



Misplaced Guilt

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

(Proverbs 22:6)

Some of my most difficult discussions have been with parents whose children had just recently left the church. Some talked about how painful it was for them to pray together with the minister and the congregation for their children. Others told me that walking out of the church building afterwards was also a challenge: some people spoke to them as if nothing had happened; most maintained an uncomfortable silence; and just a few offered what they considered to be words of comfort.

I hasten to add that none of these parents were surprised by the reaction of their fellow church members. Instead they all remembered: "Before my children left the church, there were others. And did I know what to say to them? Did I have an idea of what they were going through?" When anybody's children leave the church, it's natural to think about Proverbs 22:6. But what conclusions should we draw this time, or next time?

Of course, what people think is not the most important. If people blame me when my children leave the church, that is only a human judgment. What matters more is God's opinion, what the Bible says. But then doesn't Proverbs 22 say that *if* parents do a decent job, *then* their children will never depart from God's way? That seems to be a promise of the gospel, a God-given guarantee: If parents are faithful, their children will be Christians for the rest of their lives. In this way God seems to separate good parents from bad parents. Good parents have all their children in the church, while bad parents have children who leave the church. For some parents this Word of God is even harder to take than seeing their children leave the church in the first place: God seems to blame them!

The reality is, though, that Proverbs are not promises. Instead Proverbs are wise sayings, based on what godly people see and experience and expect to happen in life. Take Proverbs 10:27 for example: *"The fear of the LORD adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short."* What is this proverb saying about people who die at a young age? That they were all wicked? Of course not! In fact, in times of persecution, wickedness (by denying Christ) can add length to life, but the years of those who fear the Lord can be cut short (as martyrs). But the principle is still valid: We should fear the Lord and trust him to bless us, while those who live godless and undisciplined lives can expect trouble.

And it's the same with parenting. We should train our children in the way of the Lord, trusting him to work in their hearts. And children who grow up in ungodly households are more likely to turn their backs on the Lord. But these are only proverbs, observations of godly men, not promises of God!

One hurting mother made a comment that was particularly helpful. She told me: "After my son left the church, people tried to comfort me by telling me that 'I did my best.' Those people meant well, but that comment hurt. For when I thought back over my years of parenting, I remembered many occasions when I had not done my best. When we had visitors, and I heard my children fighting, I did not always respond in the best possible way. And when my son was a teenager I gave him too much freedom." Which parents can honestly say that they always did their best? If we comfort ourselves by insisting that we tried hard, we kid ourselves.

Instead we must believe that God is sovereign, and our children belong to him. He never promised any parents that their children would believe the gospel. He never promised any parents that their children would go to heaven. Our salvation does not depend on our own efforts, we learned from Martin Luther in the days of the Reformation, and the salvation of our children does not depend on our own efforts either.

It is important that Christian parents take their responsibility seriously. But ultimately we must believe that good parenting does not save children. Instead, as parents we depend on the electing grace of our covenant God! May he give comfort to Christian parents who already experience pain because they see their children make bad choices. And may he remove from their shoulders any extra burden of guilt which they might carry because they misunderstand Proverbs 22:6.

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