Family Values

Skillful Living

Proverbs 22

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So on this Mother's Day, I think pretty much everybody in the room would affirm together what we might refer to as *family values*. The Bible has a lot to say about the importance of family, and I think we would affirm that together. But over the years I've noticed something…that there is all too often a gap between what we say we value and how we actually live our lives. We say we value one thing but that's not actually how we live our lives. Why is that? What creates this gap? Well I suppose there are several answers to that question. But on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus identified a big concern—and if you don't get *it* right, you're pretty much not going to get anything else right. It also happens to be the theme of our proverb this morning. So if you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 22. Proverbs 22, verse 6 is probably the most familiar parenting verse in all of the Bible.

> **Train up a child in the way he should go,**
> **And when he is old he will not depart from it.** (*NASB, Proverbs 22:6)

That's probably the most familiar parenting verse in the Bible. There's kind of an echo to it in verse 15:

> **Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;**
> **The rod of discipline will remove it far from him.**

What's interesting to notice is there are those two verses about parenting tucked into a proverb that's mostly about money. Now I've contended all the way along that I think one reason why Proverbs is organized the way it is—which in many ways seems not organized at all; it's not really organized around topics—is because life doesn't isolate itself into just specific topics but rather one issue affects another issue, affects another issue. If I have a problem in one area, it bleeds into another area, which bleeds into another area, and that's pretty much the way Proverbs is written—that all of these different areas affect one another. So it's helpful to think about how we view money has a lot to do with whether or not we actually end up living out our value system as parents. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount talked about the danger of treasuring treasures on earth—about the danger of loving money. In the midst of that conversation he basically said, "If you get this one issue—the issue related to your perspective on money wrong—it's likely you're pretty much going to get everything else in life wrong." This proverb kind of has that same flavor to it. So let's look at the proverb and see how this works. Verse 1:

> **A *good* name is to be more desired than great wealth,**
> **Favor is better than silver and gold.**

What the proverb is not saying is that you have to make a choice between a good name, which has to do with reputation, has to do with character, has to do with integrity, or wealth. It's not saying that. As a matter of fact there is nowhere in the Bible where accumulating or having wealth is criticized; that's never the problem. It's not money; it's the *love of money*. It's a loss of a sense of

what really matters. The proverb is using what we refer to as the *better than* technique. It's very common in Proverbs, which is saying there's kind of an order to these values, so one has to be *better than the other*. We would probably say in today's language, "When push comes to shove". If I have to make a decision between my character and integrity and accumulating wealth, then my character, my integrity, my reputation has to be more important. That's just kind of the idea of verse 1. Now the reality is that all of us in the room don't have equal access, potential, or ability to accumulate wealth; we just don't. But every single one of us has equal opportunity in every way to live lives of character, lives of integrity—to cultivate for ourselves a good name. So that's the idea of verse 1. Verse 2:

> **The rich and the poor have a common bond,**
> **The LORD is the maker of them all.**

Now we talked about this a little bit last week. The Hebrew word *mishpat*, which is typically translated *justice*, carries the idea of *true justice* whether you're rich or poor. In the ancient world that was almost unheard of. This again carries that idea that in God's value system, in God's economy, it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. You're a person made in the image of God and before God you have equal value. Now I doubt anyone in the room is going to argue with that. But here's the problem…we collectively, as a culture, don't believe that. We don't buy into this. We clearly believe that net worth equals self-worth. This is not a secret. This is not something that nobody gives voice to; it's obviously stated. All you have to do is watch television and listen to the commercials. There are clear statements of what gives us meaning and purpose, what gives us status, what makes us more important. How do we demonstrate that to the people around us? How do we show that we've arrived? It's money; it's wealth; it's stuff! It's stated again and again and again. This isn't a secret. Every generation seems to be offended at the materialism of their parents, and then they live the exact same way. I'm a baby boomer. We boomers were really offended by our parent's materialism; then we turn around and live the exact same way. Each generation that follows thinks they're going to be so offended that they're going to do it differently. All of the research confirms the fact that each generation falls into the same value system and lives the same way. Research today shows that most students go to college and they choose a major not based on a personal passion but based on how can I make the most money? It's a very strong value system in our culture. Now it's easy to say, "Oh, I don't think that affects me," but I would not be so quick to dismiss that. It is a powerful force in our culture.

Now just stop and think about the value system related to what we pay people. We will pay a movie star or a football quarterback millions of dollars. Now compare that to the middle school math teacher, to the social worker, the first responders, to law enforcement, to military. Now which one probably makes the greater contribution to life in the culture? But there's a huge disparity in terms of what people are paid. Now you may be in a profession where you're paid a lot; you may be in a profession where you're paid little. There's no problem with being paid a lot. If I had the ability to be an NFL quarterback and somebody's going to pay me ten million dollars, I would take it in a heartbeat. There's no problem with that. Then it's my responsibility what I do with that. But it does begin to create a value system. So you'd say, "Well that's not true of me." Really? You're going to tell me that if somebody pulled up to your house in an old beat up minivan and somebody else pulled up to your house in a brand new Mercedes or Lexus you wouldn't notice that? Are you telling me that if I told you this morning there was a Hall of Fame NFL quarterback with us this morning and there is also a really talented middle school math teacher with us this morning, you'd see that just the same? *(laughter)* Really? You're going to be looking all over the auditorium to find the math teacher? *(laughter)* I think that's him! I think he's seated up there! You're going to

be just as excited afterward to meet the math teacher as you are to meet the quarterback? Really? Now that's just the value system of the culture. None of us can really do much to change that. I can discipline myself to remember in God's economy, one's not more valuable than the other. It doesn't matter if they're rich or poor. If you yourself are the middle school math teacher, you have to work really hard to remember that just because you don't get paid millions of dollars it doesn't mean you have less value. Your net worth does not equal your self-worth. And you have to remember what you're doing matters; it's a significant contribution to the lives of those students. In our culture you have to work to remember that. But more significantly, in this value system it's so pervasive, it's so subtle, it's the way people think—it's just really easy to get caught up into it.

And so as a young family you need to buy a house but the house you want and the neighborhood you want to live in is maybe a little bit beyond your budget. But it seems normal because that's what everybody around you is doing, and you have to keep up so you stretch your budget and you buy it. But now you're kind of stretched to the limit, so both mom and dad are working hard in order to keep up with the payments, and of course you need a car, and for some reason you need a brand new car because that's what everybody else is buying. You can't really afford to just pay for that so you get that on payments. And now your budget is stretched so thin that you have to start laying down the plastic in order to keep up, and pretty soon you have so much stress, so much credit card debt. You have these payments; you have the house payment; you're going a hundred miles an hour and before you know it your kids are in twenty different activities; both parents are working just to keep up, and all of a sudden you have to come to grips with the fact, "We're not actually living the values that we stated we value." Why? It's because of a series of poor decisions that got you into a situation where you're no longer living what you say you value. I will absolutely guarantee you: you cannot live our Proverbs 22:6 in the fast lane. You can't! It requires so much more than that. It's a little bit like thinking you can do your chemistry homework in Memorial Stadium during a football game. *(laughter)* It's probably not going to work out too well. It bumps down then to Verse 7. Again, this is the verse right after Verse 6: **Train up a child**…

> **The rich rules over the poor,**
> **And the borrower *becomes* the lender's slave.**

The proverb says a lot about debt and lending and borrowing but I think this is often misunderstood. You have financial people that pull these verses out of both the biblical context and the historical context who don't really understand them. You have to understand that in the ancient world there were no banks; there were no lenders. It was up to the rich if they wanted to loan to the poor, but there were no regulations. The rich by and large abused and dominated the poor. And so they would lend money with ridiculous terms that were almost impossible to meet, and that favored the rich. More times than not, the poor could not keep up with the terms, would default and would literally become the slave of the rich. There was a tremendous amount of financial abuse. So this consistent message is that the way to avoid that is: the poor should not borrow from the rich because the system is rigged in favor of the rich, and that's why you see so many of those verses.

Now that's totally different from a 21st century American culture. We have banks; we have lending institutions. It's all regulated. It's a business deal; the terms are all laid out, and oftentimes it's a way for everyone to win. Most of us in the room could never own a house without some help. We go to the bank; the bank loans us some money; we understand the terms and the agreement; it's all worked out fairly, and it is a way for a win-win. I get to own a house and the bank gets to make some money; everybody wins in the deal! So the Bible is not anti-debt in that sense, but it is a system that can be abused. So what happens is we maybe get in a little too deep, a little bit beyond

what we can afford, and then we start to feel the stress and the strain of that. We need a vehicle and sometimes the way life works you're in a position where you have to borrow and get some help to buy the vehicle. Then you buy a brand new vehicle and it just starts to cascade. Then I'm stretched so thin I don't have money so I'm laying down the credit cards and before you know it you're enslaved to a series of poor decisions. And now what's defining your day-to-day life is not your value system but rather it's a series of poor decisions that now keeps you going a hundred miles an hour. You're stressed out; you're worn out; you're exhausted, and the kids get the leftovers. No parent would say that's what they intended, but that's often what happens. At some point, you have to realize, "This isn't how we intended to live." The season to be a parent is very, very short. You can't just keep thinking, "Someday I'm going to get on top of this and it will be different." You better do something and you better do it quickly because the time is passing by and you're going to wake up one morning and those kids are gone. They don't need twenty activities. They don't need all of this stuff. What they need is Verse 6. They need parents who will train them how to live life in a very complicated world.

So let's look at Verse 6. The word **train** is the Hebrew word that means *to dedicate*. It's the Hebrew word from which we get the word *Hanukkah*. Hanukkah was the celebration of the rededication of the temple. This is the same term. The verb tense would be *continually dedicated to*. It carries the idea that this is hard; this is complicated; it takes a lot of thought and a lot of processing. I have to continually be dedicating myself to this task in order to **train up a child in the way he should go**. There is a lot of debate about what that means—**the way he should go**. The Hebrew carries the idea of a natural bent of the child, so personality, temperament, that sort of thing. That's maybe been kind of overstated by some. It also carries the idea of natural in terms of the age of the child. Is this child five or is this child fifteen? It affects what training looks like. But also **the way** has to do with *the right way*. It's one of the most talked about topics in the book of Proverbs—the way of life versus the way of destruction—understanding this is a very complicated world. It's full of all kinds of snares and traps and ways to destroy life. Jesus said, "Wide is the path that leads to destruction." That's the default mode. That is the path most will travel. The exception would be those that travel the narrow path, and it's the narrow path that leads to life. This was talked about again and again in the book of Proverbs. My heart goes out to these children; it goes out to our teenagers. I love teenagers and my heart goes out to these kids because this is such a complicated world. It is filled with so many landmines, so many ways to destroy your life. They need someone who has first learned how to live skillfully himself or herself. How do you navigate such a complicated world? And then I need to turn around and spend the time, the relationship, the effort that's necessary to train my children how to live in a complicated world. This is not an easy assignment, not an easy task. I'm thinking about, "What is the right path and living that myself," and then I'm thinking about, "What is the temperament, the personality of this particular child, and is this a five-year-old; is this a ten-year-old; is this a fifteen-year-old," and all of that affects my strategy and how I go about training this child to travel the path. That cannot be done in the fast lane. It cannot be done when you're exhausted, and it cannot be done in the car in between this and that. It is a very difficult assignment. We bump it to Verse 15, which is kind of an echo of Verse 6.

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;

Now **foolishness** in the Proverbs has to do with *selfishness*, has to do with *self-absorption*, and has to do with the fact that the default mode is not to be skillful. The default mode is to live like a fool. That's the wide road; that's kind of the natural bent of all of us. And so it takes a lot of training; it takes a lot of skill, and it takes a lot of correction to change that.

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;
The rod of discipline will remove it far from him. (Vs. 6)

Now **discipline** is not primarily punishment, which is punitive; it's *correction*. I don't want to punish my children; I want to correct my children. But I have to figure out, "How do I do that?" How do I bring about necessary correctives in order to move them from the path of foolishness, which is kind of the natural bent, and get them on the path of life? That's my assignment. Today I know forty-year-olds that live life with so much skill because they were trained and taught how to live skillfully. I know forty-year-olds that live every day like a fifteen-year-old fool, and when you get into their story, what you find out is nobody taught them; nobody trained them, and nobody helped them understand, "Here's how you live life skillfully in a very complicated culture."

Now yes, **the rod of discipline** is talking about what we would refer to today as spanking. I know that's a controversial subject. I don't think the Bible requires that you spank your children. So if you have a problem with it, fine. Figure out something else that works. I will say, "Yes, spanking can be abused," but for hundreds of years parents have used it effectively. So you decide what you want to do with your children. But I would suggest you find something that works. It's not unusual to sit down with a parent and the kids are out of control. They're breaking everything in sight and the parent says, "You know we don't spank our children." You want to say, "That's fairly obvious." *(laughter)* I might even say, "You know, I don't know what you're doing, but whatever it is, it's not working." Whatever you're comfortable with, you need to find something that works. That's the assignment; that's the challenge. You need to find the temperament, the bent of that child, and you need to figure out something that's age appropriate. You need to figure out, "What does it mean to travel this very complicated path?" You need to figure out how to do it yourself and you need to help them.

One of the things that has become very common in our culture, and all you have to do is talk to youth workers, to school teachers, to principals, to healthcare workers, to coaches, or talk to employers because they're all saying the same thing. One thing that has dramatically changed is the involvement of parents with their children in protecting their children and blaming everyone else except the child for their misbehavior. It's never *Little Johnny's fault*. The parents swoop in and excuse all of this behavior because it's certainly not Johnny's fault; it's everybody else's fault. I was talking to an HR director a couple of weeks ago. He told me there are parents that come into the workplace because Little Johnny's not getting his promotion, Little Johnny's not being treated fairly. Here's the problem: Nobody taught Little Johnny how to live in the real world. Parents that do that with their children are setting up Little Johnny for a huge crash. You can get away with it through school and middle school and even into high school, but guess what? The real world isn't very friendly, and there's Little Johnny who never learned how to draw within the lines, and who never learned, "How do you discipline yourself to follow the rules and operate within society?" Our job as parents is not just to protect our kids. It's to prepare our kids and to help them understand, "This is what's necessary to live skillfully in a complicated world." You cannot do that in the fast lane. It takes time; it takes energy and it takes thought.

Just a couple of things to think about: One is when you think about teaching or training your child, it's important to understand that the number one way that you will teach or train your child is by example. No matter what words you use, number one: your child will learn from your example. If you as a father are addicted to pornography, you tell me, "What are you going to teach your son or your daughter about how to be sexually pure in a sexually-contaminated culture?" If you think your son hasn't figured it out, I would suggest otherwise. And you need to ask yourself, "What am I

modeling for my child if every day for you as a parent you are filled with fear, anxiety, worry, or stress? You tell me, "What are you going to teach your children about finding their peace, their refuge and their safety in the life of Christ?" If you as a parent can't control your mouth, you can't control your temper, you tell me, "What are you teaching your child about how to treat people and respect the people around them?" One interesting dynamic is parents who would say they highly value their relationship with Jesus, but they sporadically attend church; they don't serve anywhere; there's always twenty things that are more important, and then that child gets to be sixteen, seventeen, eighteen and wants nothing to do with Jesus, and the parents say to me, "I just don't understand it." "What don't you understand? You modeled beautifully that there are lots of things in your life more important than your relationship with God. Why would you think your son or daughter would not get that? They got the message loud and clear."

I am absolutely convinced that, at the end of the day, what defines your values is what you do with your time and what you do with your money. That's what matters most to you, and I guarantee you your kids are learning those lessons. The sobering reality of parenting is the time goes so quickly. The thought that somehow you're going to get on top of life; it's all going to work out and it won't always be this busy, won't always be this stressful, but all of a sudden you wake up one morning and it's over. Your kids are gone and you never really ever lived what you said you really valued. If you are parents with children eight, nine years old, you do understand you're half done...you're half done! I mean it goes so fast! Don't miss it. There are no second chances; there are no do-over's. All of us as parents struggle with the frustration that about the time we figure it out, we're done. But you don't have to be done.

Every weekend there are seven hundred to a thousand kids in this building, and they need to be trained; they need to be loved; they need to be guided and they need to be taught. If you're like my age, you've raised your children. You look back and think, "If I had a do-over again, there are things I would do differently." If you feel that way, join the club—probably all of us as parents. But it's not too late. There's a whole army of children that I can invest my life in, that I can help teach, I can help train. I can pass on some of the skills and wisdom that I've learned over the years. I cannot imagine a more effective way to change the world than to pour my life into this next generation of leaders, into the next generation of world-changers. So we view it as a partnership with our young parents, with all of us in the body. Let's partner up. Let's make this happen. **Let's train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it.**

Our Father, we are sobered by the responsibility we have as parents. Entrusted with these little lives that will live in a very complicated culture where there are so many ways for these children to destroy their lives, You have given us the responsibility to teach them, to train them, to correct them, that they might travel the path of life. God, may we together as a church partner up to accomplish what You've called us to do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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