



A Godly father's counsel to his children

One of the most familiar texts from the Book of Proverbs reads: *'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight'* (3:5-6). This great text forms a part of that section of the book which begins in chapter 1 and extends at least to the end of chapter 7. It comprises the godly counsel of a father to his son on spiritual and practical matters. *'My son'* is a phrase repeated many times throughout these early chapters. For Proverbs (as well as being a book for everyone) has a very great deal to say to young people.

It is important to underscore that the counsel here from father to son is upon spiritual matters. Fathers (and mothers too) will counsel, teach, warn and instruct their children upon a vast range of practical matters for life. Proverbs is as practical a book as one will find anywhere in the Bible. But the thing of supreme value here — and we need to take note of it — is that the most important counsel of all which parents can give is spiritual counsel. Counsel in spiritual things is found often in Proverbs.

If we love our children, we shall tell them so often: what they mean to us and how grateful we are to God for giving them to us. And we shall prove this and demonstrate this to them most lovingly and significantly by paying attention to their souls and urging them to pay attention to their souls. We need to bring them up under the preaching of God's Word.

Bishop Ryle has a very direct challenge precisely on this point of our love for our children:

'No interest should weigh with you so much as their eternal interests. No part of them should be so dear to you as that part which will never die ... In every step you take about them, in every plan and scheme and arrangement that concerns them, do not leave out the mighty question, 'How will this affect their souls?' He adds: 'Soul love is the soul of all love. To pet and pamper and indulge your child, as if this world was all he had to look to, and this life the only season for happiness — to do this is not true love, but cruelty. It is treating him like some beast of the earth, which has but one world to look to, and nothing after death. It is hiding from him that grand truth, which he ought to be made to learn from his very infancy — that the chief end of his life is the salvation of his soul.'

Examples from famous Christians

A number of instances of a father's spiritual concern for and godly counsel to his children are preserved in the letters of past saints.

1. C.H. Spurgeon

The first letter C.H. Spurgeon's son Charles received from his father during one of Spurgeon's visits abroad begins *'My dear Charlie'* and ends *'Your loving father'*. Included in the letter are these words: *'I trust that you will prove, by the whole of your future life, that you are truly converted to God. Your actions must be the chief proof. Remember, trees are known by their fruit, and Christians by their deeds. God bless you for ever and ever!'*

2. J.H. Thornwell

James Henley Thornwell wrote the following words to his fifteen-year-old son, Gillespie, during 1859: *'I have endeavoured to commit you all to God; and there is nothing on which my heart is so much set as to see you all enlisted in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. My cup of earthly happiness would be full, if you, and Jimmie, and Charlie, were only true Christians. You would then*

be safe for time and eternity. Depend upon it, my dear son, you will never repent of it, if you should now give your heart unto the Lord. Let me beg you to seek, this summer, the salvation of your soul. You will have time to think, and read, and pray. Write to me that you are not neglecting the one thing needful'.

3. John Elias

One of the mighty servants of God in Wales in past days was John Elias. Writing from London (7 April 1830) to his son John, he included these words: *'Beware lest anything that occurs should be the means of intercepting your communion with God and marring your soul's spiritual welfare. Strive to confide in the Lord as to your temporal and eternal concerns, and thereby enjoy calmness and peace ... The Lord is able to support and direct you in all your concerns, and throughout your pilgrimage ... He is infinitely wise to see what is most profitable for you. He is most rich, possessing all things; He is almighty, and able to do all things; and He is most gracious and ready to bestow gifts upon the most unworthy; and those that put their trust in Him shall want no manner of thing that is good. He has been most merciful to us as a family, and shewed compassion to us in many difficulties and changes, as you know'.*

4. A.A. Bonar

Andrew Bonar wrote from Glasgow on 28 May 1892 to his son James, to thank him for a birthday present he had received from him for his 82nd birthday. Beginning *'My dear James'* and signed *'Your affectionate father'*, Bonar wrote as follows: *'It was in the year 1830 that I found the Saviour, or rather that He found me and "laid me on His shoulders rejoicing", and I have never parted company with Him all these 62 years. Christ the Saviour has been to me my true Portion, my heaven begun; and my earnest prayer and desire for you ... will always be that you may ... find not only all I ever found in Christ, but a hundredfold more every year'.*

5. Jonathan Edwards

It is appropriate to include in this brief selection a letter from Jonathan Edwards. Written from Stockbridge to his son Jonathan on 27 May 1755, and signed *'your tender and affectionate father'* it is most earnest, gracious and spiritual in tone. Jonathan junior must surely have been moved, stirred and instructed by it. Here is part of the letter. *'Though you are a great way off from us, yet you are not out of our minds: I am full of concern for you, often think of you, and often pray for you ... Take heed that you do not forget or neglect Him. Always set God before your eyes, and live in His fear and seek Him every day with all diligence: for He, and He only, can make you happy or miserable, as He pleases; and your life and health, and the eternal salvation of your soul, and your all in this life and that which is to come depends on His will and pleasure. The week before last, on Thursday, David died; whom you knew and used to play with, and who used to live at our house. His soul is gone into the eternal world. Whether he was prepared for death, we do not know. This is a loud call of God to you to prepare for death. You see that they that are young die, as well as those that are old; David was not very much older than you. Remember what Christ said, that you must be born again or you never can see the Kingdom of God. Never give yourself any rest unless you have good evidence that you are converted and become a new creature ... you know not how soon you may die, and therefore had need always to be ready'.*

6. David Livingstone

David Livingstone writes from Africa to his wife and children back home in 1853: *'My dear Robert, Agnes, and Thomas and Oswell, Here is another little letter for you all. I should like to see you much more than write to you, and speak with my tongue rather than with my pen; but we are far from each other — very, very far ... I remember, though I am far off, Jesus, our good and gracious Jesus, is ever near both you and me, and then I pray to Him to bless you and make you good. He is ever near. Remember this if you feel angry or naughty. Jesus is near you, and sees you, and He is so good and kind ... He is always watching you and keeping you in safety. It is very bad to sin, to do any naughty things, or speak angry or naughty words before Him. My dear children, take Him as your guide, your Helper, your Friend, and Saviour through life'.*

What are we to learn from these letters of fatherly counsel? Such counsel is greatly needful and we who are parents are failing in our duty before God and to our children if we neglect it, regard it as

unimportant, fail to make time for it, or leave it to someone else. I use the word 'counsel' rather than 'advice'. Although the two words are often used more or less interchangeably, it has to be said that 'advice' has a certain 'take it or leave it' nature to it (and there is bad advice as well as good advice); while 'counsel' implies a godly and firm directing in the ways of God. 'This is the way — walk in it'. It goes without saying that we are in continual dependence upon God himself to engage in this great work. We cannot do it in our own strength or our own wisdom. Moreover, He alone can bless it and make it fruitful and effective.

We cannot but notice the rich and gracious promise which God affixes to the performance of the required duty. We are not only exhorting our children (verses 5-6a) but are at the same time pointing them to and assuring them of the blessed promise of God (verse 6b). The promise here is for newborn souls who have been saved by grace. The Lord will direct their paths, superintend their course through this sinful world and lead them to heaven itself, to glory.

'They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion'.

(Psalm 84:7)

Is this how we who are parents speak to our children? Or write to them? And cry to God for them? Is this how we show them true soul love? And if we are still young, is yours the rich privilege under God of having a father and mother who show their desire to train you not only for earth but for heaven? Then do you pay attention to what they say?

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