

Next Gen Discipleship

Proverbs 4:1-10 on June 21, 2020

(Father's Day)



Please read Proverbs 4:1-10 before going through this transcript.

One Proverb that is probably familiar to many of us is Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” In the broader community, we might refer to this as mentoring, teaching, or coaching; but in the church, we call it discipleship. Discipleship calls us to invest in one other, to help each other grow in Christian maturity. To care about one another enough, to constructively shape and mold one another’s faith. Now, discipleship can certainly happen between people of the same age; but discipleship also happens between people of different generations. In other words, those of us who are a little older and a hopefully little wiser, and who have a little more experience, invest our knowledge and insights into those who are a little younger, a little less wise, and who don’t have as much experience. We all have to start somewhere. Getting experience requires time and learning. This is what Proverbs 4:3 is referring to, “For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother.” This youth and tenderness, this lack of experience, isn’t anyone’s fault. It’s simply how things are. But the reality of this inexperience, gives us an opportunity for discipleship. Opportunity is a good word for us to think about. Proverbs is FILLED with opportunities; opportunities for ALL of us to learn from those who are wiser than us. Proverbs is filled with examples of someone older and wiser, discipling someone who is younger and less wise. So today, we’re going to think about how father’s disciple their children. But, more broadly, all of us are going to consider together what it means for each us to disciple the generation younger than us. That might mean people in their 20s discipling people in grade school. Or, that might mean people in their 80s or 90s discipling people in their 60s or 70s. And everyone in-between. We all have a generation younger than us, that we can invest in for the sake of the gospel.

Proverbs 4:1 begins, “Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.” Right out of the gate, we might assume that this passage has a limited application, that it’s only for fathers and sons. In fact, perhaps some of you have already noticed how often the book of Proverbs mentions sons, and how seldom it mentions daughters. Would you believe me if I told you that the book of Proverbs mentions sons over 40 times, but only mentions daughters once?¹ In fact, Proverbs 2 begins, “My son.” Proverbs 3 begins, “My son.” Proverbs 4 begins, “Listen, my sons.” It’s the same with Proverbs 5, 6, and 7 “My son, my son, my son.” Basically, the first 7 chapters of Proverbs reads like a “Father/Son heart-to-heart.” Understandably, this initial pattern might cause us to wonder if the book of Proverbs is really only a book for men. However, I want to begin by assuring all of us that the book of Proverbs has a broad application that is designed for ALL of us. **Discipling the next generation calls us to...**

1 ...disciple both men AND women. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible* rightly points out, that the “son” mentioned here “may be taken as a child, [really any young person] preparing to exit the household and enter the community as an independent adult.”² The fact is, a good portion of the wisdom motif, that we find in the book of Proverbs, is written from the perspective of a father to his son. But the father/son imagery is more of a teaching technique. A teaching technique that serves as a backdrop for wisdom to tell ALL of us, her story. In fact, I say “her story” because throughout Proverbs, Wisdom is often personified as a lady. This is yet another teaching technique; wisdom is sometimes referred to as “Lady Wisdom.”³ In Proverbs 8:1, 4 Lady Wisdom calls out, “Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? ...To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to ALL mankind.”

The fact is, the book of Proverbs uses poetic license because it is written in the style of Wisdom Literature. Therefore, we shouldn’t read it too literally or too narrowly. All of this being said,

¹ And, unfortunately, it’s not the most flattering mention. See Proverbs 30:15.

² *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1189.

³ See Proverbs 1:20-21 and 8. Also, note Proverbs 9:13 where “Lady Folly” invites us to a whole different kind of banquet.

discipleship is for men AND women.⁴ Proverbs has WISDOM to pass along to both genders. Also, to be fair, Proverbs has WARNINGS to pass along to BOTH genders, BOTH foolish men AND foolish women. So, whether we are a son or a daughter, a father or a mother, a husband or a wife, a male or a female, the “Wisdom & Warnings” in the book of Proverbs are intended for ALL OF US. In other words, not only sons, but also daughters should listen to their father’s instruction. And all children should listen not only to their father’s instruction but also their mother’s teaching. In fact, Proverbs already mentioned a mother’s teaching back in 1:8, “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.”⁵ Not only does the book of Proverbs apply to both women and men, but it also applies to each and every generation. Discipling the next generation calls us to... **2 ...disciple from generation to generation.** Proverbs 4:3-9 is actually referred to as the “The Grandfather’s Lecture.”⁶ Let me show you what I mean. Proverbs 4:3-4 says, “For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother. Then he taught me...”⁷ So we see here that not only is the loving mother involved in this young man’s discipleship, but so also was his grandpa. In other words, this father is telling his son, “Son, your grandpa taught me and now I am teaching you.” The implication being, “and one day, you will teach your children what I have taught you.” This principle of Next Gen Discipleship shows up all throughout the Bible.⁸ Whether we think of Moses discipling young Joshua as the next up-and-coming leader of the Israelites; or Barnabas taking the Apostle Paul under his wing, early on in his ministry, and helping him get established.⁹ In fact, not only did Paul RECEIVE discipleship, he also OFFERED discipleship to others. In 1 Timothy 1:2 Paul writes, “To Timothy my true son in the faith...” In Philemon 10 Paul declares, “...I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” Neither of these men were actually Paul’s son, but through Christ, Paul became a spiritual father figure for them.

All of this begs the question: Are you willing to disciple someone else as your “son” or “daughter” in the faith? There are probably a number of things that might be keeping us from discipling someone else. Perhaps we are just too busy and we’re unwilling to set aside the time. If this is your reason, I would urge you to pray about that. Another reason why we might not disciple someone, is the simple fact, that it’s intimidating. It’s a lot of pressure to step up and share responsibility for someone else’s spiritual growth. I mean, after all, none of us is perfect. Who do we think we are, to step into someone else’s life and offer guidance? And yet, this is the very thing that God’s Word teaches us to do: “Iron sharpens iron.” Yes, we learn wisdom from God’s Word, but we also learn wisdom together, alongside one another. The other side of this question is: are you willing to BE disciplined by someone else? Are you willing to let someone guide you as your spiritual “father” or “mother” in the faith?

During this COVID-19 pandemic, I’m convinced that those of us who were already in a meaningful discipleship relationship, have weathered this storm much better than those without it. And those of us who have been hit hard by the recent racial tension, have probably navigated it much better, if we were in a close discipleship relationship. Having one-to-one discipleship in our lives gives us a sounding board and a place to get spiritual counsel and advice: wisdom. Next Gen Discipleship is a 2-way street: being willing to teach and being willing to be taught. The book of Proverbs is built on the premise of those who are open to GAINING wisdom. And, it also models the behavior of PAYING FORWARD the wisdom that we’ve gained over the years.

Godly wisdom is designed to be like a baton, passed along from one generation to the next to the next. But far too often we Americans become distracted by things of lesser importance, things like our financial inheritance. The heritage that truly matters is our spiritual heritage. Godly wisdom is the greatest inheritance that we can pass along to our children. Whether those younger than us, are actually our



⁴ Let me just add this caveat as well. For the most part, when it comes to one to one discipleship, it’s usually best for men to disciple other men and for women to disciple other women.

⁵ See also Proverbs 6:20 and 31:1.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, chapters 1-15 (NICOT)*, Eerdman’s, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. xiii.

⁷ Last Sunday Proverbs 1:4-5 highlighted that these proverbs are not only for the simple and the young but also for those who are already wise, that they can “add to their learning.”

⁸ See Psalm 78:4. Also note that this also sometimes shows up through negative examples of generational consequences like cycles of abuse, alcoholism, etc. However, consider this article by Piper: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-visit-the-sins-of-the-fathers-on-the-children>

⁹ See Acts 4:36, 9:26-28, 11:22-26, and 15:37-39.

legal children, or whether they have become a spiritual son or daughter to us through Christ. Discipling the next generation calls us to...

3 ...disciple the best we can, then leave it in God's hands.¹⁰ Proverbs 2:10 says, "Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many."¹¹ Every parent longs for their kids to LISTEN to them, and then to go on to live a long, happy life. We want them to LISTEN, not just because we want to boss them around, but because all of us want the very best for our kids. So, the best we can, we offer them our "wisdom & warnings." Even if it's not our actual kid, we want the best for those who we're discipling. We want them to take to heart the "wisdom & warnings" that we've passed along. We want them to be blessed as we share our "life lessons." But what if our children won't listen? What if they don't accept the wisdom that we are trying to pass along to them? This makes me think of Proverbs 22:6, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." In other words, Proverbs 22:6 seems to promise that as long as I give my children a good start in this life, they'll turn out just fine. They'll take in all of the wisdom and teaching that I've given them and then live according to it as they grow older. Unfortunately, that's not always the case though. Sometimes our kids don't listen to us when they are younger. Sometimes it takes a long time for them to come back around to what we taught them when they were younger. And other times, tragically, they never come back around.

Proverbs 22:6 may be one of the most misunderstood Proverbs in the entire book. The reason that this Proverb is often misunderstood is that we tend to think of Proverbs as promises. When we first read this verse, we may assume that there is a guaranteed result here. In other words, if our children are not currently following God's ways, we may assume that it must be all OUR fault. After all, if we had done a better job when they were younger, Proverbs 22:6 says they will not turn from it. But is Proverbs 22:6 really promising this? For many parents, having a child who turns from the Lord can be one of the most discouraging and disheartening things that we ever face. And Proverbs 22:6 just seems to pour salt in the wound. This is when we need to take a step back and reconsider how we should understand the book of Proverbs. It's better not to think of Proverbs as promises.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." So, is this true or not? Well, we have to keep it in context with the rest of the book of Proverbs. For example, let's take a look at another Proverb. Proverbs 19:27 warns, "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge." This is why, in Proverbs 4:2, the father warns his sons not to forsake his teaching. And again, in Proverbs 4:6, he warns his sons not to forsake wisdom. If they stop listening, they will stray and they will turn from wisdom; and they will no longer be under the protection and watch-care of wisdom.

Many parents have done a good job raising their children. NOT a perfect job, NOT without regrets and mistakes. And yet, we've done a pretty good job raising our kids. However, not every child has necessarily been teachable.¹² Generally speaking, if children are given a good start in "the way they should go," they will grow into godly adults. But, each one of us does have a free will: Some of us will ignore the wisdom of our parents, to our own destruction.¹³ Thankfully, others of us, as we grow older, will eventually come back around to the teaching from our childhood. (And this is what we parents are desperately praying for.)

All of this being said, when we study the Wisdom Literature in the Bible, it's important for us to understand the limits of these rather compact sayings. We need to ask God for discernment in how to understand each proverb in the broader CONTEXT of the Bible. And, in the context of each particular SITUATION.¹⁴ In fact, no part of God's Word should ever be read out of context, or as an independent, isolated saying. This is why some people have said: "Scripture is its own best

¹⁰ The Serenity Prayer comes to mind: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

¹¹ This blessing of living a long life as a result of listening to parental wisdom ties in nicely with what we read in Ephesians 6. Referring back to the 10 Commandments, Ephesians 6:1-3 says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—'so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'" See Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16.

¹² Testimonies of people like Franklin Graham, and other prodigal children, are good examples of this.

¹³ See Proverbs 30:17 and 5:11-14.

¹⁴ See discussion in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1191.

interpreter.”¹⁵ In other words, any part of the Bible is best understood in the context of all of the rest of the Bible. This is a safeguard from misunderstanding some part of the Bible. So we disciple our kids the best that we can, and then we leave them in God’s hands.

In the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom stands at the gate, at the entrance to the city, and pleads with us to embrace wisdom before we go into the city.¹⁶ Before we run into all of the challenges and temptations of this life, she begs us to consider her wisdom & warnings. But all too often, we ignore these warnings.¹⁷ Brother or Sister in Christ, let’s allow the wisdom from older generations to teach us and to spare us some heartache. Let’s not repeat the mistakes that someone else has already made. Let’s learn from God’s wisdom and grow wise together as FELLOW believers. Let’s learn wisdom while we’re young.¹⁸ And I use the word “young” here in a relative sense. To someone in their 80s/90s, 60/70 years old seems pretty young. No matter how old we are, it’s still not too late to gain wisdom, to add to our learning. As long as we’re still alive, there’s still time to learn wisdom, no matter what our age we may be. This morning, as we consider this call to discipling the next generation, who has God placed in your life? Is God calling you to disciple someone? Is God calling you to BE disciplined by someone? You don’t necessarily need to be their father, or even a father figure. You just need to be devoted to following Jesus, and devoted to following Jesus together – right alongside of each other.

*This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 21, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹⁵ See the helpful article by R. C. Sproul at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/knowning-scripture/>

¹⁶ See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, pp. 1189-1190.

¹⁷ How many of our young people have we warned in similar ways as they graduate high school and go off to college or career?

¹⁸ Consider Ecclesiastes 12:1.