

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Faith. Family. Fusion.

Loving Kids to Jesus

Study #4

(Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4; Hebrews 12; Deuteronomy 6)

Introduction: Puzzling through the early years...

“They are more numerous than the entire Hispanic and African-American populations...combined. They have more energy than a nuclear power plant and are as confounding as the federal budget. They have tastes as fluid as the Missouri River and dreams that will redefine the future. They are a marketer’s pot of gold at the end of the rainbow - and the most lovable and frustrating beings on the planet. We are talking about America’s children.”

So writes George Barna in his book, Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions.

The Bible says that children are blessings. And both parents and non-parents alike will agree that children are delightful.

Innocence, creativity, mischief, foolishness, energy, boundary testing - and more! - reside in the heart of a child.

And today, as we conclude our “Faith. Family. Fusion.” series, we will be focusing on how we can wisely direct children to maturity and how we can winsomely present Jesus to our (sometimes puzzlingly) delightful children.

When it comes to raising children, few things are more important than knowing them and loving them. The Bible is big on parents knowing and loving their kids.

And I think that this - knowing and loving our children - is the thought behind one of the best known and perhaps most misunderstood verses in the Bible.

In the Book of Proverbs, wise King Solomon wrote words that most every parent has heard and many have memorized.

Know and Love Your Child

Solomon’s Wisdom

[Proverbs 22:6] Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Train in THE WAY to go

There are a couple of different ways of looking at this verse.

One interpretation of this well-known verse would tell us that Solomon is instructing parents to direct their children onto the correct moral and spiritual path.

Looked at this way, he is saying that if we train our children to follow Jesus, they will end up following Jesus.

Most who see the verse in this light do not see it as an ironclad guarantee, although some do.

Recognizing that it is a *proverb* (a statement of the way the world generally works), most interpreters who see the verse this way will usually say that parents greatly increase the likelihood that their child will follow Jesus in adulthood - even if there are significant period of straying - if they train him or her to follow Jesus when they are children.¹

Perhaps you have heard this interpretation before.

¹ Sid Buzzell, writing in the Bible Knowledge Commentary (authored by Dallas Seminary professors) sees the verse as statement of a proverbial truism that, generally speaking, when a child is taught to go the correct way, morally and spiritually, he ends up there.

And, indeed, that may be what Solomon is saying. There is, however, another way to view the verse.

Train in HIS WAY to go

I come to the interpretation I do thanks in large measure to the authors of the most technical commentaries on the Hebrew Old Testament I own, the series written by the German scholars, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, in 1872.²

These scholars tell us that the verse is not teaching parents to train their child to walk in a godly way. They tell us that this particular verse is not about the importance of directing children toward the biblical way of living (although, obviously, that is a very important thing to do!).

No, properly understood, there is something more personal and individual going on in the words of Proverbs 22:6.

The original language (Hebrew) says, literally, to train up a child in “*HIS* (the child’s) *WAY*.”

The real “gist” of the verse is that parents should give instruction to their children according to their children’s ability and inclination to hear³ AND according to their children’s particular “bent.”⁴

Solomon is telling parents that they are to become keen and perceptive students of their children. Parents, know and love your child for the special gift of God he or she is.

Cookie cutter parenting formulas, and “one size fits all” models dishonor the creativity of the God who made them and it ignores the beautiful uniqueness of every child.

Parents with one child will marvel that after eighteen years of getting to know that one child, the child still offers plenty of surprises. Parents with more than one child will marvel that such different children came forth from the same gene pool.

And these wonderfully unique children are to be dealt with uniquely and according to their individual “bent.”

One of my favorite trees is the crepe myrtle. It is a prodigious bloomer through the spring and summer in San Antonio. Different varieties produce strikingly different colored blooms.

Correctly pruning a crepe myrtle takes some skill. A good arborist will prune the tree in accord with the general shape and tendency of the tree.

Less careful pruners commit what is called “crepe murder”! They just top off the several trunks of the tree at the same height without making allowance for the uniqueness of this or that branch.

The result is a monstrosity nature would have never produced.

Uncareful parents who treat all of their children the same, without regard for each child’s individual tendencies, are equally unwise.

Chief among God’s commissions to parents is the charge to know each of their children’s peculiarities, weaknesses, strengths, temptations and abilities - and then deal with them accordingly.

Prune them accordingly. Train him, train her, in his or her way.

Adults, remember back to when you were a child. Do you ever remember being told by a parent after a success, “*You are really good at this. I could see you being a great success in life in this thing.*”?

If you heard such a comment from a father or from a mother, it probably shaped your self-concept, inspired a vision, and drove your future.

² Translated and published by Eerdmans.

³ Keil and Delitzsch write, “The instruction given to children should be conformed to the nature of children. The manner of instruction ought to regulate itself according to the stage of life and that stage’s peculiarities. The method ought to be arranged according to the degree of development which the mental and bodily life of the child has achieved.” They are not as persuaded that the thought is to take the child’s individual nature into consideration, but this idea is not foreign to their view.

⁴ Chuck Swindoll agrees with Keil and Delitzsch, as does Bill Hybels in his book, Proverbs: Making Life Work.

My nephew, Travis Kerr, is about to graduate High School and is going to Texas A&M next year with a dream. He's planning on majoring in aerospace engineering. Travis is a very bright kid and has always had an interest in building stuff. His parents recognized this interest early on and purchased just about every Lego set imaginable as he was growing up! They saw the direction his life/tree was trending and trained him accordingly.

Guillermo and I were talking about this verse at one point last week. He came up with the negative example of a Dad who was a standout football player in High School and then forced his son into the game, despite his son's obvious talent and interest in literature and the arts.

That's a perfect example of how NOT to do it. Moms and dads, the loving way to parent is to go to school on your kids. That's the only way you'll be able to direct them on to a path that is uniquely suited for them.

Then, Solomon says, when they are older, they will be well-adjusted, mature, responsible adults, contributing to their world in their area of strength. You trained him in the way he should go.

The New Testament chimes in with similar advice when it comes to parents knowing and loving their kids.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul gave parenting counsel that would have been considered somewhat strange in the Roman world of the first century where fathers often ruled their homes with an iron fist.

Paul's Wisdom

[Ephesians. 6:4a] Fathers, do not provoke⁵ (or exasperate) your children to anger...

Exasperating provocations not allowed!

While many parents have been exasperated that Paul says nothing about children not exasperating their parents (which would be another verse), the focus here is on the behavior of parents, which can be quite exasperating to children!

⁵ "Provoke" (Gr. *parorgizete*) means to exasperate (cf. Rom. 10:19; Col. 3:21).

The command forbids parents from making unreasonable demands on children in the everyday course of family life.

- A child may become exasperated when he is, for no apparent reason, singled out for extra chores.
- Children are sometimes provoked to anger if the punishment for wrong-doing has no obvious relationship to the crime committed.
- A child will become frustrated if she senses aloofness or emotional withdrawal from a parent.

If a parent relates to a child in an insensitive way, it can cause bitterness and anger, or it can just as easily result in a child feeling beaten down and defeated.

Moms and dads, you are to work hard at involving yourselves in your children's lives in such a way that they are not exasperated. Bring sensitivity and emotional engagement to the table.

Bring what you understand about your child's unique personality to your every dealing with him. Provide emotional nurture so that she will know the freedom of being well-loved.

Rather, bring them up God's way

Fathers and mothers avoid exasperating their kids when they provide for both the physical and the spiritual needs of their children.

Or, as Paul goes on to say, you ***[Ephesians. 6:4b]...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.***

Now, having heard **inspired wisdom** from Solomon and the Apostle Paul, I'm going to contribute a couple of far less weighty thoughts to the conversation, from my own personal experience.

Dave's Thoughts

Involve yourself early and deeply

My children didn't come gift-wrapped with directions for how to parent - and yours didn't either. Other than "Handle with Care" and "Handle with Prayer" I didn't have many thoughts about how to raise them.

But I have received some advice over the years that has “rung true.” One of those bits of advice came from a man in the church who was then about as old as I am now.

Bob Burnside pulled me aside shortly after I entered the world of parenting and told me, “*Dave, be sure to make big investments in your children’s lives early on, when they are impressionable and when they most want your input.*”

That was - and is - GREAT counsel.

It’s never too late to start pursuing your children if you have not been doing so to this point. So, if your children are teens, and you realize this morning that you’ve not been making big investments in them, start today. It’s never too late to start doing the right thing!

But it’s also never too early, either.

Elementary school aged kids need to be pursued by moms and dad. So do pre-schoolers. So do toddlers and one year olds and six-month old babies and so do newborns.

Those of you who are just beginning the parenting adventure - and I am absolutely delighted to see so many younger families here at Northwest these days - pour yourself into the lives of your young children.

Be as involved in your children’s lives as deeply as possible as early as possible. You will never regret making those investments.

And the corollary to that bit of advice follows.

“Quality time” is no substitute for “quantity time”

I know how busy everybody is today. The pressure on parents is enormous in this twenty-first century world and I have no interest in piling guilt onto moms and dads who are already frazzled, tired, and at their wits end. But I’m going to say it anyway.

If you are a parent with younger children, you must carve out time for them. Your children need **quality** time with you AND they need great **quantities** of time with you.

Look at it this way. Parenting young children takes up only one season of your life. If you live to be seventy-five, you will only spend one third of those years with children at home. (And believe me, those years fly by!)

I once heard a speaker say “*God created time so that everything wouldn’t happen all at once.*” And if God has ordained THIS season as your season for active parenting, pour yourself into that glorious task. Give your kids gobs and gobs of time. It takes gobs and gobs of time to parent!

One of my favorite Old Testament characters is Nehemiah, the architect of the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem in the 5th century BC. In the sixth chapter of that book, while he was deep into the business of rebuilding the wall around the city, Nehemiah was invited to a prestigious meeting with dignitaries from several of the surrounding nations.

What was Nehemiah’s response? The Bible tells us that he sent messengers to the hosts of this shindig, saying, [*Nehemiah 6:3*]...**“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?”**

Parents with small children will not have time for some things. Why? Because they are doing a great work! You are raising the next generation of champions - and that takes time.

In addition to the value of knowing and loving your child, the Bible talks a lot about the importance of parents disciplining their children.

Train/Discipline Your Child

The Danger of a Discipline Deficit

Negative role models

Lack of discipline is disastrous. It is today and it was in biblical times.

In the Old Testament we read about a Jewish priest named Eli. Eli had sons who were notorious for their shameful behavior. These young priests attacked women who came to offer sacrifice to the Lord. They stole sacrifices intended for God.

The Lord eventually brought judgment against the sons, but He specifically rebuked Eli, the father, for not disciplining his sons (1 Samuel 3:13).

Who knows what damage could have been avoided had Eli simply, forthrightly disciplined his sons?

He may have thought that he was being kind to his sons by not saying anything, but the Bible is clear that withholding discipline does children no favors.

Positive instruction

[Proverbs 13:24] He who withholds his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him diligently.

I'm not making a big play here for corporal punishment, although I do think that properly administered, at an appropriate season in a child's life, spanking can have a place in a loving home.

Clearly, punishment must never be abusive, must never be administered in anger or when a parent is out of control. (Parenting demands maturity!). But to not discipline is to not love.

The thing to note from Proverbs 13:24 is that to restrain from providing corrective discipline is not loving. It is hateful. It is consigning a son or a daughter to learn the harsh lessons of life outside of your home where the consequences of disobedience are infinitely harsher.

So, we parents are to take our cues from the way God deals with His children. He disciplines. So should we.

The Importance of Discipline

God's discipline

[Hebrews 12:6] For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.

The Bible is clear throughout that God is willing to allow or to actively bring discipline into the lives of His children so that they (we) will mature as He wants us to.

It is His love that prompts him to discipline - and it is the love of a mother or a father that will prompt him or her to discipline their children.

Discipline will come in two forms. On the one hand, there is directive discipline.

Parents' discipline

Directive

Parents are in a unique position to equip their children to deal with the world's challenges.

Just think of all the stuff your kids will have to know before they venture out into the world alone. They need to know how the world works - and you get to train them! You tell them -

- Why paying interest is bad.
- How to groom.
- The importance of hard work.
- How to prepare for a job interview.
- How to shop for bargains.
- How to change oil.
- How to keep from getting taken advantage of.
- How to shop for insurance.
- The importance of buying quality tools.
- Why it is important to dress modestly.

Bill Hybels wrote, in Proverbs: Making Life Work, "Parents are called upon to dispense practical instructions for effective living, provide knowledge about how the world works, offer loving and balanced discipline, and both teach AND model eternal virtues, life-affirming values and wisdom that is timeless."

Wow!!

Providing this kind of discipline and training is an essential part of the parenting task. But it is not the only part of discipline.

Corrective

Parents, who know their children better than any others, are in a uniquely perfect position to direct and re-direct their children onto the path of wisdom. When your son or daughter strays, direct them back.

Wise parents confront attitudes and behavior. They are not afraid of their children. But they do fear the Lord - and that fear of the Lord frees them to bring loving discipline to bear on the children they desperately love.

Parents strive to always communicate to their children a two part message: Yes, I love you desperately and no, you can't have your own way.

And here is a word to the wise child. For children who are going to be on the receiving end of discipline, trust me, your parents are giving you a great gift when they discipline you.

Children's Response

I love the way Proverbs sometimes smacks us in the face. Solomon doesn't hold anything back here.

[Proverbs 12:1] Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid.

Children, what does that proverb say to you about how important it is to listen to your parents?

It says that if you hate the rebuke that your mom or dad have for you, you're being stupid.

Your parents love you. So, when they correct you, it is for your good. When they warn you about something, pay attention!

When you hear your mother say, "I sure wouldn't do that if I were you!" or when your father says, "Son, I'd think twice before following through on that plan." - pay attention.

When they tell you, "I wish you would choose your friends more carefully" or "You are falling into a pattern that's going to wind up costing you dearly" or "Given your recent history, I don't think I'd do that if I were you" or "You're not going out dressed like that, are you?" - listen to them!

Who provides for your food, clothing, and shelter? Who has known you longer than your parents? Who has your best interests at heart more than your mom and dad? Nobody!

They are among the only people in the world who love you enough to tell you something hard. You will become wise as you pay careful attention to their wisdom, their reproof, and as you learn from their discipline.

So, wise parenting will involve knowing and loving your child and it will certainly involve disciplining your child. But parenting children, for Christian parents, will, first and foremost, be all about raising children to know and love and trust Jesus.

Spiritually Nurture Your Child

Who Will Guide?

The culture/society as the spiritual hub

There is the thought that sometimes circulates among parents, "We'll let our children make up their own minds about matters of faith."

In an age such as ours, when lots of things are up for grabs and lots of ideas are given consideration in the public square it can be tempting to believe that to actually direct a child in spiritual things is not playing fair, or that it is coercive.

The reality is that leaving spiritual nurture up to the culture, or not giving intentional spiritual direction is to set a child adrift on a wild, wind-tossed sea without a rudder for navigating life.

It will lead to a state of affairs similar to that which occurred in Israel during the period of the Judges when ***"every man did what was right in his own eyes."***

That was an intolerable situation in ancient Israel. It will be intolerable in your home!

So, if we agree that spiritual nurture is important and we agree that directing a child into the Christian faith is a good thing - who is best equipped to accomplish that task?

I know, let's entrust our child's spiritual nurture to the church!

The church as the spiritual hub

Now, it is true that we work hard here at Northwest to equip children with biblical truth and wisdom!

With Judy Blake giving oversight and Pastor Guillermo cheering her on, our children's Sunday School teachers are doing a wonderful job. These men and women truly love the Lord. They prepare diligently week in and week out. They love the children who come to their class.

Kelly Blake (our AWANA Commander) and our many AWANA workers team together to serve the children who come to church on Wednesday evenings. They love on the kids. They teach and play with the kids. They help equip the kids for a life of faith.

I believe that what happens at church is important. (You would hope that I believe that!)

BUT, as important as is the church for the spiritual nurture of children, the church is not to be the primary place of spiritual nurture.

No, the place of primary spiritual nurture is the home. Your home.

The home as the spiritual hub

The home is where a child is to learn of God's love and grace, and power. Parents, YOU are your children's primary disciplers.

I really believe that what happens at home is far more important and that that what happens at home makes far more impact on spiritual development than what happens at church.

The most time that any child spends at church is a few hours a week. Compare that to the dozens of waking hours they spend at home. There is no comparison.

As important as I think church is and as much energy as I and others pour into the ministries of our church, the potential for long-lasting life-transforming engagement is infinitely greater at home than at church.

Now I don't know how you feel when you hear me say this. Energized? Empowered? Overwhelmed?

When I first realized that the responsibility for passing on the torch of the faith lay squarely in the lap of the home I was all of the above.

I felt profoundly inadequate for being the "go-to" guy for spiritual nurture when I became a father of first, one, then two, then three children.

How was I to pass on the torch of the faith to my children? My parents had not passed a faith torch to me.

But I heard the words of the Bible, and Moses' words gave me some ideas. I first came to understand that the torch could be passed through the daily routines of life.

Parents, Pass the Torch of Faith!

Through the day to day routine

[Deuteronomy 6:6] These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. [7] You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Eating dinner together gives great opportunities to talk about the things that count. Weekend trips to Home Depot provide the same. Doing something as natural as taking a walk together, where there is nothing else going on - no intrusions from strangers or electronics - provides a setting for intimate conversation, bonding, talking about Jesus, listening.

Parents, think through your day and consider how you might pass the torch of faith to your children in the normal routine of life.

And then there is the part of Moses' words that speak of something more intentional.

Through intentional disciple-making in the home

[Deuteronomy 6:6] These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart...[8] You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. [9] You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Here is where you go out of your way to press Jesus into the life of your child.

You challenge them to memorize a verse from the Bible with you. You invite them to pray with you. You lead them in a Bible study of a topic that interests them.

This is where many parents get terrified and feel woefully inadequate. Not having been trained in the faith by your own parents, you may be tempted to throw up your hands in desperation. You just don't know what to do.

Again, I understand. As a rookie parent, I had no clues about how to conduct family devotions or stuff like that. So...

Kathy and I talked with other parents who were experimenting with family devotional ideas and learned from them. We read books and magazines. We listened to Focus on the Family.

Kathy and I tried stuff. Some of it was OK. Some of it went down in flames. But the key is: try stuff.

Today, I want to encourage you who are parenting. You are right in the thick of it. You're at the pointy end of the spear. You're on the front lines. Try stuff. Go to school and learn about some stuff to try.

Check out resources at:

www.focusonthefamily.com

www.familylifetoday.com

At these sites you'll find great ideas on how to spiritually nurture your children. Try reading some of the books that Guillermo and I have placed out in the foyer.

You parents have what it takes to bring Jesus to your children. And we here at the church want to do everything we can to cheer you on and to support you!

Conclusion:

At any point in history, humanly speaking, the Christian faith is one generation away from extinction. Therefore, nurturing children has to be a priority!

Ultimately, our children are not ours. They have been "loaned" to us for a brief time to nurture and equip to live responsibly, wisely, and for Jesus.

The vision is that every home at Northwest is a home where Jesus is Lord. Whether you are living alone or with extended family or with your spouse with or without children, the dream is that in all of our homes, Jesus is Lord.

May each of us be able to say, with Joshua, ***[Joshua 24:15b]...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord***