is being punished. Abuse is unfair and the child is clueless why it's happening. Proper punishment preserves a child's dignity. Abuse degrades a child. Proper punishment is balanced and limited. Abuse is extreme and brutal. Proper punishment never leaves any kind of scar. Abuse leaves both physical and emotional scars. Proper punishment actually builds a child's self-esteem. Abuse just destroys a child's sense of self-worth and personal value.

There's some truth to the wise old saying, "The ears of a boy are on his backside." At times a child has to be confronted with the consequences of living unwisely. A wise parent knows that child must come to associate pain and

discomfort with wrong actions. I believe God has created of portion of the human anatomy that can receive a moderate amount of pain with no lasting injury. Nevertheless, that pain has a way of sending a message to the inner ears of a child very quickly and effectively. What is it? Foolishness has painful consequences in life. When you teach a child that, you love him or her.

If you fail to send your kids that message, Mom and Dad, you're guilty of awful neglect. Bad behavior is rewarded by neglect. Spoiled children are not well-loved kids. Just the opposite. Show me a spoiled child and I'll show you a parent who is unwilling to experience the pain of punishing his or her own kid. Of course, it's hard to spank your child! You weren't meant to enjoy it! If you do, you've moved over to the abuse area. But a parent who refuses to confront his or her kid loves himself or herself more than the child. They want to avoid the pain of confrontation. Sadly, they only delay that pain for a few years and then it's often far more serious and much more painful to deal with. Then it might be a call from the police, or the sentence of a judge, or – worst of all – the report from the county coroner. Mom and Dad, if you don't confront your kids about their own inherent foolishness, sooner or later someone will. So start early. Be balanced. Be consistent. Be reasonable. Be loving. But do it.

I'm the only person I know who actually got spanked on his birthday. I received a gift of a bow and arrow set with those rubber-tipped "looks like a little plunger" arrows. Somehow the bow string broke in the midst of the party and I got really frustrated about the fact that this brand new gift that I'd just gotten was already broken. In my anger, I started whipping one of my party guests with the broken string of the bow. My mom caught me in the act and "righteous indignation" doesn't quite capture her reaction. It didn't matter that it was my birthday. My suffering personal embarrassment was not her concern. I got thoroughly and promptly spanked. My mom sent a message via my rear end to my inner ears that I've never forgotten: when things go wrong in life, Rick, you don't lash out and hurt innocent people. It was a piece of discipline I needed to learn about life and she had the courage to call me on it. Here's a fourth truth.

### **WISE PARENTS KNOW THEIR ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES.**

If you're a wise parent, you know you can't be passive about parenting. You believe what God says. How you parent those kids God gave you will have inevitable consequences both for you and them. When you fail to discipline them in love – and, remember, by discipline we mean the whole task of training not just punishment – disgrace and death will be the consequences. Proverbs says, "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.... To discipline a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child." (19:18 NIV, 29:15 NLT)

Do you see the assumption there? At best, failure to discipline your child will mean disgrace. At worst, failure to discipline your child can contribute to his or

her death. Yes, it can mean literal death, but there are all kinds of death. There's the death of self-respect, the death of self-control, the death of being able to have a healthy relationship with others, the death of being able to make good moral choices and the death of wanting to have God in your life. That's a sobering thought, isn't it? Mom and Dad, unless you decide to confront that natural, "built in from birth" foolishness in your kid's heart – with all the love in your heart possible and depending on God's grace for discernment and strength – you will disgrace yourself and contribute to the moral, spiritual – and maybe even the physical – death of your own child.

Let me add this thought. These proverbs state principles that are true most of the time and in most situations. They're not intended to offer absolute promises; instead, they provide accurate principles. Nor are they intended to address every imaginable situation or problem between parents and kids. Meaning what? On the one hand, I've seen kids grow up in great homes with lots of loving discipline and, then, - for reasons that are impossible to discern – those kids reject their parent's training and turn their backs on God. On the other hand, I've seen kids from terribly dysfunctional homes turn out to be wonderful human beings who love God despite all the disadvantages of their upbringing. All of that to say just this. When you see a parent struggling with his or her kid's behavior, don't be too quick to judge or make negative assumptions. Some stuff in life you just can't explain. It's a mystery. When you see a struggling, hurting parent, your job is to be supportive, compassionate, understanding and prayerful.

Is there a payoff for providing faithful, loving discipline? According to Proverbs there is! "Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will make your heart glad." (29:17 NLT) Yes, you can get to a place of rest and peace in your relationship with your child. It might not happen until that child leaves home and starts his or her own life. But hang in there. Trust God for that time in life when your child will make your heart glad even if it isn't today. That word for "glad" in that verse can refer to delicious kinds of food that bring delight to your taste buds. Well-disciplined kids end up having that kind of effect on your mind and heart. They bring you delight, joy, satisfaction and enjoyment. So take courage, Mom and dad! The pain, the patience and the persistence of raising kids wisely and well will bring a wonderful payoff down the road.

A medieval sidewalk superintendent asked three stone masons on a construction project what they were doing. The first replied that he was laying bricks. The second said his work was building a wall. But only the third worker revealed a proper sense of esteem for his own work when he said, "I am raising a great cathedral." If someone asked you what was your role as a Mom or Dad, what would you say? "I just bring home the paycheck.... I'm the family chauffeur, cook and maid." I hope more of us here today would say something like this: "I'm raising children made in God's image for God's glory." There's no nobler calling this side of heaven. So do it wisely and well!