

Does a Godly Home Guarantee Godly Kids?

Proverbs 22:6-6 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 18 July 2010 00:00

Proverbs 22:6 *Spiritual Urban Myths: Does a Godly Home Guarantee Godly Kids?* **A Tale of Two Families**

Bert and Katie have a problem. Whenever they are in their small group, or out with their friends from church, and the conversation shifts to what the kids and grandkids are up to, they get terribly quiet.

Sure, they can talk about their one son. He lives in town and attends the church. He has a strong marriage and two adorable kids. He's got a good job and is widely respected.

But their other two adult kids are a mess. The oldest is in jail--busted for making meth—and has two kids Bert and Katie never see anymore. And the daughter still hasn't found herself. She's pushing 40 and on job number 12 and marriage number 3. More disheartening, she's developed a disdain for spiritual things and a dependence on hard liquor. She doesn't communicate with them anymore, unless she needs something—usually money.

These two prodigals have brought Bert and Katie an abundance of heartache. They're embarrassed to talk about them and frustrated and angry. As proud as they are of the one son, they are ashamed of the other two.

And, more than that, they feel guilty. Terribly guilty. In their minds, the paths these two children have taken serve as irrefutable proof that they have failed as Christian parents.

Ted and Liz, on the other hand, love to talk about their kids. They have two, and they're doing great. The oldest has moved out West, where he's raising 3 great kids and serving on the board of a fast-growing church. Their daughter lives in town and is married to the youth pastor. She's one of the key volunteers in the children's ministry, and everybody agrees that her two grade-school kids are the best behaved in the church.

Ted and Liz's kids have turned out so well, in fact, that people are constantly asking for their

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advice on parenting. Recently, they've started teaching a class at church on raising "Spiritual champions." They say things like: "God's word tells us everything we need to know in order to raise godly children" and "If we follow the Bible's principles on parenting we'll not be disappointed." They believe the proof is in the pudding. "If a parenting approach seems biblical," they say, "yet bears bad fruit, we can be certain it wasn't biblical." (quotes paraphrased from an article by Christian writer Reb Bradley, found in Leslie Leyland Fields, *Parenting is Your Highest Calling (and 8 other Myths that Trap us in Worry and Guilt)*

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p. 168)

Ted and Liz have never talked about it with Bert and Katie; but privately, they agree: Bert and Katie have failed as parents.

So is this right? Are good kids a sure sign of good and Godly parenting? Are bad kids undeniable proof that parents have not been doing their job?

We're in a series called Urban Legends. We're looking at some commonly held beliefs and ideas that exist within the church that don't stand up to closer Biblical examination. The idea behind this series is that we want to build our lives on what God's Word really says—not on Christian clichés or conventional wisdom.

And the myth I want us to consider today is the idea that **a good and godly home guarantees good and godly kids.**

This is the assumption that both Bert and Katie and Ted and Liz are operating from. For Bert and Katie, it means crushing guilt. For Ted and Liz, it means misplaced pride. And for everybody who's ever attempted to be a parent—or even considered the possibility of someday being a parent—it means tremendous pressure and anxiety to get it right.

But here's the thing: it's not true. The Bible does not say that if parents do the job right their kids will turn out perfect. The Bible does not say that every bad kid is the product of bad parenting. The Bible does not give guarantees for parenting.

The Roots

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So where does this myth come from?

How'd we end up putting so much pressure on parents?

Well, the best Urban Legends usually contain a nugget of truth. In the same way, this parenting myth is born out of a well-known Bible verse:

Proverbs 22:6:

Train a child in the way he should go,

And when he is old he will not turn from it.

Many people take this verse as the final word on Biblical parenting. They believe that this verse promises that a child raised correctly will stay faithful to God—or at least return to Him eventually.

And, clearly, this verse holds parenting in high regard. It is obviously telling us that parents have a significant role in the shaping of their children. Much of the book of Proverbs is filled with advice on parenting.

But the mistake we make is reading this verse as a promise. This is a proverb, not a promise—and that's an important distinction.

Proverbs are maxims and observations about how life generally works.

They are God-breathed, they are filled with wisdom, but they are not universal. They describe how life usually works, but not always. The righteous are not always honored. The wicked sometimes succeed. The lazy sometimes strike it rich. And well-trained kids sometimes turn off the path.

A promise, on the other hand, is the way God always works

. When God makes a promise, you can take it to the bank. It's a done deal. It's guaranteed.

This verse--"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"—is a proverb, not a promise. How do we know that? Because it is in a book called

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Proverbs. It's a good piece of advice, but it is not a guarantee.

In fact, in a bit of irony, the author of this verse proves the exception to his own rule. King Solomon wrote most of the Proverbs—probably including this one—and yet in his old age he abandoned the teaching and example of his father as his many foreign wives led him to worship their false gods (1 Kings 11:4).

So Proverbs 22:6 points us to some common-sense wisdom, but it does not mean that every troubled child is the product of poor parenting.

Moreover, I think our ideas about Biblical parenting might be less influenced by the Bible and more influenced by the ways we read **behavioral psychology** into the Bible.

Behaviorism is found in the ideas of psychologists John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. It teaches that children are born as blank slates, able to be shaped and molded in any direction so long as we use the proper rewards and stimuli.

This quote

, from Watson, sums up the most extreme form of behaviorism:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. (Wikipedia entry for John B. Watson)

This school of thinking had a huge impact on social services, education theory, and parenting in the 20

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Century. Many of its theories have fallen on hard times in the academic world, but its ideas of proper methods guaranteeing outcomes are still in vogue in the world of Christian parenting.

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Says one observer:

Entire formulas and programs have been created to divine and instruct on the kind of parental training that will secure the desired outcome... A few of the more stridently conservative writers are so confident of their parenting methods and outcomes, they describe child-training as a risk-free venture analogous to staking out tomatoes, training dogs, and teaching mules, only loosely veiling B.F. Skinner-like techniques with swatches of strategically placed Bible verses.

(Fields, in

Christianity Today,

Jan. 2010, p. 24)

Combine this kind of behavioral theory with a Biblical proof-text like Proverbs 22:6 and you've got the kind of Sunday School myth that turns parents into either winners or losers. We judge ourselves by our children and we judge others by theirs. And if you are a parent, this kind of thinking will convince you that your child's future happiness and success and even salvation is entirely up to you.

The Truth

So that's where the myth comes from. Now, let's take a look at **what the Bible actually says.**

There are three principles to keep in mind:

1. Rebellion can happen in even the best environments.

The problem with the blank slate theory of behavioral psychology is that it fails to take into account our sin nature. Everybody is born with sin. We all come from the factory pre-loaded with the tendency to be self-centered and prideful and moody and dishonest. Think about it: nobody has to teach a child how to be selfish.

And the thing is: this sinful nature is not something we can eliminate with a carefully controlled environment or even the prayers and godliness of a Christian parent.

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Consider the first children in the history of the world: Adam and Eve. They had an absolutely perfect environment—the garden of Eden. They were perfect—flawless products of creation. They had the perfect parent—I mean, God was their parent! And yet, they rebelled. They ate the fruit. They broke the rule.

Are we supposed to conclude that God—who calls Himself Father again and again in scripture—is a failure because His children—you and me—mess up on a regular basis?

We have free will. We rebel. Even against our Father in heaven.

Our children have free will. They may rebel. That doesn't mean we are failures as parents.

Which leads to a second observation:

2. Everyone is responsible for their own actions.

We are all responsible for the choices we make. The decisions we make, to sin or not to sin, are not a reflection on our parents. If you are a parent, then the decisions your children make are not a reflection on you. They bear their own burden of guilt for the sins they commit.

In Ezekiel chapter 18 there is this really interesting passage where God talks about a righteous man and all the things he does not do: he doesn't go to the mountain shrines, he doesn't defile the neighbor's wife, he doesn't oppress the needy, he doesn't commit robbery, and so on. He's a righteous man. But suppose, God says, he has a son who does all these things: worships idols, commits adultery, ignores the poor and steals from everybody. Is that the father's fault? No. The wicked son must bear his own guilt.

God even takes it a step further. Say the wicked son as a son of his own, who sees the sins of his father and decides to follow a different path. He's loyal to God, pure in heart, generous to the hungry, and so on. Will this son die for his father's sin? No. The passage ends like this

, **Ezekiel 18:20**

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The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.

Everyone is responsible for their own actions.

The truth is: if you are a parent and your child has chosen a poor path, there may well be some things you've done to contribute to that. But at the same time, if your child is perfect, you have to admit there are some things you've done that make it amazing they turned out so well. We all goof up. We all make mistakes. And we all bear responsibility for our own choices.

□

There is nothing you and I can do that makes it absolutely impossible for someone to come to God; or anything that we can do that will guarantee that they will. It's a choice everybody makes.

And that leads to a third observation:

3. □ Only God is Sovereign.

If there is a Proverb that should govern the way we think about our success as parents, I don't think it is Proverbs 22:6. Instead, I think we should back up a few verses to the last Proverb of chapter 21

. □ **21:31**

. This is a Proverb with so much wisdom, not just for parenting, but for so much of life. Here's what it says:

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,

but victory rests with the Lord.

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Think about the imagery here. If you are a cavalry soldier, there are a lot of things that you can do to get ready for battle. You can train the horse. You can equip the horse. You can do the drills and practice riding in formation and you can learn strategy and tactics. There are a lot of things you can do to make sure you are as prepared as possible.

But at the end of the day, victory in battle rests with God.

It's the same with farming. The farmer can do everything right: fertilize and till and pick the best seed for the soil and everything else; but every farmer knows the harvest is in God's hands.

In other words: in life we can do what we are responsible for—we can put in the effort and do the right thing and tend to the details, but the results are up to God. That means, as a pastor, as a husband, as a church member, when I stand before God I'm not going to be held responsible for outcomes; I'm going to be held responsible for how well I prepared the horse.

And the same goes for parenting. Of course I have influence. Of course I need to do my best to prepare my kids to be productive, well-adjusted, God-fearing adults. But at the end of the day, I'm not sovereign over my kids. God is.

Ways to Prepare the Horse

So, I want to be clear. The idea that a Godly home guarantees Godly kids is a myth. We can't blame the parents when a child takes a wrong path, and we shouldn't get all puffed up like a peacock if our kids turn out pretty well. God isn't holding us responsible for the results, He's holding us responsible for the how.

I am not saying that parenting doesn't matter. I am not saying that we should all just turn our children loose to fend for themselves. I'm just trying to relieve parents of the incredible pressure and guilt that comes from thinking it all rides on them.

So, that being said, I want to conclude with a few Biblical pieces of advice that can

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increase our odds of success as parents

. These aren't guarantees of Godly kids. But these are ways we can prepare the horse for battle:

1. Discipline your child.

Proverbs

13:24

says:

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

This verse is often used in the corporal punishment debate. But regardless of whether you believe in spanking or not, the larger point is that part of good parenting is disciplining your children. When they do wrong, correct them. When they make mistakes, don't be so quick to bail them out or cover for them.

Now this is a Proverb, again, so it's a statement about how life usually works, not a guarantee. We probably all know people who were raised in extremely permissive homes who turned out all right.

But as a general rule, if you want your kids to grow up to be brats, defend them at every turn. If a teacher comes down on them at school, make sure to take your kid's side and not the teacher's. If they get arrested for drunk driving, make sure to get a good lawyer so they can get out of it. If they make a bad business deal and are about to lose everything, make sure to step in and cover all their losses. Do that often enough, and there's a good chance your child will be a monster.

We call it love, but it's not love: it's hyperprotection.

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I've said it before: a parent's job is to be a parent.

2. Be reasonable.

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Ephesians 6:1 through 3 are some of those great verses for parents that say “Children, obey your parents in the Lord.” It's a reminder of the 5th

commandment. A kid's job is to obey. Parents like that verse.

But smart kids will know that those verses are followed by

Ephesians 6:4

:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children.

□

As parents, we need to make sure we are not being overly strict—or unreasonably strict. If we are constantly trying to make sure our children understand the consequences for every little infraction or every mistake—there is a possibility we will exasperate them. Colossians 3:21 says we need to make sure we do not “embitter” our children or “discourage” them.

“I'm the parent, doggone it, and what I said is going to go” isn't always going to work, and it isn't always proper. We need to be reasonable in our expectations of our children.

3. Adapt to their unique bent.

□

Go back to

Proverbs 22:6

a second. A lot of scholars think that when this Proverb says “train up a child in the way he should go” it's actually talking about raising a child according to his or her unique personality and gifts. Literally, the original language reads “train up a child according to his bent.”

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The point is: each child is unique. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all parenting program.

Take my brother and I for example. My brother is mechanical, and had very little interest in school. I have a hard time putting air in my tires, and if I could have figured out a way to make a living as a student, I'd probably still be in school today. My Mom says Ben likes to work with his hands, and Russell likes to work with words. (We also have a sister who is musical and an athlete, but I'm not sure how she fits this illustration.)

My point is: my parents couldn't raise us the same way. They couldn't insist we be involved in the same activities. They couldn't motivate us with the same rewards. And they couldn't threaten us with the same consequences. If they'd send my brother to his room, he'd want to die. But send me there, and I'd just read a book. On the other hand, if they forced me to go to my Grandpa's shop, I'd be miserable. But Ben would be in heaven.

If you are a parent, I'm sure you've probably already figured this out, but it's a good reminder: each child is different. We have to train them according to their bent.

4. □ Change the scorecard.

□

We need to stop asking: Am I parenting successfully? And start asking: Am I parenting faithfully? Because faithfulness, after all, is what God is really after.

We see this in the calling of the prophet Ezekiel. In the first 3 books of Ezekiel, God gives Ezekiel a tough job. He has to go to the people of Israel and speak for God. But God warns him up front: the people are not going to listen. Ezekiel is going to warn of destruction and terror and the people are going to ignore him. When it is all said and done, everything Ezekiel warns about is going to come to pass and Ezekiel is going to look like an utter failure.

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But as God commissions Ezekiel, three times He repeats this phrase: “whether they listen or they fail to listen.” One of those three times God completes the sentence: “Whether they listen or fail to listen...they will know that a prophet has been amount them.”

□ **(Ez. 2:5)**

Ezekiel desperately wanted his people to repent, of course. But he wasn't judged on that. At the end of it all, this is what Ezekiel was responsible for: faithfully speaking the words of God—whether the people listened or not.

At the end of it all for us as Christian parents—whether our children listen or fail to listen—this is what we are responsible for: making sure they were raised in a loving, God-fearing home.

An author named Leslie Leyland Fields writes:

We will parent imperfectly, our children will make their own choices, and God will mysteriously and wondrously use it all to advance his kingdom...

We are not sovereign over our children—only God is. Children are not tomatoes to stake out or mules to train, nor are they numbers to plug into an equation. They are full human beings wondrously and fearfully made. Parenting, like all tasks under the sun, is intended as an endeavor of love, risk, perseverance, and, above all, faith. It is faith rather than formula, grace rather than guarantees, steadfastness rather than success that bridges the gap between our own parenting efforts, and what, by God's grace, our children grow up to become.

Proverbs 22:6-6 (ESV)

6 Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it. ([ESV](#))