

CAN A PROPERLY-TRAINED CHILD EVER GO WRONG?

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Pr.22:6). All my life, I have heard brethren *misuse* this passage to suggest that *anytime* a Christian’s child falls away, it *must* be the parent’s fault. It’s time to put that myth to bed! Would you think with me about the proper meaning/application of this passage?

As we begin, it is imperative for me to state the issue at stake. The issue is NOT: “Should children be properly trained?” Of course, they should (Ep.6:4)! The issue is NOT: “Does parental training help to ensure our children will be faithful to God?” Of course, it will; that is the whole point of Proverbs 22:6! ***The issue is: “Does Proverbs 22:6 state an absolute truth; or a general truth?”***

The Bible contains a wide variety of literary forms. It has prose, poetry, history, parable, allegory, metaphor, and a host of other types of literature. Each type of literature requires a different interpretive approach. For instance, it is a serious mistake to interpret figures of speech literally! Jesus is not *literally* a “door” or “shepherd” (Jn.10:9,11). He is those things only in a *metaphorical* sense, i.e. He is LIKE a door (providing access) and LIKE a shepherd (caring for, protecting, and leading His people). The church is not *literally* the “body” of Christ; Instead, it is LIKE a body, having interdependent “members” (1Cor.12:14-19), which are answerable to the “head” (Ep.1:22-23). Now let’s bring this to bear on the kind of literature we call “proverbs.”

A “proverb” is “a short, pithy statement about the nature of man and life” (Nelson’s Bible Dictionary). These pithy sayings are not always absolute truths, but *general* truths. Consider some examples: “A stitch in time saves nine.” Is that *always* true? Of course not! And why “saves *nine*”? Why not “six” or “fifteen”? It should be obvious that this is a *general* truth about the importance of being proactive. And the “nine” stitches saved is clearly intended as a rhyme, designed only to aid the memory. Further, “a stitch in time” sometimes saves nothing, for the fabric still tears!

Here is another example: “To *everything* there is a season” (Ecc.3:1) And yet, we know that sometimes things happen “out of season” (2Tm.4:2). How about this one: “***Do not answer a fool*** according to his folly, lest you also be like him. ***Answer a fool*** according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Pr.26:4-5). Unless Solomon contradicted himself, these cannot both be true at the same time! Clearly, these two proverbs are geared to *different circumstances*. Sometimes, we should not answer a fool; and other times, we should.

This brings us to Proverbs 22:6. This proverb does NOT state an absolute truth, but a *general* truth. This can be easily demonstrated by considering the larger context of the Bible. First, there is this thing called “free will” – a point that we often argue with our Calvinist friends. You see, they believe that sin is inherited; that a child inherits sin from his parents. But the Bible paints a completely different picture: “The soul who sins shall die. ***The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.*** The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezk.18:20). This passage clearly teaches free will – specifically, that the father shall NOT bear the guilt of his son! So how can we say that, if a child goes wrong, that it MUST be the parent’s fault? It MIGHT be their fault – but not necessarily!

Here is another example: In Isaiah 1:2, God says, “***I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me.***” Are we going to charge God with being a horrible father? After all, if His children went bad, it MUST be His fault, because He is their Father! And what shall we do with “the prodigal son” (Luke 15:11-31)? Remember, the “Father” of this parable is God! So, if a child’s bad behavior is ALWAYS the fault of their parents, then where did God go wrong with His prodigal son? Should God “repent” of being a bad parent every time a Christian departs from the faith? Should He “resign” from Godhood? Surely, we can see the folly of taking this position!

How many Christians have had a “guilt trip” placed upon them by their brethren, when their child’s apostasy was not their fault? How many men have not been allowed to serve as elders or forced to resign because an adult child, who doesn’t even live in his father’s “own house,” fell away (1Tm.3:4-5; cp. Mt.19:5)? Let us be very careful, brethren, that we are not guilty of overly-harsh or even hypocritical judgements in such matters (Mt.7:1-ff)!

With all of the above being said, it is still possible for our children to fall away precisely because of our own neglect (Pr.22:6; Ep.6:4). That is why those passages are in the Bible! May we all examine our role as parents, to make sure that we haven’t *contributed* to their fall by our lack of teaching or example. At the same time, may we also understand that they can choose to ignore parental instruction, and fall away (cf. Isa.1:2)!

--Lanny Smith