

Urban Legends

Proverbs 22:6

The Legend:

The Fact Check:

The Problem with Proverbs:

The Point and Practice:

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Urban Legends¹ *Proverbs 22:6*

In 1876 a whaling ship named *Velocity* was sailing off the coast of Australia near New Caledonia. Those on board saw some rough water and thought they saw something sandy. They marked the area on their map charts and named the island Sandy Island. After that other map makers saw *Velocity's* map, and Sandy Island started making its way into maps. In 2012 if you had looked at the midpoint between Australia and New Caledonia on Google Maps, you would have found the island. But a scientist in Australia thought the water was too deep at that location for an island to be there, so he decided to search for the island. When he arrived at the location, *there was no island*. The whaling boat in 1876 made a mistake, and everyone afterward had copied the mistake – no one had double-checked *Velocity's* map for (over) 130 years. We don't know how they made the error. Maybe they were mistaken about their location. Regardless, the island's existence had become an urban legend. An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, repeated throughout the culture as common knowledge, but which isn't true.²

Our summer sermon series explores some of the urban legends that have developed in the Bible and church history, and we're going to try to set the record straight. In addition to dispelling myths, in the process, we will gain a more accurate understanding of God – who he is and what he does for us and through us. We will also gain a more accurate understanding of who we are and how we are to live as God's people. You might be surprised at what we discover together; there may be some passages that do not mean what you think they mean.

So are you ready to dive in? I thought, since it is Father's Day, a good one for today would be that famously quoted passage from Proverbs about raising children.

The Scripture: Proverbs 22:6. Let me read it to you, although many of you will recognize it:

¹ Sources for this series:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Sid S. Buzzell, "Proverbs," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985)

Additional sources for this sermon:

Stephen J. Lennox, *Proverbs: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Pr 22:6

² David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and in the end he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6, nkjv)

How many of you have heard that verse before? Many of us. One scholar says that “this is perhaps the best-known verse in Proverbs on child training.”³ You might think this is pretty straightforward, but actually there is some fairly serious wrong thinking about this verse that you may not even realize you’ve bought into.

So here is...

The Legend.

The legend is that this verse *guarantees* that if parents will teach and train their children to know the Lord and live godly lives, their children will never depart from their faith. The legendary teaching says that the right training produces the right outcome, and even if the child might turn away from the faith for a time, when (the child is) older, (he or she) will return to God. (So the other conclusion from this legend is that, if) a child permanently abandons the Christian faith, (it) is a reflection of bad parenting and failure to teach and model the correct values and beliefs.⁴ In other words, if you do it right, your child is *guaranteed* to be a Christian, or at least return to his or her faith later in life. If the child does not return, then you as a parent did not do it right and the failure is your fault.

Maybe that sounds familiar to you, but how many times have parents, who are distraught or grieving because it seems their child has abandoned the faith, how many times have those parents had some well-meaning person try to comfort them by quoting this verse, as if to say, “If you did it right, your child *will have to* come back to faith, whether he or she wants to or not.” After all, that’s what this verse promises, right? Wrong.

This verse *does* point out the lifelong influence of parental training, but the legendary teaching on this has heaped tons of guilt and blame on many faithful Christian parents whose children have abandoned the faith. It is important to understand that while this proverb *does* speak of the enduring value of parental influence, it does *not* offer an absolute promise or guarantee that children will follow the Lord if their parents train them in the right way.⁵

So let’s do...

The Fact Check.

We’re going to do a fact check by taking a look at what the passage really means, then we are going to get to the point of it so we can learn from it and actually apply

³ Buzzell

⁴ Croteau and Yates, *Urban Legends of the Old Testament*, 157.

⁵ Croteau and Yates, *ibid*

it to the way we practice our faith and live it out. Okay? By the way, this will apply to everyone, parent or not.

So, let's look at **The passage**, starting with the word **train**. The verb "train," can be found in other places in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 20:5; 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 7:5), and a noun related to it shows up seven other times (Numbers 7:10, 11, 84, 88; 2 Chronicles 7:9; Nehemiah 12:27; Psalms 30:1). In all of those, the word is used to refer to the dedication of a house or a building. So this verse is saying that a parent should dedicate their child to the Lord and for his purposes; as parents we dedicate our kids to Christ intentionally and on purpose. What's important to know is that this verb and its related noun is *never* connected with instruction and discipline. In fact, the writer of Proverbs uses *different* words for discipline and instruction, so if *that's* what the writer meant, he would have used one of those words instead. So the word here has more to do with dedicating the child to God and *demonstrating* to a child *the right way to live*. You could even translate this to mean, "prepare the child for his or her future responsibilities." That's why better translations say, "start a child off on the way he should go..."

If you dedicate your child to the Lord, then you realize that the child is God's, not yours. This is a child that God loves and that Jesus died for, that God has great plans for. So you will be very careful about how you treat that child, about how you discipline that child, about how very much you show love to that child, and how you model the Christian life to your child. The last thing you want to do is mistreat this child that belongs to God.

So if that is the case, then *when* in your child's life is this supposed to happen? In other words, how old is the **child**? Well, the word that is used – na'ar – doesn't mean exclusively young children. In some places the word refers to an unborn child (Judges 13:5–12), a newborn (1 Samuel 4:21), an infant (Exodus 2:6), a weaned child (1 Samuel 2:21), and of young boys like Ishmael (Genesis 21:12) and Isaac (Genesis 22:5, 12). The term also applies to Joseph at the ages of seventeen (Genesis 37:2) and thirty (Genesis 41:12, 46), and is also used with reference to men who are old enough to marry (Genesis 34:19), engage in warfare (2 Samuel 18:5, 12), act as spies (Joshua 6:22), participate in priestly service (Judges 18:3, 15), and work as servants (Genesis 22:3; Numbers 22:22; Judges 7:10–11). The six other uses of this word in Proverbs seem to refer to youthfulness in general. Proverbs 20:11 says that character already begins to demonstrate itself in a na'ar. The na'ar in 1:4 and 7:7 is a person needing understanding. The remaining uses of na'ar in Proverbs are in contexts that stress the need for discipline and correction (22:15; 23:12; 29:15, 21).⁶ The point is that this proverb in 22:6 is not designating a specific age but is simply stressing the importance of proper parental influence for helping the child get started in the right direction and continue through life. Proverbs was written from a father to a son, and the topics that the father addresses with his son in the rest of Proverbs – things like marital and sexual advice (5:1–16; 15:21), economic counsel (10:5; 11:1), political instruction (25:6–7; 29:12), and military advice (24:6), if you

⁶ David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*

put all those together, it seems to indicate that the book focuses more on training and character development for a teen and young adult than for a young child. But the term *na'ar* clearly is broad enough to include the *entire* process of a person's life.⁷ Here's the point – parents *never* stop influencing their kids for Christ and being an example for them for their whole lives.

By the way, if you go to the sermons page on our website, you can look at or download the manuscript of the sermon, and I've embedded a ton of Scripture references to support what I'm saying, as well as citing the sources of my research on this. I encourage you to do your homework, especially if this urban legend is one you've believed. Okay, so we've talked about the key words "train" and "child," now let's look at the phrase **In the way he should go**.

This part of this Scripture is a little bit more challenging for us to understand than the first two words. In particular, what is "the way" that a child should go? Is it a moral way (as in living righteously), or vocational "way" (as in pursuing the appropriate trade or schooling or career)? Or does it mean to do so in keeping with the child's personality or stage of life? Some have argued that it is *that* one, which implies that if we raise a child to be different than their personality is wired to be, is to kind of go against the grain of the child. And that makes very good common sense, but is that what the verse means? Which of those is the "way" that we hope the child won't turn from as he or she gets older, or that we hope the adult child will return to? Well, if we put this verse in its context (which we **MUST ALWAYS DO** when seeking to understand Scripture, by the way), the stated purpose of the book is to teach the way of wisdom (right?) – so we get our correct meaning. The "way" means the "proper way", the path of wise, godly living, which is the whole point of the Proverbs. It's from this proper behavior pattern or godly lifestyle that we're told the child will not turn from when he is old, that is, when he is grown (which means he or she has attained maturity or adulthood).⁸

So now that brings us to the crux of this urban legend around this verse. Remember, the urban legend around Proverbs 22:6 is that, if the parents do it right, they are promised – guaranteed – that their children will be Christians, or at least will return to being a Christian before they die. But it only takes *one* time that this doesn't happen, to prove that premise is false, correct? I won't ask for it, but I bet if I asked for a show of hands, I bet a whole bunch of us would say that, at least so far, that promise is not true.

Some parents have worked hard to follow that apparent promise but without this result. Their children have strayed from the godly training their parents gave them. Thus...

The Problem with Proverbs.

⁷ David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid.*

⁸ Stephen J. Lennox, *Proverbs: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*

This verse really helps us to better understand the nature of a “proverb.” A proverb is a literary device where a general truth is brought to bear on a specific situation. Many of the proverbs are not promises or absolute guarantees.

So write this down if you need to, and commit it to memory: *Proverbs are principles, not promises. (repeat) There are promises in Scripture, especially when it comes to what God does and what he wants to do for us, and about human nature. But Proverbs are general principles NOT absolute promises.*

Though the proverbs are *generally* and *usually* true, there are times when you don’t get the intended result, like with this verse. There are all kinds of reasons for that; it might be because of the self-will or deliberate disobedience of a child or an individual who chooses to go his own way – which Proverbs calls the way of fools instead of the way of wisdom. And the entire Bible is clear: for those kinds of choices, every person is held responsible, but – it *is* generally true that most children who are brought up in Christian homes, under the influence of godly parents who teach and live God’s standards (Ephesians 6:4), follow that training.⁹ But, again, proverbial statements reflect general principles as to how life works, and these principles do not always prove true. And since we live in a fallen world, there are exceptions to the rules of Proverbs.¹⁰

Does that make sense? So we get into trouble when we buy into the urban legend. We try to force this verse to be a promise when it was never intended to be; it is a general principle.

So by now, you might be thinking, “Gee, thanks for the lesson and biblical interpretation. But so what? What difference does it make in my life?” That is a *very* good question, especially if your kids are grown or gone, or if you don’t have kids. But there is actually a...

The Point and Practice.

For this verse that does instruct all of us, fathers, parents, or not. Like all of God’s Word, there are things to be gained from it and practical applications of it, even if on the surface it doesn’t seem to apply.

So let me first point out a key, implied, underlying principle that should come into play in any relationship, whether parent-child, boss-employee, mentor-mentee, teacher student, discipler-disciple, and even among friends. That principle has to do with **rules vs. relationships.**

In any relationship, especially a relationship where one person has some authority over the other, there is an important balance between rules and relationship. Let me explain it in the context of parenting a child, since that is the passage we’re looking at, but I think you’ll see that it applies in a lot of settings.

⁹ Sid S. Buzzell, “Proverbs,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*

¹⁰ Croteau and Yates, *ibid*

When it comes to parenting, there are rules that the child needs to learn to obey, right? In good parenting, these are not arbitrary rules, nor should they be rules “because that’s how I was raised.” Any “rule” is always for the betterment of the child; rules are to protect the child and to help the child grow as a productive person in society and to be a difference maker in the world for the Kingdom of God. But one trap that parents fall into is an *over-emphasis* on the rules, or rules given without the context of healthy relationship. So here’s the first problem: *rules without relationship equals rebellion. (repeat)* If you as a parent are always enforcing rules, you will likely end up with either a rebellious child or a beaten down, insecure child. I’ve seen it time and again: well-meaning parents (I’m not talking about abusive, controlling parents), but well-meaning parents, in an effort to correct everything that is wrong or is a potential threat to the child, end up focusing only on correcting what’s wrong – on the rules. As a result, the child grows up lacking proper esteem, thinking he or she will never be good enough and is a failure. That’s what happens when there’s an over-emphasis on rules.

But the opposite is also true: if a parent is overly focused on the relationship and doesn’t implement healthy rules, there is an equally bad result. *Relationship without rules equals a lack of respect. (repeat)* The child will not have a healthy respect and understanding of proper authority. I’ve seen this many times, too. Parents who don’t create healthy boundaries end up with children who think of the parent as their friend. Listen – when your kids are young, they don’t need more friends; they need parents. And if they don’t have a healthy parent, they won’t find healthy friends. A child raised without rules ends up as an over-confident, entitled narcissist.

Implicit in this verse is that in a parent-child relationship, regardless of the age of the child, *rules with relationship equals responsible adults. (repeat)* Now, as the child passes through those stages that the word “child” means, the percentage of rules vs. relationships changes, right? Our job as parents is to raise responsible adults, so as they grow and become responsible, we want *them* to become the enforcer of rules in their own life, and then we focus more and more on relationship.

Does all that make sense? And even though this verse is directed toward parenting, there are relational principles that help us in any situation. But – again, there are **no guarantees**. God has given us free will, and that is a wonderful blessing that we’ve turned into a horrible curse. With it we are able to respond freely to God’s love and grace, and return that love to him in an abundant, generous, eternal relationship in this life and forever. We are able to participate in bringing his Kingdom of love here on earth as it is in heaven. We have the privilege of introducing other people to God’s one and only son, Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, free will also means we can choose the opposite; we can choose sin and selfishness, which we have done, and we do – so much so that, without allowing Christ’s intervention in our lives, we are sinful in nature, choice, and action. So when it comes to parenting, parents can do everything right and that still won’t guarantee that their child will grow up to follow Christ, or that they won’t someday reject Christ and not return. We can’t take away anyone’s free will – God won’t even do that. We can nurture, encourage, shape, and

show the right way to our kids, but ultimately the choices are theirs, especially when they reach that age of maturity in their lives that they are responsible for their own choices (and that age is different for every person). Do you understand that?

The only things that are guarantees in this life are what God says. What are some of those? I guarantee that he loves you. I guarantee that he sent his Son to die on a cross for you and rose from the dead. I guarantee that God will be faithful to you. I guarantee that if you let him, he can change your heart and give you a new and abundant life here and eternal life that starts now and goes all the way through to death into heaven. I guarantee that there will be a final judgment, and I guarantee that God is shaping the course of nations and that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth and God will wipe away every tear and welcome home everyone who responds to his love. It's not *my* guarantee; those are all GOD's guarantees, and His Word is filled with his promises.

When it comes to God's love and his promises, there is every guarantee. In fact, the Bible even says that God has made a down payment and a deposit on that promise. Ephesians says:

“The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.” (Ephesians 1:14, nlt)

In fact, we're told this again in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5. But when it comes to human choices, there are no guarantees.

Remember that we said that Proverbs are principles, not promises, and that we get into trouble when we buy into the urban legend that this verse we're looking at today is a promise, because it is not. But everything behind this verse points to promise – the promise of God! You see, while this verse is giving parents a principle, it is giving all of us a promise, because **this is how God parents us**. Over and over and over again, all throughout the Bible, God is described as both a father and a mother. God is the perfect parent, always working to influence us in the very best direction for our lives, and he does it all throughout our lives. Everything he does for us, he does because he loves us. He longs for relationship with us. He's given us rules for our good, and they are always driven by and in the context of his love relationship for us and with us. And unlike us parents, he never makes mistakes; what he does for us is always 110% the very best, wisest, most loving, nurturing, responsible thing that can be done for us. Isn't that great news?! But here's the thing – like this principle in Proverbs 22:6, God also does not take away from us our free will. What God cannot guarantee is that you will respond to his love for you. God can't guarantee that you will allow what Christ did for you on the cross and through his resurrection to be the doorway for you to step through into God's transforming love for you. That rests 100% with you.

Will you respond to God's love for you, or will you depart from it? Will you be responsible and respect God, or will you rebel and reject him?

Prayer

Pastor Jason:

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, niv)