

ARE YOU TRAINING OR SPOILING YOUR CHILDREN?

Today's Text: Prov. 22; Eph. 6: 1-4

Extracts:

- 1. *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it [Prov. 22: 6]***
- 2. *And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord [Eph. 6: 4]***

My wife and I have just returned from a refreshing vacation in Nigeria. Our last home visit together was in April/May 2002. Therefore, there was much catching up to do-with family, friends and brethren in the Lord. For today's lesson, I found our stay in Lagos very eye opening.

Lagos is notorious for its intractable traffic jams. That is because the population of the metropolis, which is now estimated at around ten million, is growing faster than the infrastructures can handle. Therefore, we decided to stay within the airport zone, in the airport authority senior staff quarters, with a couple that are among our very close friends. The wife is a top human resource manager in the airport authority while the man is an entrepreneur. They have three children, aged 6-15. By the time we had spent two days with them, I could not help but notice the high degree of efficiency and discipline in that home. The fear of God was palpable in everything that they did in that house. There was a perking order, and whoever was oldest at home at any particular point in time played the leadership role. The children were very respectful to their elders, and they studied and did their chores cheerfully. Whenever the parents came home, everybody briefed everybody else about his/her day.

I came away from that experience thanking God that some career parents have not abdicated their God-given responsibility to train up their children. Can we say that of your situation? Are you training or spoiling your children? Have your children turned out the way that you had trained them? Are they better or worse? What does it take to train a child God's way? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Training is a two-way street!

There is the story of a young man who was on trial for a criminal offence. After he had been found guilty, he requested to be allowed to whisper a secret word into his mother's ear before being taken to jail. The court obliged him. To everyone's amazement, he bit off his mother's right ear and said, "That is for spoiling me!" As she cried for help, she retorted, "Your brothers listened but you didn't!"

That suggests that training is a two-way street. *On the parent's part*, training involves shaping or developing the character of his/her child through precept or discipline (*Webster's dictionary*). That involves *teaching*, coaching, educating, instructing, guiding, preparing, tutoring, schooling, etc. *On the child's part*, there is *learning*, that is, gaining knowledge. What if the parent is teaching but the child is not learning? What if the child wants to learn but the parent is not teaching the right things?

So, what factors can influence parents' *ability* to teach and children's *willingness* to learn? Let us go to the word of God for case studies:

a) *Bad parents who raised bad children*

Ahab and Jezebel were the parents of Ahaziah. When Ahab became king of Israel, he married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidonians (from Sidon) who brought the worship of the idol, Baal, into Israel. Ahab built an altar for Baal in Samaria to displace the altar of worship of the true God of Israel [1 Kgs 16: 31-32; 1 Kgs 19: 10]. Ahab and his wife practised wickedness, including seizing the vineyard of a poor man, Naboth, and getting him killed through false witnesses [1 Kgs 21: 1-16]. Ahab was so bad that he did more "to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger *than all the kings of Israel before him*" [1 Kgs 16: 33]. How did his son who succeeded him do? "He did evil in the sight of the Lord and *walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother*" [1 Kgs 22: 52-53].

From the above case, we see that the parents trained up their son *in evil!* When he grew up, he did not depart from it. Look around your home right now and check that you are not doing the same thing. What God is served in your home? Today, a father is in court in America to stop the mention of God in official documents under the misapplied doctrine of separation of church and state. He claims to be an atheist and wants to turn his daughter into one! So, examine your home right now. Are you living a lie, such as cheating on your taxes or using official time for personal pursuits or bribing public officials to obtain what you do not deserve while preaching integrity to your children? Do you use curse words around the house and spend all day gossiping over the phone while chastising your children against lying and backbiting? Are you practising adultery/fornication while preaching abstinence/continence to your

children? In the end, they are more influenced by what you do than what you say! For example, Kevin Winston, 46, wanted to teach his 16-year old daughter a lesson about drinking. One night, she came home drunk and unruly. Her father called in the police to help him to discipline her. What did his daughter do? She led the police to a place above the ceiling of their house where her father stored drugs and weapons!¹ The trainer had lost his moral authority to teach!

b) *Good parents who raised good children*

The contemporary of Ahab was Asa the king of Judah. When he died, four years into Ahab's reign, he was succeeded by his son, Jehosaphat, who "walked in all the ways of Asa his father; he turned not aside from it, doing that which was right in the sight of the Lord" [1 Kgs 22: 41-43]. Among his achievements were the appointments of God-fearing judges [2 Chron. 19: 5-7], priests, Levites and heads of the children of Israel [vv. 8-10], competent administrators [v.11] and the promotion of evangelism [2 Chron. 17: 7-9]. Thus, while Ahab's son, Ahaziah, was a huge failure, the Lord established the kingdom of Judah in Jehosaphat's hands and brought him "riches and honour in abundance" [v. 5].

Here, we see that goodness is defined from God's perspective for, in the words of Jesus, "no one is good but One, that is, God" [Matt. 19: 17]. Therefore, whom God has declared righteous, He never forsakes and his children never beg for bread [Ps. 37: 25]. Moreover, "mark the blameless man, and observe the upright; for the future of that man is peace" [v. 37]. His children are part of his future! So, in a home where the parents raise their children in the fear of the Lord, the children are likely to have willing ears to listen, learn and practise good things, and teach it to their own children. In response to his father-in-law's manipulation of his wages, Jacob said, "unless the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed" [Gen. 31: 42]. Isaac was Jacob's father. Later, when Jacob's son, Joseph, was placed under severe temptation by Potiphar's wife, Joseph told the seductress, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" [Gen. 39: 9]. He was practising what his father had taught him.

Again, look around your home. Emphasize those practices that promote the fear of the Lord. Make God your watchman and let His light radiate in everything that is thought, said or done in that home. Your children cannot escape being infected!

c) *There are also mixed signals!*

¹ "Daughter turns in dad who called police on her," www.cnn.com.2004/11/27/dad.arrest.ap/index.html

In spite of the “pure” cases that we have cited above, we do know of exceptions to the rule. For example, there were parents who trained their children in evil but those children refused to learn; instead, they went in the opposite direction. A good example is king Saul who did everything to make his heir-apparent, Jonathan, hate David, Saul’s anointed successor. The young man refused and, instead, he helped David to escape, saying, “Go in peace, ... May the Lord be between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever” [1 Sam. 20: 42]. Another good example is a wicked king like Manasseh who raised a good and great son, Josiah, who “walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left [2 Kgs 21: 17-26; 22: 1-2].

How do we explain this? A possible explanation is that they *learnt the fear of the Lord from elsewhere*. In the case of Josiah, a prophet had announced his birth and rule during the reign of Rehoboam, many many years before he was even conceived [1 Kgs 13: 1-2]. As God also told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations” [Jer. 1: 4-5]. Therefore, *irrespective of the disposition of our parents*, God Himself trains those that He will use in His vineyard!

On the other hand, we have examples of God-fearing parents who raised evil children. Good illustrations are the prophet Samuel and his two sons, Joel and Abiah. When Samuel was old, he appointed his sons as judges over the people of Israel. However, they “did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.” Consequently, the people rejected them and asked for a king, saying, “Look, you are old, and *your sons do not walk in your ways*” [1 Sam. 8: 1-5]. Why did they refuse to learn the right way from their father?

There are many possible answers. For example, parents may think they are doing the right thing by shielding their children away from the real world. When their children ultimately get exposed, they may find themselves not adequately prepared for it. It happens with the children of church ministers when they leave home to go to college. For the first time, such children are exposed to the worldly culture of freedom and promiscuity. Many of them cannot handle the temptations!

Another possible explanation may be the high level of hypocrisy that undergirds the training that children may receive from their parents. The children cannot wait to escape from such “crap!” *When parents do not properly teach the truth, their children will learn another kind of truth elsewhere!*

2. Implications for child raising

From the forgoing analysis, we can see that child raising goes beyond social psychology. It is a spiritual question. Therefore, the answers lie with God and His word. That is the subject that **Proverbs 22** has treated. We can train our children the right way (God's way) or the wrong way (the world's way).

a) *The wrong training*

The parents' basic assumption may be to prepare their children for a highly competitive world that has no regards for integrity. The emphasis, therefore, is on the outcomes, not the means or processes of success. The children are raised to place more emphasis on silver and gold than on a good name [**Prov. 22: 1**]. They should not run away from evil [**v. 3**] but should rather use it to their own advantage. Their parents will hate to see them suffer. Therefore, they can afford to take it easy [**v. 13**] and even when they do wrong things, they are not corrected if chastising them will make them sad! [**v. 15**]

What is the outcome of this kind of training? The children sow iniquity and reap sorrows [**v. 8**]. Since they are perverse, they are always surrounded by thorns and snares [**v. 5**]. They remain foolish because they do not know or fear God. Therefore, God also gives them up [**vv. 12, 15**]. They are haunted by their parents' records and would want to pull them down [**v. 28**]. In the end, they wind up less known! [**v. 29**].

That kind of training can only produce spoilt children.

b) *The right training*

This approach does not abhor material blessings but they have to be anchored on the fear of God for "by humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honour and life" [**v. 4**]. With trust in God [**v. 19**] and purity of heart [**v. 28**], children are trained to prefer a good name, and loving favour to material gains [**vv. 1, 2**], be evil avoiding [**v. 3**] and build on their parents' achievements [**v. 28**]. When they are wrong, they are disciplined and corrected, no matter how painful it may be [**v. 15**].

Children raised in such circumstances are blessed because they are generous [**v. 9**]. They will excel in their chosen fields of human endeavour, speak with graceful lips and find favour with people of authority [**vv. 11, 29**]. They will be wise because God has inclined their ears to learn the truth [**vv. 12, 17-21**].

That kind of training can only produce children that every parent will be proud of.

3. Conclusion: Train up your child!

We all look forward to successful children that we can be proud of. We now know from today's lesson that God has a hand in our ability to train up our children because we can only plant and water but He gives the increase.

Here are some of the things that we can do:

□ Obtain God's agenda for your child's life

For every child that comes into the world, God has a purpose and a plan for him/her. Speaking of God's all-seeing eye and inescapable presence, David wrote, "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed, and in Your book they all were written, *the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them*" [Ps. 139: 16]. Jeremiah was ordained and sanctified a prophet to the nations even *before he was conceived*. Josiah was anointed a king even before he was conceived. Do you know what plans God has for your children?

I believe that this was the essence of a naming ceremony on the eighth day during which prophets and prophetesses gave a word concerning the child's future. When John the Baptist was born, his father, Zecharias, "was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, ...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways..." So, the child "grew and became strong in spirit, *and was in the desert till the day of his manifestation*" [Lk 1: 57-80]. In like manner, at the naming/presentation of Jesus at the temple, a prophet, Simeon, and a prophetess, Anna, were on hand to pronounce prophetically on His earthly ministry [Lk 2: 21-40]. The practice has been continued in some African churches.

□ Ask for God's guidance and supply

The methods and means to raise the child as God wants it only He can provide. Therefore, continue to remind Him of that. Remember, you can only water. He gives the increase. You may fail in the eyes of the world but He will make up for your inadequacies. When you cannot pay his/her school fees, God will line up good Samaritans to help. When s(he) needs professional advice and guidance, God will provide the leading experts. All God asks of you is that you provide the *enabling spiritual environment* for that child to grow in the fear of the Lord. Of Jesus and His earthly parents, we are told, "And the Child *grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him*" [Lk 2: 40].

It may be hard to successfully train your children, but, please, don't spoil them!