

WISE PARENTING**PROVERBS 22:6**

Nobody ever said being a parent was a piece of cake. Mark Twain, the famous American author, once gave his reliably unique perspective on parenting. “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 shut 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!

Last week we began considering some of the major themes in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. I’m calling this message series “How To Live Wisely & Well.” One of those major themes has to do with parenting. Solomon, one of Israel’s kings, thought it was very important to pass along sound principles having to do with being a parent. Why? Back then, 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 ignore what God has to say on the subject of parenting in His Word? Godly parenting is an important part of living wisely and well. Here’s a few simple truths from the book of Proverbs about being a wise parent. First...

WISE PARENTS KNOW CHILDREN REQUIRE DISCIPLINE.

Underneath every statement about parenting in Proverbs is a fundamental assumption: kids need discipline. For example, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.” (Pro 22:15 NIV) Kids are not born wise. Actually, no one is born wise. Wisdom about life and how to live it must be taught just like you teach kids how to dress, how to read, or how to drive a car. You might hear that word “folly” and think of it as a kind of mischievous, childish, or “kids will be kids” kind of thing. But the word “folly” comes from “foolishness.” That’s an attitude of heart and mind the Bible takes very seriously. Foolishness can become an approach to life and how you live it. You don’t have to be a kid to be foolish or have a heart that’s full of folly. Foolishness resents God, rejects His authority, and chooses to ignore Him. Foolishness hates to be corrected or even taught. Foolishness is all about getting your own way regardless of who gets hurt. Foolishness lives life from a self-centered platform. Foolishness is about being a sinner which is exactly what the Bible says is true of every person.

How can this be? Every child – every person – reveals their heart by their 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 their environment – family, friends, neighborhood, school – but not entirely so. According to that verse, God holds kids responsible for their own actions even as He does adults. Behavior reveals the heart of a person - adult or child. Parents should be both encouraged and warned by that verse. Here’s the encouragement part. When you see in your child kind actions, loving behavior, and gentle words, you want to encourage that in every way possible. Be all over and about that with words of praise and pats on the back. Why? When you see good stuff in your kid’s life, it means God is at work in them

in some way, shape, or form. That god stuff doesn't come naturally to any of us! Praise God when that happens and make sure your kid knows you're pleased and blessed to see godly attitudes and godly behavior coming out of his or her life.

Here's the warning part. When you observe self-centered, selfish, or sinful behavior in 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 anyone else. Don't ignore ungodly behavior or attitudes in your child. God says foolishness is so integral to being a human being that it's "bound up in the heart" of every child – every person – from day one. And someone needs to confront that built in foolishness. Guess what, Mom and Dad? That "someone" is you! You've been elected and appointed.

Solomon called it "the rod of discipline." When I hear that phrase, I admit I envision a great big stick coming down on a kid's backside. But that's not the phrase's deepest meaning. We're going to get to the issue of physical punishment in a few minutes, but I'm not convinced that's what Solomon meant by "the rod of discipline." Instead, it was kind of a blanket phrase to cover anything and everything a wise parent does to confront foolishness in a child. Mom and Dad, you're called by God to confront foolishness when you see it in your kid. Discipline is needed to separate a kid's heart from folly so the heart gets the opportunity to get connected to God and His wisdom. If that doesn't happen, foolishness tightens itself around the heart and it's much harder to get it disconnected the longer you ignore it. That leads to a second truth about wise parenting from the book of Proverbs.

WISE PARENTS KNOW THEY MUST PROVIDE DISCIPLINE.

If kids require discipline according to God, then it's just as true He makes parents the primary people to provide it. Not schools, not the government, not society at large, and not even the church. Parents. The stakes are very high according to Proverbs. It says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." (22:6 NIV) The word "train" there is the same word for "discipline" in Proverbs. It's a mistake to think the word "discipline" is just another word for "punishment." No, discipline is your entire approach to parenting your kid. Discipline or training is ultimately concerned about shaping your child's habits and desires. Discipline or training wants to shape your kid's ambitions and values. Discipline or training is passionate about helping your child relate other people and to God in healthy, positive ways. Punishment is a part of discipline – to be sure – but discipline is a whole lot bigger and more comprehensive.

Do you see some important assumptions in that verse – Proverbs 22:6? First, God assumes habits learned early in life have a way of becoming ingrained and set in a person as they get older. Now, whether those habits are good or bad depends largely on the parents of that person. How you treat people, how you express anger, what you do when you get disappointed, how you deal with stress, what you do when you're faced in a decision to act morally or immorally – all that begins in childhood. Mom and Dad, let's face it. Your 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 also when punishment is needed. Your ability to step up when it's appropriate will shape your child's inner character correctly. Yes, by all means, do it as positively and gently as possible, but you must do it. The stakes are just too high to not do it! Foolish parents overlook or ignore sinful attitudes and actions in their kids. They ignore foolishness. They shrug their shoulders and hope the kid just grows out of it eventually. But the fact is no one just grows out of being foolish. You just find increasingly sophisticated or sneaky ways of being foolish.

Second, God assumes 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. They had decided to create a "child-centered" home. Bradford, their five year old son, had everything at his disposal. When the dinner guest arrived, he accidentally stepped on one of Bradford's toys and was greeted by this statement from Bradford himself, "Watch where you're walking or you'll have to buy me a new one!" The guest discovered quickly this was Bradford's place, not his parents. The furnishings had once been of high quality, but now looked as if the Terminator himself had passed through. Mom, Dad, and dinner 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 even to sit down was virtually impossible.

Bradford got to eat his dinner first in the living room so he wouldn't be lonely. Even at age five, he still had to be strapped into a highchair to get through one meal. As the three adults started on their salads in the dining room, Bradford dumped his dinner on the carpet and proceeded to pour his milk on top of it just to ensure the peas and carrots would go even deeper 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 highchair and joined their guest in the dining room.

When he attempted to help himself to the guest's dinner, the guest said politely, "I think you should wait for your own dinner." He removed Bradford's hand from his salad bowl. Bradford swung his leg to kick the guest in the knee, but the guest saw it coming and moved quickly out of the way. Bradford missed, came off his feet, and landed hard on his backside. He screamed and ran to his mother, sobbing, "He hit me!" When Mom and Dad asked what had happened, the dinner guest explained Bradford had fallen accidentally. Then he added (tongue lodged firmly in cheek), "I'd never hit the head of a household!" He finally decided it was time to head home when Mom and Dad placed granola cookies on the stairs as an enticement to get Bradford to go to bed. He literally ate his way up to his bedroom! Sure, Bradford the Barbarian is an extreme example, but that's what can happen if – as a parent – you assume kids just grow out of selfish, foolish behavior. Can you imagine Bradford as an adult, a husband, or a father?

Notice a third assumption from Proverbs 22:6. God assumes 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 example, a wise parent refuses to see a tendency to exaggerate as just being cute. Why? Exaggeration is lying and a wise parent lovingly confronts it before it becomes an ingrained habit. A wise parent refuses to allow a kid to slip out of assigned chores or take all day long to get something done. Why? Because laziness and procrastination develop into bad habits. A wise parent refuses to tolerate harassing or hurting a pet. Why? Because 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. Yes, they do it as lovingly, humbly, and gently as possible, but they do it. Out of love, they refuse to shrink from or evade the responsibility. A third truth.

WISE PARENTS KNOW A PART OF DISCIPLINE IS PUNISHMENT.

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 not all physical punishment is abusive. 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.” (Pro 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. It’s never an expression of uncontrolled anger. That’s what makes it different than abuse. Godly physical punishment is motivated by love. Physical abuse is motivated by anger and a sinful desire to hurt a child. 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 up a child’s self-esteem. Abuse just destroys a child’s sense of self-worth and personal value.

There’s an old saying that puts it like this, “The ears of a boy are on his backside.” Some truth to that! At times a child has to be confronted with the consequences of living unwisely. A wise parent knows that kids must come to a place where they associate pain or discomfort with wrong actions. It seems God has created a portion of the human anatomy that can receive a mild amount of pain with no lasting injury. But that pain can send a message to the inner ears of a child quickly and effectively. What’s the message? “If I act foolishly, I will have pain in my life.” When you teach a child to associate pain or discomfort with folly early in life, you actually love him or her.

Mom and Dad, if you evade that responsibility or fail to send that message to your kids, you’re guilty of a kind of neglect. Your neglect rewards bad behavior or attitudes.

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 personal pain of punishing his or her kid. Of course, it's hard to punish your kid especially if it includes appropriate physical punishment. You weren't meant to enjoy it! If you do, it's become abuse and you're sick. But a parent who refuses to confront his or her kid actually loves his own comfort more than his or her child. They just want to avoid the pain of confrontation. But, sadly, they only delay their kid's pain for a few years and then it's often far more serious and much more painful to deal with. Then it might well be a call from the police, or a judge handing down a jail sentence, or – worst of all – the report from the county coroner's office. Mom and Dad, if you don't confront your kids about the foolishness they're born with naturally, sooner or later, someone will. So start early. Be balanced. Be loving. Be reasonable. Be consistent. But, for everyone's sake, do it.

I'm still the only person I know who actually got spanked on his birthday. I received a gift of a bow and arrow with those rubber tipped "looks like a little plunger" arrows. Somehow the bow string broke in the midst of the party. I got really frustrated about the fact this brand new gift 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. "Righteous indignation" doesn't quite capture her reaction! It didn't matter that it was Ricky's birthday. My suffering personal embarrassment and possible injury to my fragile self-esteem was not her concern. I got thoroughly and promptly spanked. Mom sent a message via my rear end to my inner ears that I've never forgotten. "When things go wrong in your life, Rick, you don't lash out and hurt innocent people." It was a piece of discipline I needed to learn early in life and she had the courage to call me on it. As you can tell, it's a life lesson I've never forgotten. A fourth truth about wise parenting.

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 in Proverbs and elsewhere in Scripture. 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, please remember, by discipline we mean the whole task of training a child 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 children produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child." (Pro 19:18 NIV, 29:15 NLT)

Do you see an important assumption right there? At best, failure to discipline a child will end in disgrace. At worst, failure to discipline your child can contribute to his or her death. Sure, it can mean literal death, but there are different kinds of death. There's the death of self-respect, the death of self-control, the death of being able to sustain healthy relationships with others, the death of being able to make good moral choices, and even the death of wanting to love and obey God. A sobering thought, yes? Mom and Dad, unless you decide to confront that all too natural, "built in from birth" foolishness bound up n your kid's heart – with all the love in your heart possible and

absolutely depending on God's grace for discernment and strength – you will disgrace yourself and you will also contribute to the moral, spiritual, and - maybe even the – physical death of your child. An overstatement? Well, read Proverbs for yourself and see if you come to a different conclusion on what it says about wise parenting.

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. No, instead, they provide accurate principles. Nor are they intended to address every imaginable situation or problem between parents and kids. Meaning what? Well, on the one hand, I've seen kids grow up in great homes full of lots of loving discipline and – then for reasons that are impossible for me to discern – those kids reject their parents' training and even turn their backs on God. On the other hand, I've seen kids from terribly dysfunctional homes turn out to be devoted followers of Jesus and just wonderful human beings despite all the disadvantages of their upbringing. So, when you see a parent struggling with their kid's behavior or attitudes, don't be too quick to pass judgment on their parenting skills or make negative assumptions. Some stuff in life you just can't explain. It's a mystery. Instead, when you see a parent struggling with their kid's innate foolishness, your job and mine is to be supportive, compassionate, prayerful, and understanding.

Is there a payoff for providing faithful, loving discipline? Proverbs says there is! "Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will make your heart glad." (Pro 29:17 NLT) Yes, Mom and Dad, believe it or not, you can get to a place of rest and peace in your relationship with your child. It might not happen until your child leaves home and starts his or her life away from you. 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. I understand that word for "glad" in that verse can refer to delicious kinds of food that bring delight to your taste buds. Well-disciplined kids can have that kind of effect on your mind and heart eventually. They can bring you delight, joy, satisfaction, and enjoyment. So take courage, Mom and Dad! The pain, the patience, and the persistence of raising your kids wisely and well will bring a wonderful payoff down the road if you stay at it consistently and trust God through it.

Back in the middle ages, someone asked three stone masons what they were doing on a construction project. The first mason replied he was just laying bricks. The second mason said his work was just about building a wall. Only the third mason revealed a proper sense of value for his work. He said, "I'm raising a great cathedral." If someone asked you today, Mom or Dad, about how you saw your role as a parent, what would you say? "I just bring home the paycheck." Or, "I'm just the family cook, maid, and chauffeur." I hope every Mom and Dad here today could instead say something like this, "I'm raising children made in God's image for God's glory." There's no greater, nobler, or more important calling this side of Heaven. Do it wisely and well.