

Introduction

Today is Father's Day and I'm going to preach about reaching children for Jesus. I mean by that making them disciples of His.

No person of course is born a disciple of His. He or she decides to become one. The Barna Research Group conducted a series of studies regarding the age at which people do that if they do. Those studies found that the probability of a person deciding to follow Jesus is 32% between the ages of 5 and 12, 4% between the ages of 13 and 18, and 6% for 19 and older.

Those findings in conjunction with our text, Proverbs 4:1-9, address three issues, each of which I'm going to identify and explain.

Who the Focus of Reaching People Should Be

The first is who the focus of reaching people for Jesus should be.

In verse 1, the wise man who wrote our text speaks to his **"sons."** And in verse 3, he recounts what happened when he was **"a son."** The words **"tender and the only son"** in that verse imply that he's alluding to himself as a minor child, before adolescence.

Notice what the wise man's father exhorted him to do when he was. It was to **"prize"** (verse 8) and **"acquire"** (verses 5 and 7) **"wisdom"** and **"understanding."** Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 define the controlling principle of wisdom and understanding. It's to fear Yahweh, which has two dimensions. One is spiritual, relating to and thus knowing Him. The other is moral, obeying Him. Verses 5-8 clearly imply what the wise man's father believed. His little son could **"acquire"** the spiritual and moral foundation he needed for life. And he was right. He could.

Well, what was true of his child is true of all children, even today. They're capable of receiving and processing information and developing it into a spiritual and moral foundation, and in fact do. Social scientists have known for years, for instance, that people's moral foundation is generally developed as early as the age of nine. But it isn't just their

moral foundation. As research specialist George Barna points out, **“Our research confirms a parallel outcome in the spiritual dimension: By age nine, most children have their spiritual moorings in place.”**

The bottom line is this. Spiritual and moral development, including beliefs and behaviors, start as early as the age of two. That development then progresses quickly until between the ages of nine and twelve, it becomes **“fixed.”** Most twelve-year olds, in other words, have the spiritual foundation in place that will guide their adult lives. They’ve determined in their minds and hearts who God is if He is, and how they should relate to Him if at all. They also have the moral foundation in place that will guide their adult lives. They’ve determined in their minds and hearts what is right and wrong.

You and I need to process the staggering implication of that. If we want to reach people for Jesus, we had better do it when they’re children, between the ages of two and twelve. Consider the options. We lead children to *develop* their initial spiritual and moral foundations – the ones that discipleship to Jesus requires. Or we lead adolescents and adults to *replace* their already developed spiritual and moral foundations – with the ones that discipleship to Jesus require. That second option is far more difficult to achieve than the first.

So, we follow the example of the wise man’s father in verses 3-8. We focus on reaching children for Jesus. We designate them our #1 priority in making disciples.

Who Is Primarily Responsible for Reaching Children

Our text addresses a second issue – who is primarily responsible for reaching children for Jesus?

I’d make an observation in that regard based on the reading I’ve done and my own experience. Most evangelical Christian parents think that the church is. Consider these statistics. In a typical week, fewer than 10% of parents who regularly attend church with their children read the Bible together, pray together, or participate in an act of service

together. Even fewer, 5%, have any type of worship experience together outside church. They don't, in practice, direct the spiritual and moral development of their children. By their own admission, they abdicate that responsibility to their churches instead. They do so for two reasons.

One is that they're simply following the precedent that was set for them. They're just doing with their children what their parents did with them. One mother, for instance – echoing a commonly held sentiment – explained it this way: **“After all, that’s what my parents did with me and I turned out pretty good.”**

Abdicating responsibility to the church doesn't bother parents for a second reason. They don't have a sense of urgency about discipleship to Jesus. In terms of the thought, conversation, concern, time, energy, and money devoted to it, it's down on the list of their priorities for their children. Ahead of it are their children being healthy, doing well academically, being popular, playing sports, having material things they didn't have, and more. As Asbury College president Dennis Kinlaw said it, what Christian parents want most for their children are usually the same things secular parents want most.

Whatever the reason, most Christian parents, 68% according to one study, abdicate responsibility for the spiritual and moral development of their children to the church. Their role, they think is secondary. The church's role is primary.

But that's wrong. Notice an instructive detail in our text. The wise man's father taught him, verse 3, and he in turn taught his sons, verse 1. This linking of three generations demonstrates how the spiritual and moral foundation is best laid for children. It's through the influence of their families – parents first, grandparents second, extended family third.

Notice I said **“parents first.”** The onus is primarily on them. Yahweh makes that clear in Deuteronomy 6:7. Explaining how the truth about Him and His words would be passed on, He declares, **“You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house.”** There's no doubt about it. The spiritual and moral

development of children is secondarily the responsibility of the church. It's primarily the responsibility of their parents.

How to Reach Children

We come now to the third issue that our text addresses – how to reach children for Jesus.

Notice two words that convey the wise man's contribution to his sons and his father's contribution to him. They are "**instruction**," in verses 1 and 2, and "**teaching**" or "**taught**," in verses 2 and 4. Let me ask you a question. Of whom do you think first when I say the word "**teachers**" as it relates to children? Almost everyone thinks first of those professionals who instruct them in public and private schools. But as contributing as they are, they aren't the ones of whom I think first. I think first of parents because they're the most influential teachers their children will ever have.

Now, to teach children means, generally, to define reality for them. More particularly, we do two things. First, we give them information. We communicate principles and truths to them. Second, we apply the information we give. We explain how the principles and truths relate to them and their real lives.

That's teaching and verse 2 reveals what it should be, "**sound**." The Hebrew word translated that has various connotations: reliable, perfect, safe, or complete. Sound teaching has two characteristics.

First, it addresses the most important matters. We examine human life generally and our children's individual lives particularly and determine what they most need to know. We then teach them that. Two of our culture's greatest obsessions, for instance, are sex and sports. It only makes sense, therefore, that we should address them. There are many other matters of course like work, patriotism, technology, and health to name a few. The single most important matter is discipleship and then friendship with Jesus. We address the most important matters.

Sound teaching has a second characteristic. It gives the best

information about the most important matters it addresses. It does so by descending into their details. One of the common failures of parents is the shallowness of their teaching. They don't get to the particulars of the matters they're addressing, which leaves their children in the lurch. Their children don't understand things they need to understand, which prevents them from firmly believing what they've been taught.

We teach children that pre-marital sex is wrong, for instance, but they need to know why it is and how intimate they can be. So, we tell them. We descend into the details of sex being a reflex of the Trinity and of the degree of physical intimacy matching the degree of relational commitment.

Or we teach them the sports is a gift from God, but they need to know in detail how it is and how they should participate in it. So, we tell them. We descend into the details of how play relates to heaven, for instance, and how the teachings of Jesus relate to competition.

The most important matter though, once again, is discipleship to Jesus. So, we descend into the details of it. It begins, for instance, with a comprehensive and thorough vision of God and His kingdom at hand, which we help them build. It proceeds with definite instruction about how to act upon and interact with Him and it.

Anyway, you get the idea. We teach our children and our teaching must be sound. We give them the best information about the most important matters in human life. We do because of what we know. Teaching is a primary parental role.

That's our role and we need to do it intentionally. It's true we can influence children without intending to or realizing it – through our example for instance. But the more intentional our influence is, the more effective it is. So, we teach them intentionally by doing two things.

First, we *make* opportunities to teach them. We instruct them formally. It's planned. So, I sat down with one of my grandsons and explained the most impacting sentence I've ever learned: **"The condition of life sought for by human beings through the ages is attained in**

a quietly transforming friendship with Jesus.” I *made* the opportunity to teach him that.

We teach intentionally by doing a second thing. We *take* opportunities to teach them. We instruct them informally. It's spontaneous. In the normal course of day-to-day life, teachable moments arise. We spot and use those moments.

I asked one of my grandsons what he learned in school that day. They had learned about Albert Einstein, he said, and how smart he was. It was a teachable moment and I used it. I explained that Einstein was one of the smartest persons who ever lived but that Jesus was the smartest by far. He knew more about physics, chemistry, mathematics, engineering, and so on than anyone ever has or ever will.

Make and take the opportunities. That's how we reach our children for Jesus. We intentionally teach them.

Conclusion

I sometimes close sermons by quoting others. Today, I close by quoting myself. In my son Aaron's wedding ceremony two weeks ago, which I performed, I said, **“My first aim as a father has always been that my two sons become familiar friends of Jesus.”** I said that because of what I know. The moment our children or grandchildren take their first breath on earth, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 becomes operative in relation to them. It confers upon us an overriding responsibility that's more important than all the rest. It's to **“make disciples”** of them. It's to teach and reach them for Jesus.