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THE SCRIPTURE
Proverbs 22:6

*Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.*

THE MESSAGE
“Oh, Boy!”
Beau Underwood
Guest Proclaimer



When we brought our son home from the hospital three-and-a-half years ago , I read through all the documents they sent with us. But even scouring the fine print, I didn't find what I was looking for.

I learned a lot about all the medical tests and procedures performed in the hospital. There was great information related to childhood development. But there was nothing - absolutely nothing - about how to raise a kid. As first-time parents, this meant we were flying blind.

So, naturally you look to the experts. It turns out there's a ton of websites, books, and videos

devoted to parenting. **Most of them are terrible.** And the decent ones often provide conflicting advice. It turns out that a lot of our child-rearing practices are more rooted in convention and preference than actual science.

As a pastor, you would expect that I would see the Bible as a resource. Well, let me tell you something: I love Scripture. I believe it reveals the nature, the activity, and the desires of God. It teaches us all about following Jesus. But it offers next to nothing about parenting.

Actually, that's not quite right. There's a few lessons we can draw from its pages. Consider these wise words from Leviticus 18:21, "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God." So, not sacrificing children to false gods is a clear biblical principle. As a family, we've been members here at Broadway Christian Church for about a year and, as best I can tell, we're doing pretty well on that score.

The most famous Scripture about parenting is the one we heard from Proverbs: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it." You've likely seen this on a greeting card or may even have it hanging somewhere in your house. It's one of those verses that lots of Christians recite, but few people bother to think about.

Consider two obvious problems, one related to interpretation and the other to practicality.

"Start children off on the way they should go" sounds exactly right. But, like Thomas the disciple of Jesus - you know, the doubting disciple - a moment's reflection causes us to ask, "How can we know the way?" How do we know "the way" a child should go?

The Book of Proverbs is filled with pithy statements of wisdom like this one, but slogans always lack substance. There's nothing in this verse, or the entire book of Proverbs, which offers details on what exactly that recommended way is all about. Here the Bible is like the sports apparel maker Nike. It tells us to "just do it" without defining the meaning of "it."

This ultimately proves to be a good thing. The Book of Proverbs was written **hundreds of years** before the birth of Jesus. It's super ancient. A lot has changed about parenting in the last several decades, as I moved from child to father. Obviously, a MUCH bigger shift occurred over the 25 or so centuries between when Proverbs was written and today. So, "the way [children] should go" needs to be defined anew for each contemporary moment, which Proverbs simply cannot do for us.

That brings us to problem number two with this verse, which is the practical side of things. I know lots of amazing parents. People that I admire. Folks that I want to emulate in raising my own son. They invested in their kids. Loved them. Taught them all the right things. Gave them every possible advantage. Disciplined them when necessary. Encouraged them at every step along the way. There's nothing about their approach that I would criticize. In other words, they started their children off on the way they should go.

And you know what happened? Some of these parents had wildly successful kids. Straight-A students. Star athletes. Full rides to college.

But some of these parents had kids veer wildly off the anticipated path. They struggled academically and socially. Addictions and illnesses developed that no amount of love seemed to overcome. One mistake, combined with our society's broken criminal justice system, brought about legal trouble that begat more mistakes compounded by social injustice that begat more trouble. In other words, they started their children off on the way they should go, and when the children grew up, they turned away from it. In these scenarios, the supposed wisdom of Proverbs proved to be folly. To these parents, the biblical teaching was just obviously wrong.

So, as a new dad, this left me back at square one. Neither the hospital nor the so-called parenting experts nor even the Bible seemed capable of helping me raise my son. And, to make matters worse, the problem contained another layer.

As a white, straight, economically secure dad to a white, economically presumably straight, son, my child would be starting out in a privileged position in this hurting world. He could either use those advantages to make the fractures in the world - the racism, the sexism, the inequalities, and inequities that conflict with the coming Reign of God - worse OR he could use his advantages to make them better.

In addition to worrying about whether my kid would behave in a restaurant, I started worrying about whether my son would add to the problems of the world or be a part of finding solutions? As a new father, one implication was clear to me: my parenting would not - and could not - be neutral.

So, I decided to write letters to my son. These notes would distill the values that his mom and I were trying to impart. I hoped that once he was old enough to read them, the letters would reinforce the lessons of his childhood.

I shared this idea with another Disciples pastor, who was also raising young boys. He was already writing an annual letter to each of his sons and quickly decided he would take on the writing project with me. If we were going to go to all this trouble, we figured

other dads (or even moms) might benefit from our example and want to do it themselves. So, we contacted Chalice Press, and that gave birth to our book, *Dear Son: Raising Faithful, Just, and Compassionate Men*.

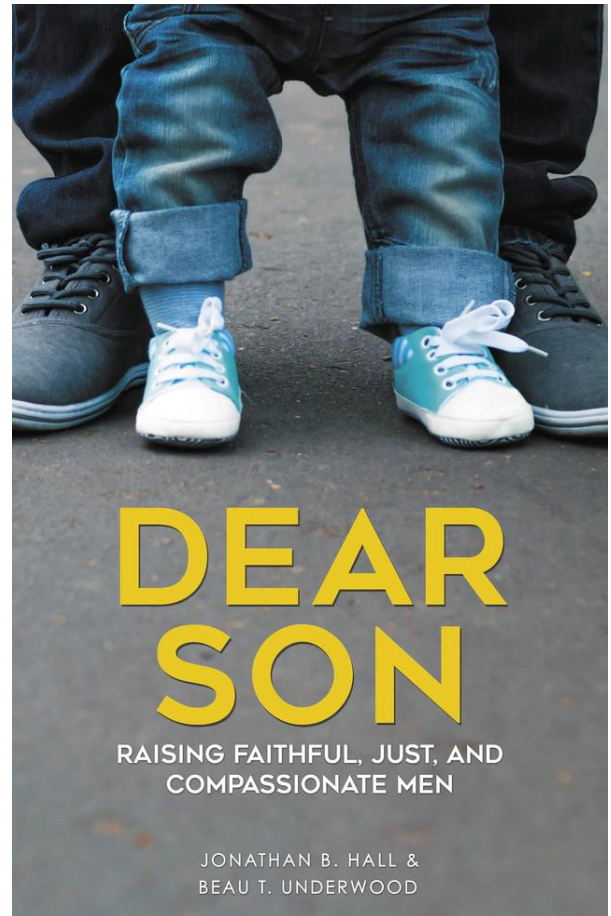
Now, we don't claim to be experts in raising kids. I'm not even the best parent in my own house. But we do believe that progressive Christians should think about parenthood vocationally. This is work God calls us to do, and we should approach it as a calling to God. And that means we need resources that align with our beliefs. Frankly, I'm tired of Focus on the Family defining what Christian parenthood looks like. So, this book is our small contribution to the growing pushback against the bad theology found on too many bookshelves.

While I hope you'll consider reading the book, I have a much bigger request for you: I need your help in raising my son. You see, our society limits responsibility for child rearing to parents or, perhaps, extended family. However, I'm convinced followers of Jesus are required to take a much broader perspective. If we begin to think about parenthood vocationally, then we realize that within a Christian community raising kids involves us all.

Consider the odd ritual we collectively participate in when a child is born. We don't just recognize the birth. We do more than celebrate the child's arrival. We ask parents - exhausted, overwhelmed, but blessedly faithful parents - to stand before the entire church and commit themselves to raising their child in Christlike ways.

Then, as they anxiously stand there in front of everyone, we invite the entire congregation to respond in affirmation. We expect the community will make a commitment back, not just to the parents but also to the child. Think about how weird that is! A bunch of strangers brought together in one place by the Holy Spirit saying, "Here's the deal. Since you're promising to raise that kid to love Jesus, we'll promise to do everything we can to help you along the way."

It reminds me of what happens as Jesus is dying on the cross. The Gospel of John describes one of his last acts as creating a new family defined not by genetics but by relationships. He tells his mother to adopt one of his disciples as her son. And he tells



that disciple that he now has a new mother. The implication is that a shared faith in Christ constitutes a new family. Not only does Jesus transform our relationship to God, but he alters our connections to one another. The Church is to model the ideal of the family, where the bonds of love inspire great compassion and sacrifice to ensure that our kin can thrive, and our loved ones are kept safe.

Notice that I qualified that statement by using the word “ideal.” Not every human family fits that description, nor does every church live up to that expectation. Many of us know that to be true in the most painful of ways. Yet, our real failures do not negate the attractiveness of that vision. Our proclamation that Jesus is Lord of us all should change how we see and relate to one another.

So, as my brothers and sisters in Christ, I have an invitation for you. There’s a lot of complexity around biological parenthood in this community. There are single moms, grandparents raising kids, would-be parents dealing with the grief of infertility, couples who decided parenthood wasn’t right for them, and lots of other stories - some celebratory and some painful - that are present when we gather together.

Recognizing that diversity, I also want to affirm our commonality. It’s the commitment we make at every baby dedication, baptismal ceremony, or celebration of a new member joining this church. We have a stake in each other. And that means there’s a collective responsibility - a common vocation - when it comes to kids.

I want you to smile with delight when my son dances in the back pew.

I hope you’ll indulge his curiosity about worshiping God when he stands in front of the drummer during praise songs.

I’m happy for you to scold him when he runs through the halls OR fails to listen to his mom and dad.

What I’m asking you to do - no, what I’m insisting you do - is take seriously your role in teaching all the kids here about the Broad-way of following Jesus. Because my son and every other child of this church isn’t going to learn those lessons anywhere else.

That’s how we bring the wisdom of Proverbs to life.

If all of us teach our kids about the way they should go, then we’ve got a fighting chance that they’ll still be following Jesus when they grow up.

SONG OF FOCUS
“In the Way They Should Go”

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

1. Raising our children in the way they should go:
it means watching and learning
(there's so little we know)
till, in their uniqueness
and God's gifts, they show
who they are in the beauty
of their life's ebb and flow.
2. Parental vocation with our daughters and sons
is to see who they are, individual ones,
and nurture their gifts to develop and grow,
raising our children in the way they should go.
3. We praise you, our God, for this heavenly call
from the day they are born
and as they grow up so tall.
We live lives before them
ever your grace to show,
raising our children in the way they should go.
In faith, hope and love,
by your grace may they grow.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH