

The Proverbial Parent

Proverbs

Proverbs was written by a father. I think it was written by Solomon to his own children who, mathematically speaking, could not possibly have all known him intimately. It's no surprise then, that Solomon has something to say about the father / child relationship.

A few things to take into account. First, in Solomon's time, women and girls were not educated the way boys were. Thus, Solomon's writings are addressed to sons. In our day, when women too can read and can take a similar place in society alongside men, these words are equally important to both women and men, sons and daughters.

Second, While these ideas use the word "father" as a reference point, they are not comprehensively representative of Proverbs advice concerning parent / son - daughter relationships. There are just as many, perhaps more verses addressed to sons without reference to the father or mother.

Finally, Many of the verses that reference fathers also reference mothers and are therefore advice concerning both. These

ideas should be seen, for the most part, as advice involving parents, not just fathers. Again, the word “father” was the reference point for the study, so the ideas are a little skewed in that direction.

The advice Solomon gives, and the wise observations he makes can be seen two ways. One asks the question: How can I parent effectively? The other asks the question: Am I a good son or daughter?

Our first duty is to listen

Over and over, Solomon encourages his children to listen to their parents. On both sides of the coin, let’s see what Solomon says

My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. (Proverbs 6:20-22)

So, when you’re asking yourself if you’re being a good parent, remind yourself that everything you say is going to stick with the child for life, both in his conscious and unconscious thinking. Make sure what you

say is life giving and not life taking.

Children, ask yourself if you are giving your parents their due. If you need to know how to succeed in life, listening to your parents is the first step in that direction. There may be more that you need to learn, but you have a leg up to make it as far as they made it just by intently listening to what they have to say. My dad used to tell me, “If by the time you’re my age, you’re not twice as smart as I am, I’m a failure. You should know everything I know as well as everything you learn on your own.” Our first leaders are our parents and their lessons drive the deepest.

You may have heard some women say, “I open my mouth and my mother comes out.” It’s true, because our parents lessons drive the deepest. What we learn in our most formative years will stick with us the closest and we will revert to them when we are stressed or not thinking about what to do. They become nearly instinctive.

I encourage you to write down some things your parents taught you. For example, my dad said I should never call people stupid, it’s unkind. Now when he said it, I had been joking around with a friend. My friend knew it and I knew it. I did not think my friend was

stupid. But my dad knew there was power in words and he wanted me to be careful with them. Now I am much more careful with those kinds of jokes.

Also, listening to our parents does not end when we reach the age of majority. Even people who are no longer children should listen to their parents, not with the same level of obedience, but with a healthy level of respect:

Listen to your father, who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she
is old. (Proverbs 23:22)

“When she is old” is kind of a two sided-coin too. I like to point out that when people call me, at 54 years old, a young man, they aren’t talking about my age. “When she is old” you are no longer very young. You’re probably not living with your parents any more. The fact that your parents are not looking over your shoulder every minute of the day does not mean they should be ignored when they speak.

Throughout our lives our parents deserve respect and an honest hearing if for no other reason than that they brought us into the world. If we have choices to make, those

choices can be informed by people who gave us our ability and first opportunity to make choices.

Listening brings life

Paul makes a point to show that one of the ten commandments comes with a promise attached:

"Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise--
"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."
(Ephesians 6:2-3)

You could approach this very cynically, and say that a rebellious child was supposed to be stoned to death, so not honoring your parents pretty much guaranteed a short life. But we should consider laws like that to represent maximum penalties, not the norm. There was always room in the law for mercy, so I'm thinking very few young people were executed for sass.

But it seems to be something more anyway. The promise is for something beyond a normal life-span.

When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my

mother, he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. (Proverbs 4:3-4)

Apparently, David told Solomon, before he and Bathsheba ever had another child that heeding his parents would bring life. It is a warning as well as a promise, that not heeding leads to trouble, perhaps fatal trouble:

If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness. (Proverbs 20:20)

This is not a very pleasant sounding promise. Notice too that the action of the child is not mild disdain, but an active opposition to his parents. But this isn't even the most colorful warning of its type:

"The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. (Proverbs 30:17)

You see we all know the tendencies of children, even adult children. We think we know better, and maybe sometimes we do, but as a general rule, we don't. So when our parents say something, we sometimes roll

our eyes. It's a silent, and, hopefully, unnoticed form of mockery.

Parents are sooo old fashioned.

But one of Solomon's classic statements is

There is nothing new under the sun

We might think our parents are old fashioned and we might think their words are something to be snickered at, but Solomon is clear, as up to date as you might think you are, it doesn't matter.

You know, in my leadership studies, this was one of the things I thought was lacking. We read all the latest and most advanced theories, but kind of brushed over older and more ancient theories.

You will ignore the voice of experience at your own peril. Do not mock the old, it has been there and done that and has the t-shirt, and the t-shirt has worn thin and has holes in it, and been replaced three times.

But parents, this places a burden on you too. Remember the question, am I being a good parent? You do have a load of experience that deserves attention, but it is up to you to edit your experience, to pass on the right wisdom for the right situation. To make sure

the things you say are true and relevant. Like possessions, too many words are just as bad as too few. If your words have the capacity to bring life and prevent disaster for your children, they cannot be just any words. The fact that you say it does not make it gospel, and does not make it wise. It is up to you to choose.

Wise and foolish

The book of proverbs is a treatise on the contrast between the wise person and the foolish. All told, the two concepts are not as simple as we might like to think. We define wisdom and foolishness in light of the actions and decisions of the person, and one is a shadow of the other.

In Proverbs, wisdom includes knowledge, strategic thinking, moral reasoning, hard work, benevolent giving, peaceful dealings with others, moderate eating and drinking, sound politics and much more.

Foolishness includes, excessive living, willful ignorance, violent tendencies, selfishness, slothfulness, insolence, a lack of planning, and more.

Every verse that contrasts wisdom and foolishness gives us another item to add to

the list that makes up the definition of each. Sometimes it's a simple item, and sometimes more complex.

Sometimes the verses do not give so much a definition as an explanation of the results of behaving one way or the other. That's what comes into play with the child, parent relationship

Foolish children

Some contrasts are not immediately obvious:

He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father. (Proverbs 28:7)

How exactly is a person who keeps the company of gluttons the opposite of a criminal. It's not completely clear. The contrast is more clearly between a discerning son and a disgraceful son. All our actions affect not just us, but our families. Bad behavior leads to speculation about bad parenting. Even if it doesn't it leads parents to doubt the job they did. One of the biggest mistakes we make in life is thinking that we are isolated, our mistakes and successes are ours alone. We are wrong to think that our actions are nobody's business because they affect nobody but ourselves. Nothing could

be further from the truth.

Notice that the action it takes to disgrace your parents (hanging out with gluttons), is a much lower magnitude than the effort it takes to be a law abiding citizen. This is in keeping with the principle that it takes much less effort to destroy a reputation than it takes to build one up. A person can be a good person for years, and one bad judgement call can mess it all up. The same goes with the way we reflect on our parents.

To have a fool for a son brings grief; there is no joy for the father of a fool. (Proverbs 17:21)

A lot of things can happen in a person's life, but I've never seen heartbreak worse than that brought on by a foolish son or daughter who will not reconsider their ways. A parent agonizes all the time, night and day. The worse part is, that they are afraid if they correct the wayward child in just the wrong way, give just the wrong bit of advice, the child will avoid them, and the pain of loss will be even worse.

When the Bible tells us to honor our parents, it goes to more than just cleaning our room when we are 10 years old ... much more.

There is no age limit on the fifth commandment. It lasts our whole lives and involves not just direct interaction but indirect reflection.

I have seen a different problem:

He who robs his father or mother and says, "It's not wrong"-- he is partner to him who destroys. (Proverbs 28:24)

On the face of it, this appears to be a warning against taking money out of your father's wallet or your mother's purse. But I also think of it in terms of borrowing money. Money borrowed from a family member is just as subject to payback as money from a bank, maybe more so.

I've also seen adult children begin to look with too greedy an eye on their parents belongings and property. In fact, this seems to be the thrust of the passage. They want to do anything they can to avoid hurting their inheritance. After all, it will be yours one day anyway, so why is that wrong? Truth is, as long as your parents are alive, their things belong to them and nobody else. If they need to unload something for whatever reason, sell it, give it away, whatever, it's their business. If they have a valuable antique and decide to

sell it for the money, it is robbery to beg them or manipulate them into keeping it so you can eventually have it. Their needs must outweigh our own. Otherwise, Solomon describes us as a partner to the destroyer. Some translations say, if you do this, you are no better than a common thief.

But Solomon clarifies the alternative

Remember what I said about defining wisdom. One way Solomon defines wisdom is with the word righteousness:

The father of a righteous child has great joy; a man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him. May your father and mother rejoice; may she who gave you birth be joyful! (Proverbs 23:24-25)

This is one sure fire way to honor your father and mother. Be wise. Be righteous.

- What does that mean, except do what is right?
- That means sometimes doing what is hard
- doing what is inconvenient
- doing what could be misunderstood
- doing what could get you out of good graces of people who want you to do

wrong

- friends
- coworkers
- bosses
- Doing what the Bible says
- And sometimes, just maybe, doing as your parents advise

Solomon follows the description of a wise, righteous person with a blessing pronounced on the child, but notice how it trickles up to the parents:

May your father and mother rejoice;
may she who gave you birth be joyful!

It's funny, it appears to be a blessing on the parents, but in light of the previous verse, it's also a blessing on the son or daughter

May you always do what is right
May you always be wise

Honoring your parents is more than just getting them a card on whatever day the calendar says. It's about an entire lifestyle. It's a constant awareness that what you do both reflects on them and affects them. It's making the well-being of your parents part of the equation of decision making. Ask, is what I'm about to do going to lift my parents up or give them grief? It may not be the last word in

the decision, but it should be considered. It's an acknowledgment that while you may not always agree with your parents, they deserve a hearing, and you're foolish to ignore them.