

FOCUS: Strategic Faith Development

Sunday, October 20, 2019
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Proverbs 22:6
2 Timothy 3:10-17

The Word of God, the Bible, is an absolute necessity for a successful life. We believe these words are special because God's Holy Spirit inspired forty authors to write down God's thoughts for us. The Bible is more than a collection of pithy quotes, memorable one-liners, and quaint stories: it is literally the Word of our God. When scriptures speak, God is speaking. Which is why we must approach the Bible with extreme care and intentionality. How we read and understood scripture is of the utmost importance.

But, too often, Christians misunderstand, misquote, or misuse verses in the Bible. We turn to the concordance to find a verse on a specific theme, read the suggestion, and apply it to our lives without considering the larger context. This dangerous practice, called "cherry picking," allows us to misappropriate the Bible in support of anything. Shane Pruitt, in his article "Straight Outta Context" gives us the five most misused bible verses (here are three!).

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). This verse is not implying that Jesus will help us hit a home run or win the lottery or close a business deal. Paul, under arrest awaiting trial, wrote this to encourage the church at Philippi that he could endure any and every circumstance because God's Holy Spirit was always with him.

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). This verse is typically given to someone as a comfort during a difficult time or offered as a blessing on a graduation card. In context, however, God gives this incredible promise to a group of people, the Hebrews, who are in exile in Babylon. God promised never to give up or to leave the Hebrew people, and God promised them physical and spiritual salvation, not material blessing.

"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:10). The most common travesty committed with this verse is only using the first part of it. The full verse reminds us that God is in charge, that God's purpose cannot be frustrated, and that one day all the earth will know God.

"Train up children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Proverbs 22:6) is another verse that is often misused and misunderstood. At first blush, this verse implies that if we send our kids to Sunday school to learn Bible stories and biblical values, then they will be good people for the rest of their lives. It's as if we can fill them up or wind them up and then let them loose and everything will be fine. But that isn't how it works.

Parents have a responsibility to instill Godly virtues and values into their children. Moses urges the Hebrew people to *"Impress [these commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"* (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Our children are going to learn about the world around them and their role in it. If they don't learn from us, they will learn from someone else.

In truth, we are all spiritual parents, spiritual partners sharing the responsibility of modeling Godly virtues and Christ-like behaviors to one another as children of God. We have a duty to show the world what matters to God: peace, justice, love, and compassion. This does not mean forcing others to believe a certain set of beliefs or rituals; it means demonstrating a genuine faith that focuses on loving God and loving others.

So, let's start at the beginning. The Hebrew word we translate as "train up" is used three other times in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 20:5; 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 7:5). Each time it refers to the dedication of a house or a worship space. This suggests that the initial imperative of this verse is to devote oneself to God. We must "dedicate" our lives to God's purpose, from childhood to adulthood. "Train up" may, therefore, be too weak a translation because it misses the element of committing ourselves to God's purpose and guidance. The overall context of Proverbs suggests dedicating our whole lives to an intentional, sustained, God-dependent shepherding of one another's hearts as we grow into mature Christians. This is no passive calling, but a repeated pledge to be God's people on behalf of the world.

Proverb 22:6 calls us to dedicate our children "in the right way" or "in the way they should go" (depending on the translation). No parent wants to train their child in the "wrong" way, but what is the "right" way? Again, the Hebrew is clearer than the English: we are to train our children "according to the dictates of his [God's] way." Thus, the command line of the proverb literally reads, "Dedicate a youth according to the dictates of God's way," or perhaps more commonly, "Dedicate a child according to what God's way demands."

In wisdom literature like Proverbs, there are only two “ways” to live: there is the way of wisdom and life, and there is the way of folly and death. Left to our own devices, human beings lack good judgment and have hearts filled with foolishness. Without guidance, without discipline, we will stray and bring ruin down on our heads. Proverbs regularly exhorts spiritual parents to discipline their children and to instruct them in wisdom (19:18; cf. 1:1; 1:4; 29:15). In Proverbs, the way of the fool is the way without wisdom, without God.

These texts could lead us to read Proverbs 22:6 as a sarcastic or ironic command that warns spiritual parents of the danger in not establishing standards and boundaries for the children of God. If you read the Proverb this way, the principle is, “Let them do what they want, and they will become self-willed adults, incapable of change! Raise them in accordance with their wayward hearts, and they will stay wayward.” This approach, however, is not a faithful reading for three reasons.

First, the sarcastic reading requires a more passive approach to spiritual parenting that does not account for the verb “train up” (“dedicate”), which expresses conscious intention and intervention. As spiritual parents we are always training one another, even passively. For example, by failing to lead one another to repentance before the sovereign God, we teach that we are fine to continue living as self-made kings and queens, rather than servants. By failing to instruct one another in God’s commandments, we teach that God’s word is *not* the highest authority in our lives. By failing to set boundaries, we impart that we really do not care whether anyone does good or ill. This type of passive training is *not* what is expressed in the imperative “Dedicate!” Rather, the sage calls spiritual parents to intentionally commit or orient the moral and religious trajectories of our brothers and sisters toward God and God’s ways.

Second, while our own inclination is naturally selfish, Proverb 22:6 pictures not a self-willed individual but someone who is benefiting from the intentional discipline and instruction of spiritual parents (“Dedicate!”). With this, the idiomatic “according to the dictates of God’s way” seems to express the way things ought to be. Every person’s future is filled with possibility, and we as spiritual partners must recognize and direct one another’s paths toward godliness. This verse is about positive trajectories and the great potential for a life lived with God.

Third, the consequence of heeding the command to “dedicate” ourselves to God’s way is that *“even when old, we will not stray.”* Elsewhere in Proverbs we hear that, *“the wise, not*

fools, are crowned with the gray hair of age” (20:29). Proverbs 22:6 anticipates a trajectory toward wisdom, not foolishness. With God there is help and hope. Proverbs 22:6 implies that spiritual partners can have a powerful and positive effect on others. The book of Proverbs intendeds to keep us on God’s right way.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that *“all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (3:17). Our purpose, as spiritual partners, is to *“encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11). As spiritual partners, our task is to build one another up in faith, teaching and modeling Christ-like attitudes and behaviors that others will emulate. Strategic Faith Development is a lifelong pursuit.

Strategic Faith Development is also one of our FOCUS goals over the next two years. We believe it is important to dedicate ourselves to God’s ways, seek God’s guidance, in order to lead a purposeful and purpose-filled life. Our Strategic Faith Development goals are:

- 20 new kids in Sunday School
- 20 new kids in Kidz Club
- 20 new kids in Vacation Bible school
- 20 Jr/Sr highs in weekly youth programs
- 20 members in Pastor Doug’s “Breathing with God” seminar

Almighty God, I pray that I will be taken into a deeper, more meaningful relationship with You, where I will grow in faith and hear the still small voice within my soul. Help me to be attentive to Your call, which will cause me to walk in Your righteousness. Open the eyes of my heart. May I see the many blessings you bestow on me, especially the very small ones that I sometimes take for granted. Walk with me, God, and take me to new levels where I can experience an outpouring of Your love and mercy. Help me to walk with others along their faith journey, too. In the name of Jesus, I ask this. Amen.

Sources:

- Jason DeRouchie. “Train Up a Child in the Way He Should Go.” September 20, 2016. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/train-up-a-child-in-the-way-he-should-go> (October 9, 2019)
- Shane Pruitt, “The 5 Most Misused and Abused Bible Verses (Straight Outta Context?).” July 6, 2017. <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/the-5-most-misused-and-abused-bible-verses/> (October 14, 2019)