

“COVENANT CONTINUITY IN EVIL DAYS”

One of the challenges that confronts Christian parents in any age is the matter of how our children relate to the broader culture. It is an issue that needs to be carefully considered because, as Paul says in Ephesians 5, “the days are evil.” This world is in rebellion against God, and we need to be very careful, lest our children be seduced by it. One area in which this challenge confronts today’s parents is the decision that we have to make about how we will educate our children. Will we send them to the government’s public schools? Will we send them to a Christian school? Or will we not send them anywhere, but choose instead to educate them ourselves at home? It is a very important decision, one that should be made only after a great deal of study, thought, consultation, and prayer. And it is certainly true that different decisions in this area will create different types of challenges. However, we should not think of these educational options as three different approaches to Christian parenting. The fundamental biblical principles for child-rearing remain the same for all Christian parents, regardless of how we choose to educate our children. We have already considered two aspects of these principles in this brief series on the topic of child discipleship. Two weeks ago, we studied the biblical doctrine of covenant succession, the idea that it is God’s will that Christian families produce Christian children. Last week, we reflected on the importance of carefully teaching our children about the Lord and about how he wants us to live as his covenant people. Today, I want to focus on the question of how we can prepare our children to live

as lifelong followers of Jesus Christ in the midst of an ungodly culture. How can we both protect our children from the world and also prepare them to live in it?

This passage in Proverbs 4 provides us with a number of helpful insights in this area. It is one of ten “paternal exhortations” found in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, discourses in which a father instructs his son in the way of wisdom. And this itself is greatly instructive for us. It underscores the fact that our children need to learn how to interpret the world, as well as how they should live in it, from their parents, and not from the world itself. This might seem obvious, but it needs to be said nonetheless. One of the sad realities in our society is the fact that so many parents are essentially handing their children over to be raised by other institutions, and especially by the mass media and popular culture. But this is something that Christian parents must not do. For the Bible clearly says that we have the responsibility of teaching our children how to live a godly life in the context of an ungodly culture.

I want to focus today upon two important insights that this passage provides for the nurture of covenant children. The first is this: *it is imperative that we raise our children to be good listeners*. This also might seem elementary, but it is extremely significant. Notice how our passage begins. The father urges his son to listen to him. He says, “Hear, my son.” We find this refrain all throughout the book of Proverbs:

“Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance” [1:5]

“Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching” [1:8]

“Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight” [4:1]

“Cease to hear instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.” [19:27]

Proverbs places great importance upon being a careful listener. And this clearly means more than simply hearing what a person says. We all know the saying: ‘in one ear and out the other.’ The writer of Proverbs is talking about thoughtful listening, the kind of listening that carefully considers and accepts wise counsel. Proverbs shows us that there is a critical link between good listening and wisdom.

But nowadays, teaching children to be thoughtful hearers is perhaps more challenging than ever before. Though we find ourselves surrounded by words, people are quickly losing their capacity for sustained thought and reflection about what they hear and read. And this makes for a very dangerous environment, especially in light of the warning that we read earlier in Ephesians 5: “Let no one deceive you with empty words.” Dorothy

Sayers talked about this danger sixty years ago in her now famous paper “The Lost Tools of Learning,” where she said,

“For we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being masters of them in their intellects.”

If this was true of young people sixty years ago, what shall we say about the youth of today? It seems highly unlikely that things have gotten any better. And it is surely no stretch to conclude that one of the leading culprits for this worsening state of affairs is the internet. It is not that the internet is inherently evil. There are a great many things about it that are quite helpful. Nevertheless, the way in which the internet is set up has an effect upon the way we think. This is explored in a recent issue of *The Atlantic* magazine, in an article entitled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” In the article, the author, Nicholas Carr, argues that the internet encourages a way of reading that is characterized by extreme impatience. He describes his own experience as someone who used to be an avid reader

of serious books, but has lately found it increasingly difficult to read more than a couple of pages without wanting to divert his attention to something else. He writes,

“My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski.”

[Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *The Atlantic*, Jul/Aug ‘08]

His point is this: the way in which we use the internet has a shaping effect upon our minds. When we spend a lot of time doing things online, our minds become increasingly resistant to slower, more concentrated ways of reading and thinking.

The reason why this should be troubling to Christians is because Scripture commands us to cultivate a slower, more reflective way of thinking. This is what the Bible means when it talks about the importance of meditation. And nowhere is this more important than in Proverbs. The person who skims over the book of Proverbs like a man zipping across a lake on a jet ski is not going to get very much out of this collection of short, pithy sayings. We need to read Proverbs slowly, thoughtfully, and reflectively, taking the time to allow its words to sink into our hearts.

How can we raise our children to be good listeners in the internet age? One of the most important things that you can do is to lovingly insist that your children cultivate good reading habits, and to model such habits yourself. There is a close connection

between being a good reader and being the kind of listener the book of Proverbs calls us to be. People who refuse to take the time to become good readers will find some other way to stimulate and satisfy their minds. And in our culture, many of the alternatives that people pursue have a negative effect upon the kind of person they become. Parents, you need to place severe limits on time spent on the internet and with other electronic media, and you need to help your children become good readers of good books. Read with them, and let them see you reading. And above all, teach them what it means to be a good reader of the Bible. Help them to learn how to aside their own interests and pay attention to the ideas and concerns raised by the biblical text. Show them how God's Word instructs and challenges and confronts us, and model what it means to respond to this Word with unwavering faith and obedience.

This brings us to the second insight that we are drawing from our passage today: *we must show our children that the path of righteousness is the only route to a good life.* One part of this involves teaching our children that there are things in this world that they must avoid. As the father in the passage warns concerning the path of the wicked, "Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on." We do need to protect our children from the world. We need to closely monitor the things that they see and hear. We need to keep watch over their friendships with other children. And if they are being educated outside the home, we need to know what they are being taught.

But we cannot stop there. It is not enough to try to shield our children from the world. While protecting them, we also need to be careful not to isolate them. As we read

in Ephesians 5, we must not only not take part in the works of darkness, but we also need to expose them by the light of God's truth. We do not want our children to grow up to be naive about the world. We want them to be sophisticated in its ways. That is, we want them to have a good understanding of the conventional wisdom and dominant sensibilities of our age, so that they will not be susceptible to the many snares that the world will set before them.

One of the features of this passage in Proverbs 4 is the persuasive manner in which the father speaks to his son. Again and again, he pleads with his son to hold on to his instruction and to avoid the way of the wicked. And one of the ways he does this is by emphasizing the consequences of each path: the path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn, but the way of the wicked is like deep darkness. One path is the way to life, while the other is the way of destruction. Our children need to have this instilled in their hearts and minds. They need to see the world for what it really is. We need to show them that though worldliness often appears attractive, in the end it only leads to death. When children flirt with the world, they are not just going through a stage; they are setting their feet on a path that leads to eternal destruction. This is a key emphasis in the Bible's wisdom literature. The way of the wicked is always shown to be a way that will perish, while the way of wisdom is consistently portrayed as the way of human flourishing. The path of the righteous is the only path to a good life. We might even say that biblical wisdom has to do with knowing how to find true happiness in the world that God has made.

But this kind of happiness stands in sharp contrast to modern notions of happiness. Today, happiness is understood as something that is different for everyone. We often hear the phrase, “Whatever makes you happy”, which suggests that happiness is relative to each individual. One person finds happiness in one sort of lifestyle, while another finds happiness in something completely different.

But the Bible says that God created us in such a way that we will only find happiness when our lives are conformed to a certain pattern, a pattern that God set up when he created us, a pattern that Proverbs refers to as the way of wisdom, or the path of the righteous. People in the modern world think that they can invent the pattern that their lives should follow. Instead of submitting to God’s design for what constitutes the good life, modern man is intent on shaping a design of his own. But this only results in an endless quest for something that is not there. As Ken Myers observes,

“Trying to find happiness on our own terms, rather than on the terms our Creator has built into our nature, is an exhausting and disappointing undertaking.” [“The Pursuit of Happiness?” *Tabletalk*, Sept. 2008, p. 20]

This brings to mind Augustine’s famous statement: because God made us for himself, our hearts will be always be restless until they find their rest in him. [*Confessions*, 1.1]

God created us, and we will only find happiness when we embrace the way of life that he has established and set before us. God’s pattern for life, the pattern that he reveals in his

Word, is the only way to have the life that is true life, both in this world and in the world to come. And this is the very reason why Christ came into the world. He came to redeem us so that our lives could be conformed to God's pattern for life. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 6:23) What could be more important for our children to learn than this?

In his article on covenant children, Pastor Robert Rayburn writes these words:

[T]he Lord works through the Christian family "to furnish the church with generation after generation of great multitudes of Christian servants and soldiers who reach manhood and womanhood well taught, sturdy in faith, animated by love for God and man, sophisticated in the ways of the world and the Devil, polished in the manners of genuine Christian brotherhood, overshadowed by the specter of the Last Day, nerved to deny themselves and take up their cross so as to be counted worthy of greater exploits for Christ and Kingdom." ["The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession." *Presbyterion* 22.2. Online at <http://www.faithtacoma.org/doctrine/covenant.aspx>]

A church like ours might be tempted to respond to such lofty words by arguing that we do not have the resources to cultivate such robust faith in the lives of our young people. We don't have a youth pastor. We don't have a youth ministry. We don't have a large

number of kids in each age group. We don't offer a wide array of fun activities for our young people. All of these statements are true. We don't have any of these things. But where does the Bible say that any of these things are fundamental to the spiritual nurture of covenant children? What is the biblical pattern of child discipleship? It is right here in

Proverbs 4:

“When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, he taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments and live.’” [Prov. 4:3-4]