

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Raising Children, Pt 1

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching; indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck.” ~ Proverbs 1:8-9

Children’s Lives Matter

The organization Black Lives Matter (BLM) enjoyed meteoric growth in popularity in the year 2020. From 2013-2019, the movement was largely localized and uninfluential. But within a few months after the death of Minneapolis resident George Floyd while in police custody on May 25, 2020, the movement grew to become the most influential political movement in the United States. While it has lost some of the support it enjoyed at the height of its popularity—some 67% of American adults backed the movement in a June 2020 Pew Research poll—the movement continues to enjoy widespread support from all sectors of American culture, including from many within the evangelical church.

The movement claims as its *raison d’être* the pursuit of *justice*—a mission few would want to oppose. But in reality, the movement’s mission is anything but just. One of BLM’s central objectives—as expressed in its now hidden “What We Believe” statement—is the destruction of the “Western-prescribed nuclear family structure.” The statement reads, “We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.” In the crosshairs of BLM’s assault are two components of this “family structure”: (1) the necessity of heterosexual, monogamous, lifelong marriage; and (2) the leading role of the father.

This mission to destroy the family is not new. It was central to the agenda of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* infamously called for the “abolition of the family.” The Russian Bolsheviks literally attempted it after the October Revolution of 1917. Some of the first laws to be enacted included efforts to disband with traditional marriage and encourage open sexual relations. The concept of “illegitimate children” was abandoned. Divorce was quick and easy. Men and women freely caroused and the state became the “parent” of the offspring. But as history shows, the experiment resulted in great human suffering and injustice—particularly for the *children*.

The BLM mission to destroy the family today is no less unjust than that of the Bolsheviks. Every statistic shows that children raised in a home without a father are subject to a life of misery. A 2020 US Census Bureau report affirms this: “There is a crisis in America. . . . 18.3 million children—1 in 4—live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home. Consequently, there is a ‘father factor’ in nearly all of the societal ills facing America today.” While BLM claims it has the strategy to bring justice for these “societal ills,” in reality it seeks only to perpetrate them.

The statistics are undeniable. Fatherless homes are the greatest causes of poverty, criminality, abuse, suicide, obesity, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, and depression. But standing in direct opposition to movements like BLM with its mission to perpetuate injustice is biblical wisdom—the book of Proverbs in particular. Proverbs points to the leadership of the father as central to the future success of children and to the stability of society. Considering the intensifying attacks on fatherhood in our day, a careful study of Proverbs is needed now as much as ever. Such a study yields at least **ten principles about the nature of a father’s successful leadership in the lives of his children**. The first five will be considered below.

1. A father’s successful leadership begins by instilling in his children the need to fear God.

The fear of God—a right relationship of reverence, awe, and adoration of Him—is the most basic component of a successful life. Without it there can be no “beginning of knowledge” (1:7; 9:10).

Therefore, it is the primary responsibility of a father to instill the need for this foundational spiritual attitude in his children from the very beginning of their lives.

- **2:1-5; 3:1, 7; 14:26; 24:21**

It is common today for fathers to delegate this responsibility to their wives. Fathers are often passive in discussions related to spiritual things, absent from the home, or too preoccupied with other issues in life. But while mothers do play a significant role in the spiritual instruction of their children, **fathers must lead the way in teaching children the knowledge of God.** Families will be strongest when they do, for this is God's design (Deuteronomy 6:1-2, 4-9; Ephesians 6:4).

Ultimately, Solomon says to his own child, "Give me your heart, my son, and let your eyes delight in my ways" (23:26). A father's successful leadership over his children is focused on the *heart* (see also 3:1-3). It is not simply about instilling in them correct behavior or spending a certain amount of time with them. It is all about the condition of their souls—and this is where the fear of God is critical.

2. A father's successful leadership assumes the depravity of his offspring.

Contrary to extra-biblical sources of ancient wisdom, Proverbs does not affirm that children are born good, innocent, or "blank slates." The foolish thinking and behavior they manifest are not fundamentally the product of their environment, though environmental factors certainly exacerbate such foolishness. To the contrary, the teaching of Proverbs assumes children are all born *in sin* ("foolishness"). A child's natural bent is to depend upon "his own way"—a metaphor for the rebellious heart.

- **3:1, 5; 19:27; 22:15; 29:15**

This wisdom echoes the Bible's direct teaching about the condition of children after the Fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:23; 5:12; etc.).

It is essential for every father to operate from this basic assumption—**that his child is thoroughly depraved.** Yet many fathers, seeking to justify their lack of dedication to the hard work of raising children, or too content with the pseudo-wisdom of this world, convince themselves that their children are really "not that bad." In culpable naiveté, the father proceeds to dedicate his best efforts to a career and things outside of his children.

"What is meant by the concept of total depravity is not that man is wicked as he could possibly be. Bad as we are, we can still conceive of ourselves doing worse things than we do. Rather, it means that sin has such a hold upon us in our natural state, that we never have a positive desire for Christ." —R. C. Sproul

When the child is left to "his own way," the child will always choose convictions and behaviors that are consistent with his sinful nature. It is this realization that sets a father on a path of gospel-parenting, where the central focus of his efforts is not behavioral modification (merely instilling correct, external behaviors) but on confronting the child's *heart* (see 23:26), taking the right steps to explain to him his depravity and leading him to the fear of God—to turn to Him as the only hope of rescue from himself.

3. A father's successful leadership disciplines his children for foolish behavior.

How a father understands the depravity of his child's heart has a significant impact on how he views his responsibility to discipline. According to Proverbs, discipline is necessary to protect the child from himself, to protect others from him, and to point the child to his need for redemption.

- **13:24; 15:5; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15; 29:17**

These proverbs teach that discipline involves both (1) *verbal correction* and (2) *corporal (physical) punishment* (see 29:15, "The rod and reproof give wisdom"). These complementary tools are not instruments of angry retaliation for the embarrassing actions of the child. Rather, they are an integral part

of instruction at the most fundamental level—demonstrating to the child, by appropriate means, *the law of cause and effect*. The child must learn that there are consequences to moral actions, and when wrong actions are committed (which is inevitable), justice must be administered. This justice must be experienced early so that the child will understand the justice that awaits him in an immeasurably greater degree later in life (when he commits crimes against others as an adult) and ultimately when he stands before his Creator and Judge, if he refuses to call upon God for redemption and transformation.

Consequently, discipline is to be likened to “the law.” As the Apostle Paul states, “But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore, the Law has become our tutor *to lead us to Christ*, so that we may be justified by faith” (**Gal 3:23-24**). Like the law, discipline is never efficacious to save. It is only a tutor. Nonetheless, it is a God-given tool to help lead children to the Savior.

It is important that this discipline include more than words, for as Kidner states, “It will take more than words to dislodge it [foolishness]” (*Proverbs*, 47). But Proverbs cannot be interpreted as condoning corporal punishment in **a spirit of abusive, irrational anger**. Other proverbs clearly denounce such anger in the general sense as foolish and unacceptable (e.g., 12:16; 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11, 19; 22:24; 29:8). Those who exhibit it must themselves be subject to punishment (19:19). Accordingly, rage directed toward children—even in discipline—is unacceptable and should be punished. Instead, the discipline of children is to be dignified, patient, and loving (see Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21).

Ultimately, the application of discipline is to be understood as **a true expression of fatherly love**, for the child who is not disciplined for his foolishness will suffer painful consequences the rest of his life—and ultimately in eternity. If fathers do not discipline foolishness in their children in the early years, they share responsibility for their children’s folly and destruction in the latter years. To neglect proper discipline is itself child abuse—a disowning of the child through the abdication of parental responsibility, and a consigning of the child to a life of folly, conflict, rebellion, and law-breaking. Conversely, to discipline lovingly and consistently communicates to the child that he is loved.

- **3:11-12** – “My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father *corrects* the son in whom he delights.”
- Read **Hebrews 12:5-11**, in which the writer quotes **Proverbs 3:11-12**.

4. A father’s successful leadership trains his children in the practical skills of wise living.

Repeatedly in the first segment of Proverbs (chapters 1-9), Solomon beseeches his son to “hear.” The verb implies much more than an auditory recognition of words. The verb implies *obedience* and can be translated in the command form as “*Obe!*” These commands reflect the father’s effort to *persuade* his son. He is not just aiming for external conformity, but intelligent, heartfelt obedience.

The need for this instruction underscores two important realities. First, it once again demonstrates that *children are ignorant and foolish by nature*, in need of external sources of wisdom—commands, instructions, and warnings—to survive on the path of life. Second, it demonstrates that **fathers must actually speak!** Fathers must employ the power of speech (see “Speaking Truth,” 11/18/2020). They must lead the home in purposeful conversation, teaching, guiding, answering, explaining, and correcting their children about the fear of God and about skills for successful living. Although a man’s wife must be involved and will even have more opportunities for such conversation, the ultimate responsibility to create this climate falls on the father. Proverbs establishes this standard:

- **1:8** – “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction.”
- **1:10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 7; 6:1-3, 20; 7:1, 24; 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:21; 27:11**

Solomon's instruction to his son covers a wide array of life skills in addition to fearing God. In particular, he focuses on three areas of special emphasis: (a) how to relate to women (e.g., 5:1-8; 6:20-35; 7:1-27; 23:26-28; 31:2-3); (b) how to relate to the world (e.g., 1:10-16; 23:19-21; 28:7); and (c) how to relate to wealth (e.g., 6:1-5). In fact, everything Proverbs addresses should be a father's instruction to his son.

Again, it is crucial to note that the father is to focus such instruction not simply on external conformity as if that is sufficient to save the child's soul. Instead, it is always focused on the *heart*, the center of the child's intellect, will, and affections (23:26; see also 2:1-2; 3:1-3; 4:4; 6:20-21).

Ultimately, the father-child relationship in the earthly realm should illustrate the Father-child relationship in the spiritual realm. In the same way that "the LORD gives wisdom" and "from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" to the one who fears God (2:6), so also is a human father to be the source of wisdom for his own children. The father is to do for his children what God has done for him.

5. A father's successful leadership builds upon the model of godly behavior.

According to Proverbs, children are not born innocent but have depravity ("foolishness") bound up in their hearts (22:15). Few things will exacerbate this condition more than a home in which the father's motto is "Do as I say, not as I do!" Successful fatherhood requires an unbreakable commitment to personal godliness. It recognizes *the law of assimilation*—that we become like those to whom we are most exposed—and employs it for the child's advantage. It recognizes the power of modeling.

This modeling requires the demonstration of real **humility**. As a father teaches his own children, he must live out before them a lifestyle that shows sincere willingness to accept reproof and correction (see "Accepting Correction, 10/14/2020): **4:3-9**. Solomon also teaches that the father who displays **integrity** will bring blessing to his children: **20:7**. A father's **speech** also has a powerful influence upon his children. Children observe and imitate *what* their father says and *how* he says it. To have a lasting, positive influence, a father must "put off" of speech which tears down and destroys, and "put on" speech full of grace and truth (see "Keeping Silent," 11/11/2020, and "Speaking Truth," 11/18/2020): **4:20, 24; 6:12; 19:1**.

Ultimately, a successful father is not only one who says, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction," but also one who is able to say, "Look, my son, at your father's life."

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- If you are not married or do not have children, what can you do to apply these truths to your own life?
- If you are a father, do you take ultimate responsibility for spiritual discussions in your home? If yes, explain how you do this on a practical level? If no, why have you not taken this responsibility?
- What reasons do fathers often use to justify delegating to their wives the responsibility of training their children in the fear of God and the practical skills of life? When is this delegation reasonable? When is it a dereliction of duty?
- What should parents do if the government exceeds its realm of delegated authority and interferes with the authority and duties of parents (prohibiting corporal punishment, spiritual instruction, instruction and correction related to gender issues; requiring participation in LGBTQ sex-ed curriculums, attendance at anti-Christian religious events, etc.)?
- If your children caught a glimpse of your private life, would that glimpse harden them toward the gospel or compel them to it?
- When was the last time you had a serious discussion with any of your children about the gospel?

This Week's Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw ***Next Meeting:*** Mar 24 – "Raising Children, Pt. 2"