

Sermon 79, How to Discipline a Heart, Proverbs 23:12-16

Proposition: If you discipline yourself and your child, you both will find eternal life and joy because you've found wisdom.

- I. Disciplining Your Own Heart, v. 12
 - A. It Takes Application
 - B. It Takes Listening
 - C. It Takes an External Word of Knowledge
- II. Disciplining Your Child's Heart
 - A. Failure to Discipline Is Child Abuse, v. 13a
 - B. "He Will Not Die" Is Literally True: Discipline Gives Eternal Life, vv. 13b-14
 - 1. Jesus Gives Eternal Life
 - 2. Jesus Is God's Begotten Wisdom
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 - C. Discipline Is Going to Need the Rod at Some Point
- I. The Need for Discipline, vv. 12a, 13a
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I remember an impassioned argument I had with my mother about this text many years ago. I confronted Mom with the horrific lie and injustice of the passage: "Mom, I *will* die! I will!" Mom insisted that I would not die. Turns out I'm still here. But brothers and sisters, the claim in this text is far bigger than that discipline will not be fatal. It is the literal claim that a disciplined child will not die — that is, that he will live forever. Yes, you heard that right. Proverbs promises eternal life to the well-disciplined child, and to the parent who applies his own heart to discipline too. If that claim makes sense to you, then you've understood Proverbs thus far. If you don't think that claim is correct, then listen

carefully to the rest of this sermon. The bottom line is that to know wisdom requires discipline, and that to know wisdom is to know Christ — and to know Him is eternal life.

I. The Need for Discipline, vv. 12a, 13a

Here we are, ten or twelve sayings into the thirty sayings of the wise, and we have a clear break. We looked last Sunday at the Ten Commandments of wealth management. Now, though, we return to an even earlier theme in Proverbs — the theme of the heart, of discipline, and the connection between a disciplined heart and a listening ear. Remember, the purpose of this whole book is to impart the discipline of wisdom. That’s the first sentence of the book, after the title in 1:1. And lest we forget that imperative, Solomon has repeated it in every chapter, sometimes multiple times, since then — either in a directly imperative command to listen, or by providing an illustration of the good things that befall the listener and the terrible things that come to the man who stops his ears. Clearly, brothers and sisters, if you’ve been paying attention to the book of Proverbs at all, then you know that discipline is important. You know that a wise life is a disciplined life. Remember, we defined discipline as “the training that makes punishment unnecessary.” It’s not just your child that needs it. YOU NEED IT!

A. For Your Own Heart

And so, the wise tell us to apply our heart to discipline — literally, to bring our heart to discipline. What does that mean? It means bringing your heart to the place where it is ready and willing to learn the correct lesson from the circumstances of life, from the words of God, from the angry denunciation of an upset neighbor, and on and on and on. To apply your heart to discipline is to refuse to let it shy away from that discipline. It’s to refuse to let yourself off the hook, but to learn the lesson you need to learn instead. Brothers and sisters, these are the words of the wise! Only a fool would say, “My heart doesn’t need discipline. I’m the righteous, holy, mature one in the relationship, and if something goes wrong, then it’s proof that the other person needs more discipline.”

What are some scenarios where you might be confronted with the need to apply your heart to discipline, and where you will be able to choose either to accept God’s discipline in that moment, or to reject it and stand on your own rights? In reality, everything you do all day long is just such a scenario. When someone cuts you off in traffic; when your child looks at you and says “No;” when your spouse does something that takes a large bite out of your plan; when your boss tells you that your performance review was the worst one in the department — and, on the flip side, when you hear that you’re getting a raise, when you see your child make the goal that wins the game, when you get a quiet evening with your favorite book — at these times, too, you have the chance to apply your heart to discipline. Your heart needs it.

B. For Your Child’s Heart

And your child’s heart needs it too. The wise are not shy about telling you what to do. After all, they are wise. Their wisdom lets them know the certain outcome of doing what they say. And so they declare it in a very clear fashion: Don’t withhold discipline from your child! Lack of

discipline is a privation, a failure to provide something that should be there. To refuse to discipline your child is every bit as evil as to refuse to feed your child.

In one sense, of course, discipline is inescapable. There are some things you will and won't allow your child to do. That in itself is part of the discipline you are required to provide. But the wise are not telling you simply to give your child the discipline of culture, but to give him the discipline of wisdom. What is that? Well, we've just been talking about it for the last 78 weeks. Quite simply, it is the fear of God. That's right. You are required to do your level best to instruct your child to fear God.

II. The Mode of Discipline, vv. 12-14

Now, how do you do that? The passage gives us two different modes of discipline, and it is abundantly clear that neither of these modes is optional. An adequate approach to discipline is going to make use of both.

A. Verbal, v. 12

The first, and quite literally primary, facet of discipline is the verbal facet. To apply your heart to discipline is not possible without applying your ears to words of knowledge. This connection, between the heart and the mouth on one hand and the heart and ears on the other, is drawn over and over again in the pages of Proverbs. The mouth says what's in heart; the ears, meanwhile, take in the words of wisdom that shape the heart. If you tell me that you are seeking to discipline your heart, but admit that you can't remember the last time you listened to God's word, then you are not applying your heart to discipline. The words of knowledge are how discipline begins.

This means, parents, that you first of all need to listen to words of knowledge before you have a ghost of a chance of disciplining your child. You need to know what you're doing. You need to know what God's word says. You need to listen to the wisdom of your parents and of other older, experienced parents whose advice you trust.

And then, you need to understand that your first resort in training your children to fear God is to talk to them. This is the core of the faith as delivered to Moses; indeed, Moses puts it better than I ever could when he says,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. (Deu 6:4-7 NKJ)

So let me get this straight: I need to talk to my children when I'm at home. I need to talk to them when I'm out. I need to talk to them when we're traveling somewhere. I need to talk to them when we're up. I need to talk to them while we're down. The obvious message here is that there is never a time when you can say, "Okay! I've told my children everything they need to know. They've got it from here." That's not true! If you want children who love God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength — the goal of discipline — then you will have to talk to them all the time.

In the English course I teach we look every year at Rabbi Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen*. One of the main characters in that book is a son whose father never talks to him. Yet Potok begins the book with an epigraph taken from Proverbs 4:

Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, And give attention to know understanding;
For I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law. When I was my father's son, Tender
and the only one in the sight of my mother, He also taught me, and said to me: "Let your
heart retain my words; Keep my commands, and live. Get wisdom! Get understanding!
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she
will preserve you; Love her, and she will keep you. (Pro 4:1-6 NKJ)

What does the father say in this chapter? He says "Let your heart retain my words"! Can your child's heart retain the words you never spoke? The answer, of course, is yes, yes it can and most certainly will. What message do unspoken words communicate loud and clear? "You're not important to me. You're not worth my time." Brothers and sisters, the primary way of teaching your child to love God is to talk about God with and to your child — and not just about God, but about everything in His wonderful world. No piece of knowledge, no fact about the world, is an enemy to God. He knows them all. He made or permits them all!

So apply your ear to words of knowledge so that your heart will have words of knowledge to share with your own beloved children.

Do you see already the promise that verbal discipline gives life? It's right there in Prov. 4: "Keep my commandments, and live." Again, this is because when you get wisdom, you get Jesus Christ, the begotten Wisdom of God — and to know Christ is to know wisdom, which is to be wise, which is to live. Again, this book of Proverbs is all about the deep and inescapable connection between knowing Christ and living like Him. That connection must be made verbally over and over and over if you are to have any hope of disciplining yourself or anyone else.

B. Physical, vv. 13-14a

But discipline is not limited to the verbal, even though the verbal is the primary and most important arena of discipline. The rod — that is, some kind of infliction of physical pain at a level too high to be ignored but not so high as to be dangerous — is another tool of discipline that godly parents use. Different children need different doses of it. But the parent who says "We don't discipline with the infliction of pain" has set himself up as wiser than God. Another way of saying this is that such a parent is a fool. You shall beat your child with the rod, say the sages. You shall cause him physical pain in order to teach him to fear God, which is the discipline of wisdom.

Now, one danger of which we must all beware is the danger of using physical pain to teach your child to fear you rather than God. Doing that is not discipline at all, and certainly not the discipline of wisdom. Yet the right kind of fear, whereby they honor their father and mother, is a good thing and part of obeying God. Parents, if you're disciplining your children in the fear of you as a healthy part of this fear of God, then that's a good thing — an unmitigated blessing,

in fact. But if you're disciplining your children to fear you as an end in itself, then you're failing to teach them to fear God, and the end will not be life, joy, or wisdom.

III. The Rewards of Discipline

Well, the wise do not confine themselves to commanding you to discipline your own heart and your child's. They could, of course. But they are wise enough to know that most people do better when you show them the positive outcome of what you're telling them to do. And so the wise outline three major rewards that come to those who discipline their own hearts and their children's hearts.

A. Life, vv. 13-14

The first of these rewards is life. We know, of course, that the wage of righteousness is life, as the wage of sin is death. But we also know that no righteous action done by fallen beings such as ourselves will ever be righteous enough to earn that wage. In other words, we constantly confront the problem of salvation by works. If salvation is by works, then there is no salvation to be had. But if salvation is not by works, then how can we ever obtain it? As usual, Proverbs cuts this knot by addressing itself to those who are already saved — those who are already sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you come under this address to “my son” in v. 15? If you do, then you are a believer. God is your Father. Jesus is your Savior. The Holy Spirit lives in you as Lord and giver of — yes, that's right — life. You are already spiritually alive if you are rightly called “son.” And so, as one who is spiritually alive, you are capable of receiving the discipline that leads to life. You can't discipline the spiritually dead into spiritual life, anymore than you can discipline the biologically dead into biological life. But because Jesus' resurrection power has already overcome spiritual death, you can receive your Father's discipline. And when you do, you won't die. As we observed earlier, the proverb envisions that the well-disciplined child will in fact meet with death and lose — temporarily. Discipline your son, and you will deliver his soul from the grave. This doesn't mean “keep his soul from ever entering the grave,” because obviously everyone dies. It means just what it says: “You will take his soul out of the grave.” The power of discipline is not merely the naturalistically construed power to avoid the kinds of behavior that will cause an early death. It is the supernatural power to give spiritual life and resurrection.

So do you want your child to possess life? Then you must discipline him, teaching him the fear of the LORD. Without that, there is no life.

B. Joy, vv. 15-16

But the second reward of discipline is joy. We've talked about this at length: A wise son makes a glad father, and the point of wisdom is to please your Father! If your heart fears God, your earthly father rejoices over that. His heart is glad. His inmost being rejoices. And even better, your heavenly Father rejoices too. Again, the ultimate source of joy is the fear of God. Discipline your children in this, and you will never know sorrow when you look at their choices.

What better reward could there be? There's more to life than happiness, says Yente the matchmaker in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Just don't ask her what that is. But honestly, is there

something you want more than joy? If not, then discipline your own heart and your child's heart in the fear of God!

C. Wisdom, vv. 15-16

Finally, the last reward of disciplining your children in the fear of God is that they will develop wisdom. Their hearts will fear God and thus be wise. Their lips, which are directly and indestructibly connected to their hearts, will speak what is right. That is, their lips will tell the truth and speak wisdom at all times.

Do you want life, joy, and wisdom? Do you want your children to experience life, joy, and wisdom? Then for Heaven's sake, discipline them in the fear of God. Train them to fear God. Train your own heart to fear God. And you will make your pastor and yourself very joyful.
Amen.