

TRAIN UP A CHILD

Text: Proverbs 22:6

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

Date: 26th March, 2017

Bringing up kids is a challenge, isn't it? I once watched a news item which featured the difficulty of raising children. They ran a survey asking folk to express their response to the question 'Do parents know how to raise up children?' 78% said 'No' . My own observation is that those who are most dogmatic about how to raise children don't have children. Those with children often seem to be at a loss. This is not a new phenomenon. Mark Twain, the writer and humorist, had these words of advice. He said 'When they become teenagers put them in a barrel and feed them through the knot hole. When they turn 16 stop up the knot hole.' Not good advice but I understand the frustration with teenagers. Two children were once heard discussing their parents. The first said 'I'm really worried. Dad slaves away at his job so that I have everything I need. Mum works hard washing and ironing and cleaning up after me. She takes care of me when I am sick. She drives me everywhere I want to go. They spend every day of their lives working for me. But I'm worried'. His friend asked 'What have you got to worry about?' The first little guy said 'I'm afraid they are going to try to escape some day.'

This morning with the baptisms we have all made vows in regard to the upbringing of our children. To understand our responsibility we must first grasp the big picture. And that is that our children are not ours. They are God's, as a trust from him. David writes in Psalm 139 *"I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are*

wonderful". Each child is a whole new person whose 'destiny' is known only to God. As David says (13&16) "*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb...Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be*". Each child is an individual whom God has given a unique DNA and their own future. He has assigned them as precious gifts to us as parents. Our task is to bring them up and nurture them into their own distinct contribution in life. It's not the case of this is 'my child who has to do what I want'. It is God's child and we must train them in God's way.

Now how do we go about that task? That is the point of our text in Proverbs 22:6 "*Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it*". Let's have a close look at this verse. Our English translation says "*Train up a child...*" or "*Start children off in the way they should go...*" Now often the attention has been centred on 'the way'. That is train them up 'in the way'. And 'the way' has often been thought of as simply reading the Bible, praying and going to church. That is the Christian way. So we read the Bible and pray at the dinner table and take our children to church. And often the assumption is that the 'training' has been done. But then at times we can be disappointed about how little impression it can make on our children. I think it is unfortunate that the English text does not bring out the full meaning of the original Hebrew. The Hebrew can better read '*Encourage a child according to the measure of their way*.' The stress is more on the child, 'the measure of their way'. That is on the fact that it is a child. On the fact that they have their own character and personality. It is not saying 'let them go their own way'. In other words let them do what they want. As a previous Proverb says 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. Which means without appropriate boundaries and discipline parents can ruin a child for life. Rather the emphasis here is on recognising the God-given uniqueness of the child. And that we are dealing with children, not adults.

The word 'train up' or 'start off' or 'encourage' also stresses the fact that we are dealing with children. The Hebrew word here is 'chanak'. It originally referred to a midwife rubbing the palate of a newborn child to stimulate its sucking. They would make up a paste made from dates and rub it on the baby's gums to create a thirst. So it meant getting the child 'started' to feed. They 'initiated' or 'created a desire' to feed. So the word meant to 'initiate', to 'accustom', to 'inaugurate' or to 'create a desire'. So the proverb means we are to realise we are dealing with children. And that we are to create a desire in them to live a certain way. We are to inaugurate them into God's way.

Now, how do little children learn? They learn by what they can actually see, hear and feel. Abstract words and concepts like 'love', 'care', 'devotion', mean little to them unless they experience them. So if they are going to be stimulated or encouraged to know God then they must be able to see, hear and feel these things. And that is where the Godly examples of parents comes in. That's why the Baptismal form speaks of us giving thought to how we live so that our children may *"...be surrounded by your Christian example and influence..."* When a child is picked up and hugged by mum or dad they experience what we call, love, warmth, closeness, security, comfort. Dad to a child is someone who is strong and capable of doing many things. Yet who like mum, is gentle and caring and loving. In mum's presence the child feels at ease. It is contented. It knows trust. That is where a child first begins to understand what God is like. God is like her father, like her mother. That is where her desire to know God is started. That's where it is initiated. If mum and dad are so good, 'Wow, what is father in heaven like?'

Or think of the way parents love each other and desire to be together. A child seeing that is initiated into an understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the church. Think of how Paul describes that in Ephesians 5. *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."* Our marital relationships are models to help us understand the relationship between Jesus and the church. Husbands, fathers who go out of their way to cherish their wife display something special about Jesus. Wives, mothers, who are devoted to their husbands show

something of how the church relates to Jesus. Seeing that, experiencing that at home a child gets her first clue, her 'initiation' into the motive for worship. Coming to church on Sunday is not just a custom. It's about a desire to be with God. It's an expression of our love for Jesus.

A child who is hugged after discipline is finished feels the relief, the exhilaration of forgiveness and reconciliation. The wrong is gone. They experience the sense of 'I don't have to feel ashamed anymore. I can come to mum openly'. That experience creates a desire to know forgiveness more fully from God. That is where our children 'start' their training in the way. That's where they get inaugurated in what the Christian faith is all about.

You can see that the opposite is also true. A bad example stunts and distorts a child's knowledge and desire for God. I remember helping set up a coffee shop in the Geelong area when I was at theological college. We were wanting to relate to the youth on Friday nights. One teenager asked some of our youth what God was like. They described God as a father who cares for you. At hearing that this young man got up and swore and said 'If God is like that, I want nothing to do with religion'. Why do you think he reacted that way? His father was an alcoholic who often beat his wife and kids. No wonder the this young man reacted the way he did. Children whose parents are violent, erratic, sexually abusive often have little trust in God. They lack any desire to get to know God. Their 'start in the way' is ruined. I have dealt with numerous people who have great trouble accepting that God is a loving God because their fathers abused them.

We can see that whatever we as parents do it is saying something to our children. It reminds me of a story. Three ministers were having a discussion debating which Bible version they preferred. The first suggested that the New International Version was the easiest to understand. So they saw it as the one most capable of growing people closer to God. The second insisted that the New American Standard Bible was better because

it was a more direct and accurate translation. The third minister interrupted the other two and said 'I prefer my mother's translation'. The other two ministers were stunned. 'We didn't know you mother translated the Biblical texts!' 'Oh, she did,' the third replied.' My mother translated the Bible everyday right in front of my eyes- with her life!' What are we saying to our children about God? And about God's love through Jesus? What is our living saying? What are we initiating in our kids? What 'desire' are we creating?

When we appreciated these things we understand that being a Christian is not just about going to church, important as that is. It is in fact a whole lifestyle. That is the point Moses is making in Deuteronomy 6. He is emphasising that the Word of God should influence all we do. When we are at home God's Word should influence what we do. It should be part of our conversations. We are to start the day with God and finish it with him. And all we do during the day should be guided by the Word of God. Notice how Moses puts it. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) *"These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates"*. The 'symbols on your hands' refers to work. The 'symbols ...on the foreheads' refers to our attitude and way of thinking. The reference to the 'doorframes ' and 'gates' means that family life and community life are also to be guided by God's Word. So, in other words, we are dealing with a complete lifestyle. Now if our lifestyle is not consistent across all the areas of life, then we create confusion and lack of desire in our children. They are looking to us as parents for attitudes and a way of life to adopt and imitate. Think of this. We go to church and say Jesus is our Saviour and Lord. But during the week we live as if that is not the case. What is the effect? We are in fact working against our calling as Christian parents. We are going against the vows we have made in the baptism of our children.

Now it is obvious that we as parents are not going to be perfect. We are all people who need the ongoing grace and forgiveness of Jesus. We will never set the perfect example for our children. Let's be real. But right here is the most important example we can give. [POWER POINT PCITURE] Which is our ability to admit where we have gone wrong and seek forgiveness. I remember as a teenager having a strongly worded argument with my dad. He went over the top in his anger telling me to do what he said or get out. I decided I had enough and would leave. Later that day dad came up to me and apologised. He admitted he had been frustrated and said things in a way he should not have. He asked me for my forgiveness. My understanding of my father and my attitude toward him changed completely. I saw something of his own struggles and need for God's grace.

Our children need to see that they are like us adults. They too need the love and forgiveness only Jesus can bring. They need to experience that although we are not perfect, Jesus is. And through him we have received forgiveness and Jesus' own righteousness. Isn't that the whole point of the gospel. Which is what baptism symbolises. God welcomes us and loves us. And washes us clean by what Jesus did on the cross. We must demonstrate daily to our children what grace looks like. We express our repentance for the word that should not have been said. And the word that should have been said. We express our repentance for the things we should not have done. And for what we should have done. And in grace we forgive each other. If we make out that we are perfect and that our kids are loved only when they are good, we push them away from grace. We end up pushing them towards legalism, workaholism and trying to be right with God by all our good works. Then we will drive our children away from a desire to know God.

Let our children see our daily walk with the God. Let them see us grappling with where we fall short. Let them see us experiencing God's grace. Let them see our joy and gratitude toward God. Then we will give them a visible demonstration of a believer who

knows and loves Jesus as Lord. That is the most important example that will help lead them to the Lord. That experience will give them a basis to hear the meaning of words like 'forgiveness', 'grace', and 'the love of God'. Many people have no real understanding of the meaning of forgiveness because they have no experience of it. They simply cannot relate to it. So what we do in our homes, as well as at church, with our children, and each other's children is not mere daily existence. It is a working together with the Spirit in their lives. It is a saving work that leads to the eternal life of our children. So let's be faithful to our task. *"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."*

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Do you agree with the TV news survey which implies the majority of parents don't know how to raise their children? Why or why not?
- If you have children, what is unique about each one? What is "their way". How can you encourage a desire in them to know God?
- What sort of example is being shown by your life to your children, grandchildren, church children? What can you celebrate? What would you change?