
Training for Life

Proverbs 4:1-27

Pay attention! Watch where you are going! Mind your step!

Illustration of driving along a high mountain road with a dangerous drop off on one side.

Pleasing God requires training, teaching for life and living.

All Christians are involved with others as learners. This is called being a disciple.

All Christians are involved with others as trainers. This is called being a discipler or mentor.

One of the primary spheres for training in life and living is the home. What I say this morning about sons and daughters is equally applicable to learning, growing and changing believers, particularly, young or untaught believers.

So we turn our attention to pleasing God by teaching and training for life.

The Instruction in the Family

(v.1-4)

¹ Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, ² for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching. ³ When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, ⁴ he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.

Solomon speaks affirming the father's responsibility (v.1-2) which leads to the son's remembrance (v.3-4). While some see this as a conversation between Solomon and Rehoboam, it is much more likely that Solomon is recalling the instruction of David, his own father. He is following an example set for him.

Solomon models, in his instruction for his son, 5 important principles.

He aims to instruct his children so as to give insight. His instruction is not merely factual, but works to bring insight into principles, processes and underlying structures and themes.

He will command his children along with instruction. His instruction, even as modeled in what follows, will be filled with commands and precepts. His instruction is filled with imperatives and admonitions.

He will seek to connect instruction and correction. Thus he will try to develop wisdom. In the midst of his correction and discipline, he will teach and train in the way they should go.

He will begin from a very young age as he was taught. Following his father's example, he will begin when they are very young. Why wait until folly has begun to develop into themes and habits?

He will instruct with truths in words they can recall. I believe that Solomon is reflecting on and illustrating an important principle. Part of our teaching is to instill

ways of thinking that *the child may not understand at the time they are learning it*. You are teaching and training into your child, your young disciple, correct ways of saying truth and godly desires to themselves that form godly character in them. They may only be able to recite it back; understanding may actually wait until regeneration.

The Instruction in its Focus

(v.4b-9)

Pleasing God instruction has as its focus the acquisition and attainment of wisdom.

To Acquire Wisdom

(v.4-7)

⁵ Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. ⁶ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. ⁷ The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.

If there is any repeated command in the Proverbs it is this: “Get wisdom”. Wisdom is only cultivated in the context of the fear of the Lord. It requires knowledge. It is developed through marrying truth with the situations of life. It is not innate to us. Folly is innate to us. We are born both in naturalness and in fallenness to not make the connection between our choices and consequences. This is the purpose of discipline. It is designed to help us see that connection.

At the beginning and end of this unit, wisdom and insight are connected together. Get wisdom and insight, whatever you do, do that. Where it is that we instruct, in the home or at church, this is what we are to press people toward. We say, “Become a wise and insightful person. Seek it. Do not forsake it. Love it. Then, wisdom will guard and protect you.” Then God uses that instruction to impart wisdom to the person, a son or daughter, a new Christian, an untaught Christian, and even seasoned saints.

To Embrace Wisdom

(v.8-9)

⁸ Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. ⁹ She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

In our instruction we are to exhort others to embrace wisdom. Now I have carefully chosen this word. It is at the center of this unit. It involves our desires and affections. Wisdom must be seen something valuable. Every phrase here points us to seeing wisdom as infinitely desirable. Wisdom and being wise is to be prized, valued and held to tightly. To his sons, Solomon constantly represents wisdom as a beautiful woman who will bring honor and respect.

Let us remember that the Bible is not just holding out the Greek idea of *Sophia* for us to pursue. All through the New Testament, the wisdom of God is shown to be radically different from the wisdom of the world. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:20-25:

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called,

both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The unfathomable wisdom of God which confounds the wise of this world reaches its apex in Christ and the cross. So, our instruction to others to pursue, to acquire, embrace wisdom will ultimately rest in Christ. It will find its fullest expression in the stunning wisdom of God to send the Lord Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins and to be raised for our justification.

Therefore, we are not just seeking to grow kids or church members who are sages, who are wise only in the context of practical living in this world. We are seeking to show how all the paths of Biblical teaching for wisdom will bring them to Christ. In Him is the greatest union of truth and life. The trajectory of all our teaching of wisdom terminates in Christ.

The Instruction for the Path

(v.10-19)

Biblical instruction in wisdom involves what Psalms and Proverbs refer to as the path or way. Yes, think road. In the Bible, people are always thought of as being on a path or a road. Choice by choice, you are moving along a way. Each choice is a fork in the road. The path you are on has a generally predictable end. Instruction is designed to describe the right path and to put you on it. Exhortation is designed to keep you in the way; encouragement to keep you moving. Warning will keep you from leaving it. Correction and rebuke are designed to bring you back to the right path. To be pleasing to God, we must walk the path, the way God has set forth for us. Wisdom then is understanding your path, the way.

Keep on the Path of Righteousness

(v.10-13)

¹⁰ Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. ¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. ¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. ¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.

The instruction we give includes keeping people on the path of righteousness. In a lovely Hebrews parallelism, the way of wisdom and the paths of uprightness are set side-by-side. Notice the second element of the parallelism. Teaching is a way of leading. When you teach the way of wisdom you are leading others along the path of uprightness.

The path of uprightness is the path of life. Walking along in uprightness the path is long. Along it you will not stumble. It has no potholes. But it must be held onto. It must be kept.

So, we lean over into the face of our sons and daughters, of young Christians and maybe not so young ones and say, “Stay on the path of uprightness and you will live and arrive safely at home.”

Avoid the Path of the Wicked**(v.14-17)**

¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. ¹⁵ Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. ¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. ¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

There are alternative paths to the paths of uprightness. There are forks in the road where we may ignore instruction, serve idols, be mastered by desires and make wrong turns. So we need warnings that point to where those forks are and the long downward slide towards hell those paths lead to.

Instruction for pleasing God must warn to not get involved with the wicked or their ways. Now make no mistake – it is *people* who are to be avoided. But even more, it is their ways, their paths, their manner of living, their lifestyle. The wicked ones ways will lead to destruction. It is a path, but one that will lead to ruin and judgment.

These commands have a reason and purpose. The wicked are to be avoided because of their depravity and their danger.

Their sinful depravity is expressed in the craving for sin. They are restless and sleepless until they have satisfied their sinful cravings. You should avoid people who do not sleep because they are up at all hours of the night on the computer, playing video games, prowling the streets.

They are a serious danger to others. They are restless and sleepless until they have caused someone else to join them in their sin. There are so many examples of this today. Some of the worst manifestations of this are in gangs (neo-pagan tribes.) But even in your Christian schools kids come under enormous pressure to do what others are doing.

Understand the Difference in the Paths**(v.18-19)**

¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. ¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

See here are two roads, two ways, two paths. Our teaching and instruction must show to others the wisdom along one and the folly of the other.

One is a path that that is growing ever brighter. As we walk its way, it becomes easier and easier to see it. It is marked by holiness and there are many loving and wise companions. While we cannot see the actual end of its destination from here, we can see the light from that celestial city. Along this God-pleasing path of wisdom and insight we move in company with all the saints until we arrive at the full dawning of the new heavens and new earth.

There is also another path, one leading along folly and ending in doom; a path easy to find and hard to get off of. It is a crooked, thorny, stone ridden, potholed road strewn with the candy of broken promises and bubbling manure pits thinly covered over with frosting and sweets. It is a wide way but one leading deeper and deeper into darkness. Further ahead along the way you hear the stumbling bumps and wounded cries of sin laden souls. The companions along this path are

often blind and deaf, sunk deep in self-pleasures and pitiful slaveries. Others are blanking out conscience and counsel and cries with tunes in their ears and songs deafening their hearts.

Which road are you on, today? At this moment in this place along the dark road there is illuminated the Christ and His cross. He is a gate, a door marked salvation, deliverance, the one and only way. It is a door that requires you believe, trust and turn off the old path. It requires that you bow for the One opening the door for you is a King to whom you will give your love and your life. Will you turn, now? Do you see the path of destruction you are on? See way offered you? See its glorious light?

The Instruction in its Examples (v.20-27)

The text now gives us examples of the content of that instruction. Running through this is a repeated and necessary fundamental: Pay attention...

To Your Learning (v.20-22)

²⁰ My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. ²¹ Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. ²² For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh.

To please God we must be people who are inclined to be taught, to be teachable. We must pay attention to what we are being taught, to remember it, to master it, to live it. The command here to the son is to pay attention in the context of being taught. It has to do with the focus of our souls when someone is communicating God's Word or truth to us. What we do not pay attention to when we are receiving it we will have great difficulty retaining later on. Pay attention when you are being taught.

To Your Heart (v.23)

²³ Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

To please God we must vigilantly guard our hearts. The Bible uses the word "heart" to represent our inner person or being. This is the non-material part of you. In your heart you think, you believe, you desire, you feel, you choose. There your conscience functions. It is the dwelling place of God by the Spirit. The Bible is much more concerned about the functions of your heart, the "what it does" than it is concerned with "being" of your heart, the "what it is".

The heart, the inner person where we believe and desire, where our thoughts and motivations run in words, must be "kept" or guarded or watched over carefully. Solomon here asserts it and Jesus confirms it several times. We live out of the flow of words in our heart. The words from our mouth are simply the overflow from our hearts. Therefore, we must pay careful attention to it. Too many Christians are almost totally unaware of the flow of inner, heart words that give rise to their affections, emotions, choices and actions. They are not paying attention, asking themselves heart exposing questions. Many even push hard against being asked heart exposing questions. What were you thinking? What did you want? What was important to you? What were you trying to achieve? Why did you choose that instead of this?

We must not only teach our sons and daughters to be aware of their hearts, but also to guard what they put in them. What is allowed in the heart, what is thought over, fantasized about eventually will become who we are. There is a Biblical power to this as faith is ability to see what truth is speaking of. But it has an enormous capacity to become bland, smooth, plain, worldly. It most dangerous is when it turns dark with sex, violence, corruption and demonic activity.

But God grants us new hearts in the New Covenant. He is also remaking our hearts after the image of Christ. So here is the foundation for pleasing God. Pay attention to your heart.

To Your Words

(v.24)

²⁴ Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.

Pleasing God means that we pay attention to our words, to how we talk. Sin often affects our tongues first (or so it appears, it actually affects our hearts which then speak through our tongues.) The emphasis here is on speaking that is not crooked or devious. It means what it says.

Let us teach and learn to have an intention to be clearly understood. Crooked speech here has moral overtones. When we talk to one another, be sure that our speech is “straight”, not crooked or corrupt. An aspect of this is to encourage one another to speak understandably. It is incredibly easy to fall in love with our own words. Sometimes, the hardest thing for me to do is go back to a lovely, eloquent, elegant but incomprehensible paragraph and rewrite it so that it is “straight”.

Let us teach and learn to speak without deceit. We say words that are true but in such a way that we know we are deceiving the person. We are not answering the question. Our explanation is designed to be merely what the person wants to hear not what is up-building or needful in the moment. Not to mention just outright lying to one another. Particularly among believers, we must trust one another and teach one another to put devious talk far away. Pay attention to your words.

To Your Eyes

(v.25)

²⁵ Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.

Teaching for pleasing God helps our sons and daughters to pay attention to their eyes. This is an interesting concept in the Scriptures. Our eyes are windows to our souls. They are not merely mirrors; it is a through the glass kind of thing. So what you set your eyes on is both a reflection of your heart desires and serves to reinforce or reinterpret your heart. What you set our eyes on tends to direct your heart and eventually, to affect your emotions and choices.

I sometimes worry my wife when I am driving. When we talk as we are going down the road, I try to look at her. I am not keeping my eyes on the road. This is a cause for concern, particularly on the Interstate. This is a worry for you who are teaching and training others. You see them sailing down life’s road and their eyes are not looking straight ahead. They are looking at all the fascinating sights not realizing they are veering towards what they are seeing.

Let us teach and learn to keep our eyes on the path along the way of uprightness. Pay attention to what you are setting before your eyes. What web sites, what

video games, what movies, what books, what magazines. Some things may in of themselves not be wrong. But we all must be careful of putting before our eyes whatever for us is a “covet book”. You, know, catalogues of _____. For many, sites like eBay and Amazon.com are endless eye-fillers and heart lusters. But, O the great and grave dangers of so much in media that is depraved, erotic, violent and soul destroying.

You will become like what you set the eyes of your soul on. Therefore, there is the transforming power of beholding Christ. As you gaze on Christ by faith with the eyes of the soul, you will be transformed, glory by glory. Pay attention to your eyes.

To Your Lifestyle

(v.26-27)

²⁶ Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. ²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.

Teaching for pleasing God counsels others to carefully pay attention to their paths. Solomon returns us to this needful instruction. It has the effect of saying, “Watch out where you are going.” Look carefully at the road you are on.

I remember traveling in Africa where I grew up. The dry season was easy, just extraordinarily dusty. The tracks that made up the road were clear. The deep holes were visible. The places where you just had to go around barriers were obvious. But travel during rainy season was another whole matter. Sometimes the tracks were just rivers – you knew where the road was supposed to be because water was flowing along it. The rocks and the holes were hidden. Runoffs could take you into horrible thickets. The few bridges were buried in the swollen rivers. I can vaguely remember a couple of trips when we drove along in places at the speed at which an observer could walk along ahead and check the road. My father’s concentration on the road was determined and fierce.

Are we rearing a generation of young people who ponder their path? Are we teaching and training a generation of new believers to not swerve to the right or the left into evil? Are we all carefully walking the high road of the third way, the path of uprightness and holiness? Do you carefully consider your lifestyle, the themes of the choices and consequences that makes up the flow of your life? Pay attention to your lifestyle.

Reflect and Respond

Speaking of Jesus, Luke records in 2:39-40:

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Jesus grew in wisdom even as a child. Two reasons: his parents were obedient to God and God's favor or grace was upon Him. May God so grace our children so that our obedience as parents teaches and trains children who grow in wisdom

Speaking of Christ, Paul reminds us that He has been our wisdom. Both for ourselves and the ones we are teaching and training may all our pursuit of wisdom culminate in bringing them over and over again to the gospel mercies in Christ.

Teach and train your little ones to love, to pursue, to crave wisdom. We are teaching them, often by example, to prize and to pursue too many lesser things. In all your desires for your children and those you are training, hunger to have them grow in wisdom, living life from God's perspective.

Teach and train your little ones and not so little ones to know, walk, stay on and love the paths and ways of God. Show them the great dangers of folly and sin. Show them the great delights of Christ, His person, promises and provisions.

Maybe you find yourself on the path of destruction I described earlier. You have now begun to see how thorny it is as you are ensnared in its deceptions. You have now begun to see how putrid it is as its rottenness infests your body or soul. You have now begun to see how rocky and pot holed it is as you try to run the race with bent legs and broken feet. But the narrow, cross-shaped gate that leads to the path of life is opened by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Will you turn from the path of sin that leads to hell and turn to the path of salvation that leads to Christ?

May we be pleasing to God as we teach and train for life.