

IS PROVERBS 22:6 A PROMISE FOR PARENTS?

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Is Proverbs 22:6 a promise?

Many Christian parents feel guilty when their children do not “turn out right.” They ask questions like, “What did we do wrong? What else could we have done?” What is more problematic is that the guilt so many Christian parents feel finds its root in the Bible. After all, Proverbs 22:6 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

This verse has produced much shame in Christian parents because it seems to promise that if parents will raise their kids in the right way when they are young, then when they are grown they will continue to live the right way, and if you do not raise your children in the right way, then they will live the wrong kind of life. The logic seems clear and straightforward: if you have grown children who did not turn out right, then you must not have raised them right. So, added to the heartache of a child not walking with the Lord is the biblical condemnation of your parenting.

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE PROMISE

Is that really what Proverbs 22:6 teaches? Some scholars try to scoot around the problem by contending that the Proverbs are not promises. But there is a different way to understand Proverbs 22:6 without undermining its promissory nature. Instead of being a promise that “if you do right then your kids will turn out right,” it is a reverse promise – a warning – that if you do not correct your children when they are young, then they will run amuck, wanting their own way as an adult.

Almost every English translation of this verse adds a word to the text that is not in the Hebrew. The English says something along the lines of “train a child in the right way” or the “way he should go.” In the Hebrew, there is no descriptor or qualifier; so English translations add the word “right” or

“should” to aid in interpretation. Literally the verse should be rendered, “Train a child in his way, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” What does that mean? If you give a child his way when he is young, then when he is old he will insist on having his own way. This translation best fits with the flow of Proverbs that teaches children are foolish by nature and need to be corrected (cf. Prov. 20:9; 22:15; 29:15).

The clear warning of Proverbs – despite Disney’s messaging – is that following your own heart, or your own “way,” is the epitome of foolishness (Prov. 14:12; 28:26). That is why Proverbs says that the parent’s role is to correct their children’s natural foolishness, and so Proverbs 22:6 is a warning that parents must discipline their children’s foolish character before it is set. The Genesis narrative also suggests that the body comes with needs. Adam would be hungry, so God gave him the fruit of the garden. These needs are an expression embedded within the created order that Adam is finite, dependent, and derived.

NO SPOILED CHILDREN

Proverbs 22:6 heavily critiques the buddy-parent philosophy. It warns that if you allow your child to be self-centered now, then he will certainly be later. You have to say “no” so that you do not turn your children into Veruca Salt – the spoiled child from Willy Wonka’s factory who received everything she ever wanted. Lori Gottlieb’s article in *The Atlantic* exposed a generation of parenting that cannot hold the line with their children:

A kid will say, “Can we get ice cream on the way home?” And the parent will say, “No, it’s our day. Ice-cream day is Friday.” Then the child will push and negotiate, and the parent, who probably things negotiating is ‘honoring her child’s opinion,’ will say, “Fine, we’ll get ice cream today, but don’t ask me tomorrow, because the answer is no!” The teacher laughed. “Every year, parents come to me and say, ‘Why won’t my child listen to me? Why won’t she take no for an answer?’ And I say, “Your child won’t take no for an answer, because the answer is never no!”¹

OUR CHILDREN’S GREATEST NEED

Proverbs 22:6 ultimately demonstrates that our children’s greatest need is the Good News about Jesus. Proverbs is clear that discipline is evangelism, “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” (Prov. 23:13-14). If we do not correct our children, then they will not recognize their sin or that their sin will be held accountable.

Some Christian parents misunderstand grace as calling for a laissez faire attitude towards discipline, but that is deadly. Discipline shows our children that there are consequences and accountability for sinful actions, and it demonstrates that there is a standard of right and wrong – one that they have fallen short of and thus need a Savior. Discipline is not simply meting out punishment – however you choose to carry it out under biblical guidelines. Discipline is an opportunity for a gospel conversation

1. Lori Gottlieb, “How to Land Your Kid in Therapy,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2011, accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/how-to-land-your-kid-in-therapy/308555/>

where you tell your child that your love for them – and God’s love for them – is not conditioned on their behavior, where you confess that you are a sinner who has sinned in the exact same ways that they have, and where you acknowledge that you need God’s saving grace in Christ as much as they do.

So, let us heed the warning and promise of Proverbs 22:6, so that in glory we can say with our Lord Jesus, “Here I am with the children you have given to me” (Heb. 2:13).