

Question: Since the Bible says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6), does this mean that parents are at fault when their children turn bad?

Unfortunately, a heavy burden of guilt has sometimes been placed on parents by a misunderstanding of Proverbs 22:6. Although parents do have the responsibility to provide guidance, the children have responsibility for their own choices in life. The prophet Ezekiel emphasized individual responsibility on the part of children and parents. He said: "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him" (Ezekiel 18:20). In Proverbs 1:8 and 4:1, children are told to listen to the instructions of their fathers and mothers.

The nature of a biblical proverb is to state a general principle, not an absolute law. For example, one proverb says, "The fear of the Lord adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short" (Proverbs 10:27). However, the Bible also tells us how righteous Abel's life was cut short while his murderous brother, Cain, lived many more years (Genesis 4). In addition, we know that Jesus lived without sin; yet his life was cut short.

In a similar way, we need to see that Proverbs 22:6 emphasizes the power and responsibility of parental influence. The underlying principle is that children tend to develop the way their parents have trained them through instruction, discipline and example during the formative years of their lives. However, numerous biblical characters illustrate how sons and daughters often chose a different path from that of their parents. King David's son Absalom rebelled and did great wickedness before God and the people of Israel. The prophet Samuel and the High Priest Eli both had children who did not follow the instructions and training of their fathers. Certainly, these were not perfect parents, any more than we are; but they were good men.

Sometimes parents are at fault when their children turn out bad, but sometimes children from the worst of parents turn out to be good and honorable adults. Therefore, I believe Jesus would offer forgiveness and not guilt to parents who strive to set a godly example before their children. As parents, we must seek to do the best

we can. At best, we will all make parenting mistakes; but our children must take responsibility for their own lives.

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