

## The Way Kids Go • Proverbs 22:6

Children’s Day is one of the least known and least celebrated holidays in America. My guess is that not many parents send cards to their children on Children’s Day and that even fewer get up early to give their children breakfast in bed! But there is a little understood proverb that could fit in well with Children’s Day or just about any other day.

Proverbs 22:6 could probably win awards in two categories. It gets a prize for how very well known it is and it gets a prize for how little understood it is! This powerful Proverb says, “*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.*” Most of us think this verse instructs us to teach our children to believe, to trust God, to obey, to be good kids and then, when they are all grown up, they will be good adults. But you may be surprised that this is not what this proverb is saying at all.

“Really?” you ask. “Well, then, what does it mean?”

This proverb means that parents are to serve as the agents of God to send their children in the right direction for each child. The way to do that begins by recognizing the uniqueness of each child.

Every person has “his way”. Proverbs 22:6 literally means, “Train up a child according to the child’s way.” It does not mean, “Train up a child according to God’s way”, although God has established the uniqueness of every person and therefore “the child’s way” IS God’s way!

Every family with more than one child faces individual uniqueness. It is absolutely amazing that children with the same parents, who grew up in the same house, went to the same school and the same church can be so dramatically different.

I grew up in a family with four sons. I am the youngest. I look at my brothers and think how different we all are. My oldest brother, Roy, is 5

feet 6 inches tall; my next brother is 13 months younger than Roy and is 6 feet 2 inches tall. Next is my brother Adam who probably has the first dollar he ever earned in childhood on a paper route; if he doesn’t still have it I am sure he has it invested somewhere at a fantastic rate of return. Paul has probably already spent almost every dollar he will ever earn and I doubt he could spell investment. Roy is fluent in English, Spanish, German and Basque and reads Latin and Greek and who knows what else. After I got a D for the year in Latin I switched to French where I got another D, so I decided to take typing.

We are different. Each one is unique. We all love the Lord. We all have many things in common, but we are all unique.

When a baby is born into a family it may have mama’s smile or daddy’s eyes, but that baby

is not a photocopy or an extension of the parents. He is his own person. She is unique—one of a kind. From the moment of conception and even before God has created that uniqueness and set that child’s “way”. It is not a

detailed plan of life but a direction and a destination that best fits all the attributes that are in unique combination in that very special person.

As parents we must seek to identify each child’s special way so that we can follow the admonition of Proverbs 22:6. But how do we do that? The first step is to be aware of the principle. Many parents have never consciously thought about this much less been able to verbalize the principle of this proverb. If we are serious about following what God wants us to do we ought to memorize the proverb, review it and discuss it. Parents ought to give frequent consideration to it, be sensitive to the uniqueness of each child in the family and realize that each son or daughter is as distinctive as his or her fingerprints.

A second step is to pray for wisdom. Before any of our children were born I knew all there

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was to know about raising children. My knowledge has diminished in direct proportion to the number of children we have and the number of years I have been a parent. So I have the greatest admiration for every parent who does well and the greatest sympathy for every parent who fails.

As parents we desperately need large doses of divine wisdom. How grateful I am that in James 1:5 we are told, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God (for it).”* God is anxious to give us that wisdom.

Most of us probably ask God for wisdom to do what is right about our children in specific situations but less often (or never) do we ask for wisdom in understanding the uniqueness of our children. We ought to be praying, “Lord, help me to understand my daughter. Show me the beauty of her individuality and uniqueness. Reveal to me the way my son should go when he is grown up. Lord, help me see my son or my daughter the way you see him, the way you see her.”

A third step is to know our children. This is neither a simple nor an easy task. We can live together in the same house for a lifetime and remain virtual strangers. We need to spend time together, do things together. Learn each other’s likes and dislikes, joys and fears, dreams and nightmares. Get acquainted as people and not just parent and child.

Parents are often better at verbal skills and want to talk, demonstrating their superiority. Give equal time to playing games together where your child is better and faster and smarter than you are.

A fourth step is to avoid some common dangers. One danger is imposing your will on your child. You went to Yale so you want your son to go to Yale. You got married so you want your daughter to get married. You like sports so your children should play sports.

Or maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe you were never very popular in high school so you insist that your daughter be popular. You never had much money so you want your son to be rich. You were cut from the team so you want all your kids to earn varsity letters.

Another common danger is confusing what is right with what is different. Many Christian

parents turn individuality into sin. There is a personality conflict between child and parent and the parent assumes that it is rebellion. Or a child has dreams and ambitions and abilities that really do not fit with the parents’ way of thinking and the parent calls it laziness.

Another danger is to assume that inability is inadequacy. My parents made me take piano lessons for eight years and I never passed the second book. I think they assumed I could do it if I practiced harder and really cared. After all, my brothers could all play and sing! The truth is, I couldn’t! Ten thousand years of piano lessons could never make me into a pianist. It was not the way I was supposed to go. I figured it out when I was 7 years old. Three different teachers figured it out and sent home notes to my parents. It took my parents eight years!

Awareness of the principle, praying for wisdom, knowing our children and avoiding the common dangers will lead to some preliminary conclusions. You will begin to see that this child has a real sensitivity to people, another child is a marvelous student, a third child is a super communicator and a fourth child is a strong leader.

All of this is not to say that other disciplines ought to be neglected. The non-student still needs to stay in school and the non-athlete should be exposed to team sports. But, you will increasingly be able to define the way God has specially designed your child—the marvelous, beautiful, special, unique gifts and abilities each child has.

Once we have recognized the uniqueness of each child it becomes our responsibility to send each child in the right direction. Think of yourself as a travel agent. In comes a traveler whom you can send anywhere in the world. All you need to do is write the ticket, set up the package and send the traveler on his or her way. So, what do you do? How do you determine the best place for that person to go? Well, you ask questions, get acquainted and help to send him to the right destination.

You noticed when he walked in that he had a limp and he tells you he needs a special operation available at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. But lately you have been thinking a lot about vacationing in Hawaii. The sun and surf at

Waikiki is marvelous for sore legs and besides, there is a special fare starting tomorrow!

Hawaii? Of course not! You must send the customer where he needs to go, not where you would like to go or to the cheapest and easiest place. That would be ridiculous. As parents we are not to send our children to the destinations we would like to visit or where it is easiest and most convenient. We are to send them where God has designed them to go.

The Hebrew word for “train” in Proverbs 22:6 is the same word used for the dedication of a house in Deuteronomy 20:5 and of the temple in I Kings 8:63. So, to train up a child is to dedicate that child to God and develop his or her uniqueness.

What does that include? It includes salvation. What a privilege it is to introduce your child to Jesus Christ as Savior, to see your own child born again! If that does not take place then all the uniqueness is tragically and eternally wasted.

It also includes nurture. Nurture is providing physical care, emotional love and spiritual education such as school, church, prayer, discipline and all the things necessary for uniqueness to be developed and not wasted.

And it includes encouragement. A child needs the support of parents to become God’s person—a godly husband or wife or single, a godly architect or laborer or introvert. The issue is not for the parent to choose the vocation; the issue is that the child should become what God has designed that child to be and that the child becomes God’s person in that place.

The husbandman of a vineyard trains a grape plant by planting, pruning, watering and harvesting it. He never tries to make the vine produce apples or watermelons. He trains up the vine in the way IT should go so that in maturity it will be what it is suppose to be (a grape vine) and do what it is supposed to do (produce delicious grapes). But all of this has to be done when the plant is young and tender because, if it grows wild for 15 years, you cannot then go back and

try to redirect it.

Parents are the husbandmen, the gardeners, of children’s lives. Their job is not to determine the kind of fruit but the quality of fruit that their children’s lives produce. It is to see to it that their children go in the right direction for them as set

by God. Ninety percent of life’s habits are set by age 20. Ninety-eight percent of alcoholics begin drinking before they are 21. Eighty-five percent of Christians receive Jesus Christ as Savior before their 18th birthday. How crucially important it is that a child

be trained, dedicated and directed in the way he should go when he is young so that when he is old he will not turn from it.

The dream of God ought to be the dream of every parent—that in maturity, perhaps after the parent is dead and gone, that child will be what God intended for him to be from birth and before. If the direction has been set since childhood you can be assured that when your child is old, he will not depart for that right direction or end up at the wrong destination.

What marvelous counsel God gives to us from this old proverb. As each parent looks down on that very special child in his or her life we realize what a grand privilege and a heavy responsibility we have from God. We are God’s agents to train up that child in the way he or she should go so that when he is old he will not depart from it.

But there is a tragic epilogue to this proverb. Proverbs 22:6 was written by the wisest man who ever lived. He was a man who knew God personally and ruled the kingdom of Israel as God’s regent.

Wise King Solomon had a son named Rehoboam. There was no doubt about “the way he should go” because Rehoboam was the successor to the throne of David as anointed by God himself. There could be no doubt about the way he should be trained—in the wisdom of his father Solomon and the godliness of his grandfather David.

*...the child should become what God has designed that child to be...*

But Solomon who wrote Proverbs 22:6 failed to follow his own counsel. He was too enamored with women, too busy with political power, too involved with false gods, too everything to train up his own son in the way he should go. And so, when Rehoboam was old enough to be a man and when his father the king died, he came to the throne without the training he needed. He triggered a civil war in Israel and caused a split in the kingdom of Israel that would have broken his father's heart.

The wisest man who ever lived knew the truth but failed to do the truth. Mom, Dad, follow the words but not the ways of Solomon. *“Train (your) child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”*

Heavenly Father, you have given us as parents, teachers, Sunday School teachers, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends a heavy and yet a great calling. We are to be your agents to shape and direct tender young lives in the way you want them to go.

Lord, may we meet that responsibility head on with all the resources you have for us. May we depend on your Holy Spirit and may we not fail to do it. May we train up our children in the way they should go so that when they are old they will not turn from it. And, Lord, may you look upon their lives with satisfaction and delight because their way has been your way. In Jesus' name, amen.

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