

## WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Raising Children, Pt 2

“Like a bird that wanders from her nest, so is a man who wanders from his home.” ~ *Proverbs 27:8*

### The Greatest Challenge

Next to disciplining himself, the greatest challenge a man will face is raising his children. As Charles Spurgeon stated, “He who thinks it easy to bring up a family never had one of his own. A mother who trains her children aright had need be wiser than Solomon, for his son turned out a fool!”

But today’s father is not left without the necessary provision. God’s Word contains the truth needed to meet the challenge. As Tedd Tripp stated, “The only safe guide is the Bible. It is the revelation of God who has infinite knowledge and can therefore give you absolute truth. God has given you a revelation that is robust and complete. It presents an accurate and comprehensive picture of children, parents, family life, values, training, nurture, and disciple—all you need to be equipped for the task of parenting” (*Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, xvii). The book of Proverbs provides much of this revelation. A survey of its contents reveals at least **nine principles needed for a father to be successful in raising his children**. The first five were considered in the last lesson (see “Raising Children, Pt 1,” 3/17/2021):

1. A father’s successful leadership begins by instilling in his children the need to fear God.
2. A father’s successful leadership assumes the depravity of his offspring.
3. A father’s successful leadership disciplines his children for foolish behavior.
4. A father’s successful leadership trains his children in the practical skills of wise living.
5. A father’s successful leadership builds upon the model of godly behavior.

### 6. A father’s successful leadership depends upon marital unity.

One of the greatest obstacles to successful parenting is a conflict-ridden marriage. Marital strife greatly distracts a father from his paternal duties and saps him of the energy he needs to invest in his children. But more than that, marital strife disheartens the children, conditions them to quarrelling, and teaches them to respond to disagreements with anger. Ultimately, the foolishness bound up in the child’s heart will capitalize on this discord and use it as a pretext for sin.

Proverbs grants no legitimacy to marital discord. Indeed, the father must take the lead in establishing and implementing the child-rearing approach of his home. But the book always assumes this is done in unity with his wife. As Tremper Longman observes, “Though she never speaks, it is clear that the father often speaks on behalf of both parents as he instructs his son” (“Family in Wisdom Literature,” 84).

With this unity assumed, Proverbs implies that the child who rejects one of his parents automatically rejects the other. The “father” and “mother” are treated as an indivisible unity.

- **1:8** – “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.”
- **6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22, 25; 30:11, 17; 31:10-12, 27-29**

In every instance where “mother” is mentioned in Proverbs, it is always presupposed that she and the “father” stand united, as a team. Neither the father nor the mother opposes the other. Both are involved, both teach the same thing, and both reap the same consequences to their successes or failures.

“The best way to be a good father to your children is to be a good husband to their mother.”  
—Jay Adams, *Christian Living in the Home*, 53

Any man who prioritizes successful fatherhood must begin with an even greater priority: *his relationship with his wife*. Next to his fear of God, nothing will be as determinative in the efficacy of his fatherhood as the strength of his marriage union. After all, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

### **7. A father’s successful leadership creates the potential for incomparable joy.**

The book of Proverbs recognizes several sources of *joy* and *gladness*, including the acquisition of wisdom (3:18), the hearing of an appropriate word (12:25; 15:23), giving to the needy (14:21), the exercise of justice (21:15), the enjoyment of oil and perfume (27:9), and obedience to the law (29:18). But the most frequently mentioned source of joy in the book of Proverbs is the child who walks the path of wisdom. According to Proverbs, such joy appears to be the greatest reward that comes from successful parenting.

- **10:1b** – “A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother.”
- **15:20; 23:15-16; 23:24-25; 27:11; 29:3, 17**

Conversely, nothing creates *grief* in the heart of a father or mother like a child who refuses a father’s instruction and continues on the path of folly.

- **17:21** – “He who sires a fool *does so* to his sorrow, and the father of a fool has no joy.”
- **17:25; 19:13; 28:7**

**“Parents, ours is a solemn and awesome responsibility, but it’s a wonderful privilege. One of the most fulfilling experiences in all the world is to have children committed to the Lord, no matter what the cost, because they have seen the same commitment in us.”**  
—MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting*, 233

Responsibility and reward go hand in hand; they are proportionate. Successful fatherhood requires tremendous investment and sacrifice, and the risk is almost insufferable. But fatherhood exercised according to God’s wisdom and combined with His favor yields a reward incomparable with anything this world can offer. At the end of his life, a father’s successful parenting will mean far more to him than a successful career or accumulated wealth. That reality must impact the decisions young men make today.

### **8. A father’s successful leadership does not guarantee a successful result.**

Parents long to see a guaranteed return on all the efforts invested in a child’s upbringing. Could it be that the book of Proverbs provides this guarantee?

- **22:6** – “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

It is important to note that Proverbs 22:6 is one of the most debated expressions in the book. For one, the verb “train up” is better translated as “dedicate” and the word translated “child” most likely refers to a “youth” rather than an infant. But the most debated aspect of this expression is the phrase “in the way he should go,” which translated literally is “according to his way.” Since “one’s own way” in Proverbs so often refers to foolish intuition, some commentators conclude that the proverb does not convey optimism but a sad realism: “Dedicate a youth according to his natural bent (which is always foolish), and even when he is old he will not depart from it!” In other words, give a child what he wants, and he will become a hardened fool beyond repair (see Dan Phillips, *God’s Wisdom in Proverbs*, 353-79).

But is the “way” of 22:6 a negative one (the child’s folly) or a positive one (wisdom)? When the statement is read in the context of the entire book, it is best to take this “way” as the latter—as *the way of wise, successful living*. Proverbs emphasizes the significant influence that a father’s instruction can have in the life of his child in the long-term, and the overall purpose of the book operates on the reality of this

influence—that instruction, reproof, correction, and discipline do yield positive results. This corresponds to the *cause-and-effect logic* of Proverbs.

It is also important to note that the focus of 22:6 is not necessarily on heart transformation but on *conditioned behavior*. It is not a formula for ensuring the salvation of one’s child, but it is a bedrock principle related to sowing and reaping with respect to his or her behavior. Indeed, parents have immeasurable influence over the long-term, behavioral practices of a child. No other source of influence comes close.

The issue then becomes the nature of this promise: Does 22:6 express general optimism or an iron-clad guarantee? Once again, the context of the entire book must be considered. The reason why these pithy sayings were collected into one book was to provide the necessary *context* for their interpretation. In other words, this proverb expresses truth about child-rearing, *but not all the truth at once*.

Proverbs does not hesitate to add to the truth of 22:6 other insights about child-rearing and its outcomes. As much as Proverbs emphasizes the responsibility of parents (and the father in particular), it also recognizes each child as a *morally responsible individual*. Consequently, there are factors which parents must realize are beyond their control.

This can be observed, for example, in something as basic as the conditional language present in many of Solomon’s addresses to his sons: “**If** you will receive my words. . .” (2:1), “**If** you will cry for discernment . . .” (2:3), “She [wisdom] will honor you **if** you embrace her” (4:8); “**If** your heart is wise . . .” (23:15), “**If** you find it [wisdom], then there will be a future . . .” (24:14), etc. But it is also evident in the recognition that children raised according to wisdom do not always go on to choose that path:

- **10:1b; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13a, 26-27; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:11-13**

It is in the sphere of childrearing where the *law of cause and effect* collides with the *law of personal responsibility*. Fathers must operate according to the hope offered by the former but accept the reality of the latter. They must provide the nurture which exposes the child’s folly and his need for God but recognize that the child is responsible for his own choice. The decision cannot be made vicariously. Consequently, a father’s successful leadership is always vulnerable to a child’s choices, and Proverbs is clear that the child who rejects the fear of God in which he is raised bears responsibility:

- **20:20** – “He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness.”
- **30:17; Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:20**

**“If we measure our success as parents solely by what our children become, there is no inviolable guarantee in Scripture that we will experience absolute success on those terms . . . The true measure of success for Christian parents is the parents’ own character. To the degree that we have followed God’s design for parenting, we have succeeded as parents before God.”**

—MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting*, 17

## **9. A father’s successful leadership can establish a powerful legacy.**

A father committed to raising his children in the fear of the LORD can have the hope of an enduring legacy. This is the long-term effect of *sowing and reaping* in the realm of fatherhood. Fathers must recognize that the way they parent today affects future generations. If their fathering is wise, there can be long-lasting fruit—not only in the lives of their own children, but in their children’s children as well. If it lacks wisdom, they should expect a corresponding return. This was evident in Solomon’s own life.

- **4:1-4** – “Hear, *O* sons, the instruction of a father, and give attention that you may gain understanding, for I give you sound teaching; do not abandon my instruction. When I was a son to my father, tender

and the only son in the sight of my mother, then he taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments and live.’”

God was the ultimate source of Solomon’s wisdom (see 1 Kings 4:29). But God imparted this wisdom not only through direct means, but also through the instruction of Solomon’s own father, David, who himself was instructed by his father Jesse, who was instructed by Obed, who was instructed by his faithful father, Boaz (see the book of Ruth). See also **Psalm 78:5-8; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15**.

What is central to this legacy is not the continuation of *ancestral traditions*. Rather, it is the passing on of *biblical wisdom*—how unchanging truth is faithfully applied to concrete life situations. A distinct deficiency in children is their lack of experience in God’s law of cause and effect and how it operates in a fallen world. They do not see beyond their immediate circumstances and have a limited cache of lessons drawn from experience. They easily succumb to the enticements of sin and folly. But biblical wisdom passed down from parents and grandparents instructs them from the vantage point of long-term experience. Such wisdom teaches—both from unchanging precept and learned lessons—that the pleasures of sin are frivolous and vain, and that biblical wisdom is the only thing that will “guard you . . . watch over you . . . exalt you . . . honor you . . . place on your head a garland of grace . . . present you with a crown of beauty” (**Prov 4:6-9**).

Proverbs teaches that it is *good fathering*—not the government, the public school system, or the effort of the community—that creates lasting hope and opportunity for children and their children after them. While others outside the family do have influence, the most influential factor in establishing a trajectory of improving standards in health, stability, justice, and prosperity for generations to come is a father who fulfills his role according to God’s standard. Paraphrasing an old Chinese proverb, “The father plants the tree, and his children and their children get the shade.”

- **13:22; 17:6**

#### Recommended Resources

John MacArthur, “Creating Shade for Your Children,” 4-part sermon series, January 2016 ([www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org))  
John MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting*. Word, 1998.  
Stuart Scott & Martha Peace, *The Faithful Parent: A Biblical Guide to Raising a Family*. P & R, 2010.  
Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*. Shepherds Press, 2011.  
J. C. Ryle, *Duties of Parents*. Available online.

#### For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- Considering the impact a man’s marriage relationship has on his children, what priority should current fathers and future fathers place on the health of their marriage? Is this reflected in your life?
- Proverbs speaks of an incomparable joy that can come from children. How should this potential for joy affect how young men make decisions about marriage, family, career, and wealth?
- How should we explain Proverbs 22:6 to a distraught father whose child has rejected the faith, and who believes he himself is to blame or that God did not honor His promise?
- When men think of their legacies, what do they often think of? What legacy should Christian men long for?
- Our failures and inadequacies as fathers should compel us to our heavenly Father for grace and mercy in our need. How much of your praying is devoted to your responsibilities as a father, and the wellbeing of your children?

**This Week’s Audio & Notes:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** Apr 7 – “Handling Fools”