

“You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught”

A sermon in the series
**“Summer Memories:
Scripture Verses Worth Remembering”**
by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Philippians 3:12-14, 17¹² I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. ¹³ Of course, my friends, I really do not think that I have already won it; the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. ¹⁴ So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.... ¹⁷ Keep on imitating me, my friends. Pay attention to those who follow the right example that we have set for you.
- Proverbs 22:1-6 Memorization Verse –⁶ Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Though proverbs are not guarantees, we trust that if we teach children to revere and strive to follow God’s way, when old they are less likely to stray.

“Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” This week’s “scripture verse worth remembering” is Proverbs Chapter 22, Verse 6. I’ve taken it from the New Revised Standard translation. Other translations phrase the verse slightly differently, but I like this version because it’s got a certain ring, a certain rhythm to it: “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.”

Unfortunately, it’s not true all the time. Several weeks ago our son and daughter-in-law in New York City texted us some photos. That afternoon they had gone to a baseball game at Yankee Stadium, less than four miles from their apartment in Manhattan. One photo showed our son Kevin wearing... (I can hardly bring myself to say it!) a New York Yankees ball cap! I was devastated. Everything that we had taught him growing up apparently had been tossed aside by this grave betrayal, this stark demonstration of poor judgment. Yet the Bible asserts, “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray”?

Actually, that incident illustrates a characteristic of proverbial wisdom, especially the kind presented in the Bible. “Proverbs are not absolute promises.”¹ “One proverb is never adequate to describe all of reality.”² But they do reflect the accumulated wisdom of generations. By presenting moral ideals the proverbs convey our aspirations for the young based upon our own experience and the experience of our ancestors.

The biblical book of Proverbs is different from the stories and histories and proclamation that make up most of the Bible. The book of Proverbs actually consists of several separate collections “of

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 198.

² Ibid., 107.

sayings, commands and admonitions, and long poems.”³ Many of the sayings are attributed to King David’s son Solomon who was renowned for his wisdom and insight – you might recall the story in the 1 Kings Chapter 4 when King Solomon flushed out which of two women was the real mother in a child custody case when he proposed that the baby in dispute simply be cut in two.⁴

Nowadays when we think about instruction for our children, the first thing that comes to mind is the school. We entrust our children to formal education in public or private schools from the time they’re three or four or five years old through their early twenties or even longer. Of course we know that children learn lessons beyond the formal classroom. In addition to lessons taught by schoolteachers,

- children learn from camp counselors, from ministers and Sunday school teachers and fellowship group advisors and the people they see at their church;
- children learn from police officers, from nurses and physicians, from sports coaches and music tutors;
- children learn from examples they see in professional athletes and actors and politicians and pop singers;
- children learn from their friends and their friends’ families.

Most important of all, children learn from what they are told and what they hear and what they see from the example of parents and grandparents and siblings in their home and in the car and at the park and in the store. The book of Proverbs presumes that the primary setting for formation of character is the household.⁵ And we know that children are observant. Like little security cameras children usually pick up on what they see and hear going on around them whether or not we’re thinking about teaching them. Children presume that whatever they experience is normal and acceptable.

That finding is the basis for one of the survey tools I use in premarital counseling for brides and grooms. For a discussion tool called the “Family and Couple Map” the survey is able to calculate the bride’s and groom’s preferences on two scales. One scale measures how much stability or change they prefer in their life. The other scale measures how much emotional closeness or independence they prefer. This is helpful in premarital counseling because the bride and groom can see how closely aligned their individual expectations are for what married life should feel like:

- do they want their life to be steady and predictable or ever-changing and exciting?
- do they prefer a relationship that is emotionally “tight” or one that offers more personal independence?

Researchers have found that people’s preferences for stability or change, closeness or independence are formed by the situations they grew up in as teenagers – those formative teen years are the best predictor for what they will prefer as an adult. So as I said earlier, kids are studying what we teach by our attitudes and example when neither the kids nor the adults are even aware of it.

This is the case for better and for worse, for children learn negative lessons from us as easily as they do the constructive ones. This truth was so eloquently expressed in a song called “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught” from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical “South Pacific.” Reflecting on the unjustifiable nature of prejudice, Lt. Cable sings with bitter sarcasm:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
 You've got to be taught from year to year
 It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
 You've got to be carefully taught
 You've got to be taught to be afraid
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made

³ *Introduction to “Proverbs,” The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocannical Books (New Revised Standard Version)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 802.

⁴ See 1 Kings 4:29-34

⁵ Leo G. Perdue, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching—Proverbs*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000, 191.

And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade
 You've got to be carefully taught
 You've got to be taught before it's too late
 Before you are six or seven or eight
 To hate all the people your relatives hate
 You've got to be carefully taught⁶

Sadly, train children in the wrong way, and when they're old they also will not stray.

We do what we can to guide our children, and our grandchildren, and the neighborhood children in how to live decent, upright, constructive lives. In a way this continues throughout our life. But in another way we recognize that there comes a time when our work is done. We've "taught our children in the right ways of life," and now it's on them to choose whether or not to heed what they've been taught.

Not to pick on our oldest son Kevin, but here's another story involving him. It happened the day we were taking him to begin his freshman year at The College of Wooster. We had loaded up two cars with his stuff. His younger brothers were going along and climbed into the minivan with my wife. That's when she said to me, "I'll take Eric and Brian. Why don't you have Kevin ride with you? Maybe there are some things you need to say to him about going off to college."

I remember saying something like, "Mary, whatever he hasn't learned from us by now, I don't think the next sixty minutes in the car is going to make any difference." Leaving home is when the proverb is put to the test.

And yet, we never really stop teaching. In fact, that's the premise behind something we're doing at this church starting in two weeks. After considerable study and discussion, and with the complete support of our church leaders, our Sunday school program is making some changes in how it seeks to "train our children in the right way." The curriculum used in the classrooms will be new. The age groupings of children in classes will be different.

And the most noticeable change will be in our deliberate effort to be a more inclusive congregation by beginning every worship service with our children in our midst for the first portion of the service. Why? It's very, very simple: the way to learn how to worship is by... worshipping.

- They'll learn by watching, by hearing, by doing.
- They'll learn from your smiles of welcome and encouragement.
- They'll learn from your patient understanding when they make a bit more commotion than you're used to in worship... and their parents will appreciate your kind patience, too.

As a church we share in this opportunity to "train children the right way." As psychologist Madeline Levine states in her book Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Real Success, "...real success ...is measured ...by the people our children become ten or fifteen years down the line."⁷

So it makes no difference if we have little children, or big children, or grandchildren, or we simply see children in the neighborhood or community or in the pew in front of us. Through our words, our actions, our facial expressions, our gestures, our example, every single one of us is a powerful teacher. Though we've learned that proverbs are not guarantees, we trust that if we teach children to revere and strive to follow God's way, when old they are less likely to stray.

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⁶ "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" lyrics by Richard Rodgers from "South Pacific" (1949), <https://genius.com/Richard-rodgers-youve-got-to-be-carefully-taught-lyrics>, accessed 8/24/2017.

⁷ From a review of Madeline Levine, Ph.D., Teach Your Children Well: Parenting for Authentic Success, New York: Harper/HarperCollins Publishers, 2012, at <http://madelinelevine.com/teach-your-children-well/>, accessed 8/24/2017