

Myth #3: *God Guarantees You Godly Children?*

The third in the series: *Urban Myths: Debunking Christian Clichés*
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Intro: I knew a family with a charming little girl. She was compliant and cheerful. Her life was like a dream. She got along well with others and got great reports in school. She had a sister whom her parents loved *just the same* but she *wasn't just the same*. She didn't play well or do well in class. As the two girls headed into adolescence, one continued to excel, the other continued to rebel. If I remember the details, one went to college, married the perfect guy and produced the perfect grandchildren. She lived in a nice house with a white picket fence and a cat in the yard, while her sister chose to live on the streets and got in more and more trouble. She was eventually incarcerated where she stabbed a worker. Her life was just the opposite of her sister's life. This young woman took her own life in her cell, ending her struggle against everything around her.

One girl followed her family's values and the other rejected them. Though they came from the same home and had the same upbringing, one seemingly couldn't do anything wrong and the other seemed like she couldn't do anything right. Sometimes *very different kids* who live *very different lives* emerge from the *exact same environment*.

Now let's read our key verse for today and think of what it might suggest about this couple. **Prov. 22:6 - Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.** This is a wonderful, well-known verse, but it's often misapplied. How should we think of this couple's performance as parents and how should they think of themselves? If you look at one daughter, you come to one conclusion and if look at the other, you come to the opposite conclusion. Does this beloved verse say that their daughter's struggles demonstrate that they were failures as parents? After all, if they trained her up right, she wouldn't have turned away. Right? Isn't that what it promises? If so,

then we must conclude that her troubled life and terrible death are all the proof we need that that couple didn't raise their kids to follow Christ.

On the other hand, the other girl's life would indicate that *things were great* in the home. So, how should we understand this verse? How should they understand it? Are they responsible for their daughter's choices? If so, for which daughter's choices? Or are their daughters responsible for their own choices?

We'd better make absolutely sure we use this verse as it was intended to be used and not slip into making it promise what it doesn't. Let's start with...

1. **What this verse is: oProverbs 22:6 is a proverb, and proverbs speak generally, generally speaking.**

As students of Bible we must understand the difference between proverbs and promises, probabilities and principles, maxims and mandates. The Bible contains them all. God makes absolute promises in the Scriptures and we should treat them as such. But the Bible contains other things as well: narrative, correspondence, poetry and proverbs. They are all inspired, but each different literary device conveys God's truth in a different way.

What is a proverb? Proverbs are *observations* that simply *describe how life generally works*. The reader recognizes that exceptions do exist. They are not intended to give a *guarantee of what will be*. That's not the role of a proverb, but of a prophecy. Let's read a few proverbs to get an idea of what the book contains. **22:4,16,29.**

The word *proverb* comes from a root meaning *to be like*. Proverbs are memorable expressions about what life is like. Look at it again: **Prov. 22:6 - Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.** This is sitting in a context of similar sayings about a variety of topics. They are pithy, practical nuggets that express generalizations that can equip you to live with wisdom.

So, is this verse supposed to be viewed as a promise? Will the child who is raised in a Christian home necessarily follow God? Do they operate under our complete control and lose their free will to accept or reject Christ? No. That view would *contradict the Scriptures* and it *doesn't align with reality*. *This verse is not God's guarantee for godly children.*

2. What this verse says and doesn't say:

Train a child - This Hebrew word is usually translated, *dedicate*. It's used of dedicating a house, the temple, an altar and so on. The word's origin has the sense of *narrowing*, meaning that parents guide a child like the banks of a river narrow the way for the water. *Life's not about this or that, it all points to God's glory! That's the way to go!*

in the way he should go - Some picture this is saying that we're to raise kids according to *their individual bent or niche*. Have you heard that view? But the word *way* is used many times in Proverbs and means the *proper way*, the *way of wisdom*. That's what the whole book is about. This is not saying we're to train a child in the way he *would* go - according to his own natural inclination, but in the way he *should* go, according to God's Word.

and when he is old - when he is grown. Many paraphrases include the word *even* because that seems to be the sense here - *even when he is old*. In other words, he will stay on that path. The concept is that, *you set him on a course and he will continue in that direction*.

he will not turn from it - He will not leave it, won't depart. Does the verse say a rebel will return, that the prodigal will come back? No, it says *he will not turn*, not that *he will return*. What we wish it says and what it says are two different things.

3. What we shouldn't do with this verse:

It can be can be misused. It shouldn't be used to play the blame game.

oLet's not blame others, judging them as bad parents because their kids spin out.

What do we say when someone's kid rebels? Do we assume they are bad parents? I used to be an expert on raising children before I had any. I'd see a kid acting up and I'd know for certain what the parents were doing wrong. I'd think, *why do you tolerate that? You only experience what you allow*. I used to believe that. But there are things in this life that are out of our control - many things and all people.

Should blame be shifted onto parents when a young person makes stupid choices? Is that what this verse is teaching? Who does the Bible say is responsible? **Ezek 18:20 - 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 the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.** Not against his parents! So, let's not do so. When anyone sins, blame cannot be shifted to anyone else, including parents. Your friend with the criminal kid doesn't need condemnation. The Scriptures call us to **weep with those who weep**.

Think of it; are parents responsible for the decisions of their grown children? How can they be? Doesn't each individual have his or her own will? Sure they do! Anyone who has had kids knows this. The fact that they have their own will is painfully clear! If kids weren't responsible for their actions, what would that do to the clear biblical teaching that each individual is held responsible? **Rom 14:12 - So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.** Nearly every family I know has produced a rebel or two. They may follow Christ as a kid and get involved in youth group. But when they go away to college then the professors systematically unravel their faith. Many bail out on their parent's values. Solomon himself provides an example. **1 Kings 11:4-6 As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his**

father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. Solomon's father David was known as a man after God's own heart. So don't judge parents for how their kids turned out.

On the other hand, if your kid is doing well, do you see this as evidence that you are superior parents to those with kids who struggle? Is that what you do with this verse? Do you pat yourself on the back? It is fun to take credit for a successful child, but pride comes before the fall. Those who have feelings of superiority to other families may end up getting very surprised. I remember one woman who seemed to look down on all of us with teens. Her kids were perfect, showing what a perfect parent she was. I remember thinking, *What's going to happen when they have a challenging strong willed one?* When kids hit the teen years, most parents are humbled.

T - What else should we not do with this verse?

Let's not blame ourselves, feeling like failures and wallowing in undeserved guilt.

Maybe you've got an adult child who does not share your Christian faith. She doesn't go to church. Her life-style is diametrically opposite of yours. Is your prodigal proof that you blew it? Does your wayward child forever label you as a loser? What if your kid is developmentally disabled? Is strong willed with ADHD or has Tourett's syndrome? Does your wild child mean you're a failure as a parent? Should these syndromes arouse guilt in the parents?

Back to my friends' story: How should they feel about themselves, about God and about this verse? If they were here they might say, *Our home was a nurturing environment. We tried to get her to hang around with the right kids but she just gradually went off the deep end. What went wrong?* Maybe she did. The daughter went wrong. Maybe she made the mistake, not you.

How about your prodigal? You thought you were gave him a Christ-centered upbringing with good moral and spiritual guidance. But now your kid or kids simply don't have an appetite for the Lord. You're disappointed, frustrated, even embarrassed. You've dealt with anger and now you sunk into shame and sorrow.

What did I miss? The answer may be that you did miss something or it may be that you didn't. It may not be about you at all.

Ever feel like you can't get your kids to do right? *That's right.* You *can't* get your kids to do right. You can lead your kids, you can train your kids, but whether or not your kids do right is up to them in the long run. We may not like this. We may want to create robots. But note that God didn't create robots. God created us as his children, giving us free will which opens the risk that we will disappoint him. We can reject him and so can our kids. And some do.

Your child is responsible for his or her own choices. What we want to do as parents is to equip them to make choices that bring good consequences. And most of the time it works really well.

I had a pastor friend whose daughter got pregnant while sill in high school. He received a call from the pastor of the largest church in our association, Chuck Swindoll. Maybe you've read his books. Chuck told my friend Don a story about another Father whose kid spun out. In fact, all of this guy's kids rejected his ways, everyone one of them. After elaborating on the story, Chuck revealed that he was talking about God, our Heavenly Father.

We tend to think that misbehavior can be traced to *environment*. Others argue that *genetics* are to blame. Is it *nature or nurture*? If you go back to the beginning, in the garden of Eden, it was *neither*. God is a perfect parent and his kids all spin out. So don't *blame yourselves, feel like failures or wallow in undeserved guilt.*

4. What we should do with this verse:

oLet's realize that we have a big influence in the direction of children's lives.

While the Proverbs are to be differentiated from promises, they should be seen as words of wisdom to lead us in life. This verse says *parenting matters*. The general rule is that kids raised with good and godly values won't leave the path you start them on. You can give them a framework to follow the rest of their lives.

You *can't control* the outcome, but you *can guide* and set an example! You can model a sincere genuine faith. Our key verse, **Prov 22:6**, speaks about how children live when they grow old. At that point, their parents are older still. But not too old. You never stop being a parent. People of all ages still look to their parents for advice. You aren't too old to be used by God in your adult children's lives. You can still be an influence. I love Paul's counsel to Timothy about the importance of leading by example. **1 Tim 4:12 - Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.** The same can be said of parents of grown children as well. *Don't let anyone look down on you because you are old!* Don't even look down on yourself. But keep setting an example... **in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.**

Don't say, *everything will be fine, my job is done*. That kind of false confidence leads to complacency. Keep it up! While the child is held responsible for his or her own choices, we are held responsible for the example we set. How are you doing? You can't lead your kids to a faith you don't have. Rededicate your life and family to Jesus Christ right now.

Some extra notes:

If you know of someone who is living out of control, is the parent to blame? It might be partially the parents' fault, but it might be that the parents did a great job.

God entrusts his children to earthly parents for a time. And he expects return on investment.

Our freedom is part of what is meant by the phrase that we are **created in the image of God**. We have self-will the ability to honor God or to reject him. And God holds people responsible for the choices they make.

Proverbs describe how life works. They give rules to live by.

You're not the one who did something wrong. The evidence points to the fact that your child is the one who did something wrong. We all make mistakes, we all have faults, but everything is not our fault!

This is saying that parenting is powerful. But it's not saying that the results are always guaranteed. It doesn't say that there is never an exception.

There are promises in the Bible; some are conditional, others are unconditional. In the book of Proverbs we find, not promises, but proverbial wisdom, moral instruction delivered in short maxims. Comparisons, contrasts, and figures of speech. Wisdom literature uses poetical means.

Train: Inaugurate, initiate, set on a course.

How about Jacob and Esau. They were twins but as different as can be. Environment isn't everything.

Some run away from God and die still facing away.

A defect in the product implies there was a problem with the process?

Parenting matters like working hard matters. Many of the proverbs are about the importance of hard work. They tell us that if we don't work hard, we're not going to have any stuff. But we know people who work hard and have nothing and we know people who strike it rich but are lazy.

God holds you responsible for how you parent, but he holds your children responsible for how they respond to your training and example.

Just as I've seen troubled kids come out of great homes, I've seen great young adults emerge from abusive horrible homes. You aren't the only factor.

Let's not bring the kids to church assuming that everything will be fine from there on out. Wishful thinking. Don't set yourself up to be disappointed with God.

How about the parable of the prodigal son? It tells a story about God. Read it in context. Does this parable teach that the prodigal always returns?

You may have kids who passionately follow Christ and kids who went through episodes of totally dishonoring God.

Do your kids' lifestyles necessarily reflect your parenting?

We view kids of victims of their circumstances. It's the upbringing or school, or whatever. Might the kid just be a little creep?

[Eph 6:4](#) Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

DT 6: ⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them 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. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Eli in 1 Sam 2:22-24; 3:11-18; 4:14-18.

The usual method of looking to the context doesn't help us much here. For this verse is in a section of Proverbs containing pithy sayings, one after another. The ones before this verse speak of the importance of prudence, humility and consequences for actions. The verses which follow tell us that debt puts you in bondage, another verse on the consequences of wickedness, and the blessing for the generous.