

In a Wise Way: Cultivating Discernment

Proverbs 3:5-6, 13-26

Thesis 1: Parenting (or discipleship) is designed by God as the means by which we train up our children to maturity (who can develop the skill of judging well)

The aim of parenting is not comfort for my children, but character; not protection, but progress. To a great degree their character and progress would be measured by their ability to discern well.

- When they can discern for themselves between good and evil
 - From spiritual infancy (1 Corinthians 3:1-2) into maturity (2 Timothy 3:17), thoroughly furnished
 - From being weak into strong (Romans 14-15)
 - From a diet of milk to solid food
 - From being children to those who have their senses exercised to discern between evil and good.

¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

- When they can come to discern between things that differ (even between good and better, or better and best) (Philippians 1:9-11)
- When they can come to discern what is pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:10)
- When they can come to ascertain what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2)

In order to teach these kinds of discernment to my children, I must possess discernment and grow in it myself.

Thesis 2: For parents, parenting is one of the primary relational processes by which God continues our own maturity, and one of the primary means by which He makes us more discerning.

For this reason, God did not provide us with an explicit manual or simple formula for parenting. Instead, He presses *us* more deeply into growth by giving us the responsibility to exercise discernment for others (not yet able to exercise it themselves), to model discernment for those learners, and actively to teach discernment to them. As parents we come to see more than ever our own need for discernment, and it should burden us to teach it to our children.

I don't have all the answers, and being a parent reminds me regularly that I do not.

"It appears that God has deliberately left us in a quandary about many things. Why did He not summarize all the rules in one book, and all the basic doctrines in another? He could have eliminated the loopholes, prevented all the schisms over morality and false teaching that have plagued the church for two thousand years. Think of the squabbling and perplexity we would have been spared. And think of the crop of dwarfs He would have reared!" (Elisabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience*, 56-57)

So often this goes counter to what we want. "Just tell us what to do!" we cry.

How then is wisdom and discernment caught and taught? What are the ways in which we pack and shape our children's discernment filters to reflect that our own is also being shaped?

- By modeling – allowing my wife and children to see God make me into what He wants me to be (Proverbs 23:26).
 - How what I am in Christ is connected to what I do
- By instruction – finding out what God wants my children to know, particularly about Himself, and making sure they learn it
 - Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (fear of God, His presence, His ways)
- By commands taught and enforced (As Scripturally informed as possible to connect our authority with God's) – holding them to the words and ways of God (beyond the letter of the law – to the spirit of it).
 - *My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments* (Proverbs 3:1)
 - *Then he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; Keep my commandments and live"* (Proverbs 4:4).
 - *Some are Bible* - We need to teach these in a way that demonstrates that we are ourselves under authority
 - *Some are efforts to teach common sense and safety*
- By learning to navigate between the lines of commands
 - . . . the process of putting two commands together in a moment when they seem to conflict, or the process by which multiple commands are prioritized in relation to each other, or the process of coming to an application, or arriving at answers to delicate questions over which even careful people disagree.
 - Proverbs
 - "[T]here are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings" (Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, 13).

i.e., *Honor your father and mother* (Exodus 20:12). *'Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.'* *And all the people shall say, 'Amen'* (Deuteronomy 27:16).

Ezekiel 22:7 *They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you.*

Proverbs comes along and helps us see how inseparably connected our parents are to us, and the degree to which our conduct impacts their very emotions.

- 1 Corinthians – questions (takes time and patience)

Paul is modeling discernment as he teaches the Corinthians how to be discerningly consecrated within their own culture. He gives commands, but more frequently he is asking probing, pointed questions – 107 of them spread out in 14 different chapters! Paul is aiming to teach discernment guided by love (1 Corinthians 13), and part of his method is to teach the Corinthians how to be good question askers.

“During my graduate studies, I took a course in which half the grade depended upon the answers we gave on exams, while the other half was based on the questions we asked in the class. The professor was a firm believer in the value of asking the right questions. If there is a sliver of light in the darkness of this hour, it is in the fact that we are asking the right questions” (Ravi Zacharias, *Light in the Shadow of Jihad: The Struggle for Truth*, 14-15).

“This is the generation of questions. Everybody seems to have his own question. Questions are important to ask, but it is more important to ask the right ones. A successful lawyer will win or lose a case simply by the questions he asks or does not ask. There is no end to questions, and we can be bogged down trying to answer each and every little one. Finding our way through the maze of questions today is an all-but-impossible ride” (A. W. Tozer, *The Crucified Life*, 24-25).

We need wisdom to answer the questions correctly, but we need wisdom to ask the right questions, and true wisdom only comes from God (Proverbs 2:6) as does the grace to receive and apply it.

For example, here are four helpful questions I use that attempt to replicate Paul’s example from 1 Corinthians?

1. Have I done everything with Scripture that I can in this situation or am I hastily looking past relevant truths?
2. Am I giving way to fleshly motives or am I endeavoring to walk by the Spirit?
3. Am I helping others obey questions 1 & 2 by my choices or am I influencing them in neutral or wrong directions?
4. Does my choice in this diminish the degree to which God can use me or the degree to which others benefit spiritually from my influence?

Some of our own meagre efforts at home to both practice and teach discernment to our children:

Here's our set of house rules that we began using when the children were very young:

1. BE RESPECTFUL

... by listening carefully to and instantly following all instructions.

A wise man will hear and increase in learning (Proverbs 1:5).

If you would like to do something other than what you are told, you may ask permission only after you begin to obey.

... by looking at the person speaking to you

Give me your heart, my son, and let your eyes delight in my ways (Proverbs 23:26).

... by speaking/answering in a way that shows I appreciate the other person

She opens her mouth with wisdom; and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (Proverbs 31:26).

... by caring for the Lord's property in our home

2. BE HONEST

... by telling the truth in word and action

A faithful witness will not lie (Proverbs 14:5).

3. BE KIND

... by initiating good to or for others

He who diligently seeks good seeks favor (Proverbs 11:27).

... by avoiding behavior that provokes anger

For the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing the nose brings forth blood; so the churning of anger produces strife (Proverbs 30:33).

4. BE HAPPY

... by obeying with a happy heart

A joyful heart is good medicine (Proverbs 17:22).

Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23).

Other examples:

G's

1. Gracious Guest
2. Remember the Grownups
3. Be a Goad
4. Gender friendships
5. Be good

Questions are helpful:

- Are you being wise?
- Are you being respectful?
- Are you being kind?
- Are you being honest?
- What did God see you do? Tell me what God saw.

Four Guiding Questions:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. Whom do I belong to?
4. Whom do I serve?

Here's an example of a more "grown up" attempt for when our children reached high school and college:

Love Rules in the Home

(though applicable anywhere and all the time)

Treat others the same way you want them to treat you (Luke 6:31).

For you were called to freedom, only . . . through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

As I mature . . .

1. . . my **responsibility** increases . . . even though I'm tempted to believe it decreases.
 - a. In areas of designated duties

"So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:10).

- b. In areas of unspecified need

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, When it is in your power to do it (Proverbs 3:27).

2. . . humble, loving **consideration** of the next person is vital . . . even though I'm tempted to think primarily or exclusively about myself.

³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

3. . . **relationships** require initiating investment . . . even though I'm tempted to take them for granted.

Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man's counsel is sweet to his friend (Proverbs 27:9).

A friend loves at all times . . . (Proverbs 17:17).

4. . . my **influence** increases . . . even though I'm tempted to be forgetful of it or to minimize its scope.
 - a. With my younger siblings
 - b. With my peer siblings
 - c. With my parents

Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17).

We are brothers and sisters in the Lord, chosen by the Lord, and placed together by the Lord with the opportunity to serve each other in ways that reflect the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:4-5).

A stands for Ask

In humble submission
Of God, in prayer,
From parents, permission.
(Philippians 4:6-7; Ephesians 6:1-2)

Truth for A: *During my youth, I am under Divine and parental authority.*

B says to Believe

God Whom I can't see,
He sent to us Jesus,
And first loved me.
(1 John 4:10, 12, 19; 2 Corinthians 5:7)

Truth for B: *God alone opens eyes to see truth that is invisible.*

C calls for Calm

Heart quiet and still.
For me to be calm,
I must use my will.
(Psalm 131:1-2; Isaiah 26:3)

Truth for C: *What I know and give my heart to governs my attitude.*

D demands Diligence

In what hands find to do;
Not fearful of hard work,
Persisting 'til through.
(Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23; Ephesians 6:6)

Truth for D: *Working hard to finish what needs to be done is God's will for me.*

E learns to Entreat

Without complaining;
Asks helpful questions
While always obeying.
(1 Timothy 5:1-2; Leviticus 19:32)

Truth for E: *Appeals to an authority should be made with a respectful spirit while obeying, not in place of obedience.*

F means good Friendships

Some closer than brothers
To goad, sharpen, equip,
And strengthen each other.
(Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:17)

Truth for F: *Being a good friend means being a godly friend.*

G is for Grateful

For all I receive,
For what is omitted,
For Whom I believe.
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Truth for G: *A thankful heart knows I receive more than I deserve and not all that I deserve.*

H is for Humility

What God most loves to see.
When God finds one humble,
He gives grace lavishly.
(James 4:6-10)

Truth for H: *Being honest about God's greatness helps me be honest about my smallness.*

I loves Integrity

A true light to guide
In paths just and sure,
Where steps do not slide.
(Proverbs 2:7; 3:21b-23; 10:9; 11:3, 6; 13:6; Psalm 37:31)

Truth for I: *Doing what is upright is always a safe step.*

J aims to be Joyful

With a heart that's ready,
Meets pleasure and trial,
With a spirit that's steady.
(Proverbs 15:13; 17:22; Philippians 4:4; John 15:11; Acts 2:46)

Truth for J: *A merry heart truly is medicine for my spirit and for others.*

K kindles Kindness

That heals what is broken;
 Responds with kind deeds
 And words fitly spoken.
 (Proverbs 16:23-24; 25:11; Ephesians 4:32)

Truth for K: *Kindness to others grows from thinking about and imitating God's kindness toward me.*

L loves to Listen

Prays "God, open my ears."
 For whenever God speaks
 His young servant hears.
 (1 Samuel 3:9-10; Isaiah 50:4; Matthew 11:15)

Truth for L: *I need to listen to God's Words until I really hear Him.*

M means to Meditate

Thinking over and through
 God's Word night and day,
 His will to pursue.
 (Joshua 1:8-9; Psalm 1:1; Colossians 1:9)

Truth for M: *Preparing carefully to follow obediently is God's recipe for success.*

N means a good Name,

A right reputation,
 Earned by the faithful
 In God's estimation.
 (Proverbs 22:1; Ecclesiastes 7:1; 1 Corinthians 4:2)

Truth for N: *A trustworthy reputation among men grows from faithfulness before God.*

O stands for Offering

Of body and soul
 To God who is worthy
 To have my heart whole.
 (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Samuel 15:22-23)

Truth for O: *I can give my whole body and soul as a pleasing offering to God.*

P stands for Patient

Means learning to wait.
 Though I'm in a hurry
 God never is late.
 (Psalm 27:14)

Truth for P: *A patient spirit learns to wait, remembering that God's schedule may differ from my own.*

Q stands for Quick

Quickness to listen,
 Quick to obey,
 Quick in contrition.
 (James 1:19; Psalm 119:60; 1 John 1:9)

Truth for Q: *I must say "yes" to God quickly . . . before I begin to find reasons to go slowly or not at all.*

R means Remember

Recall from the past
 God's words for the present;
 In faith hold them fast.
 (Psalm 77:11-12)

Truth for R: *Forgetting God's words is the first step to disobeying them.*

S says, "Be Sensible!"

To consider each choice
 As a time from our God
 To give ear to His voice.
 (Proverbs 14:8; 15, 18; 15:5; Titus 2:6)

Truth for S: *Pause to listen for God's voice in His Word before acting in haste.*

T is for Teachable

A necessary grace
 Asks perceptive questions,
 But remembers my place.
 (Proverbs 9:9; Psalm 1:1; Philippians 2:3)

Truth for T: *A teachable spirit values others as more important than myself.*

U loves Understanding

Sadly absent in fools
But present in wise men
Who learn in Christ's school.
(Proverbs 1:5; 2:2-3, 11; 3:13; 4:5; 10:13, 21)

Truth for U: *Understanding grows from knowledge and is a test of true wisdom.*

V stands for Valor

A virtue with courage;
Disciplined in danger,
Weak hearts encourage.
(Joshua 1:6; Romans 15:1)

Truth for V: *A brave heart is bold toward danger but tender toward the weak.*

W is for Wise

Humble and discerning.
To grow in God's wisdom
My young heart is yearning.
(Proverbs 1:5; 4:5; 10:14)

Truth for W: *The wise eagerly store up wisdom in their hearts for present and future use.*

X longs to eXcite

To good works and love
Points others to live
With minds fixed above.
(Hebrews 10:24-25; Colossians 3:1-2)

Truth for X: *The best use of my influence is to point others to what God wants them to know and do.*

Y tells the Young

To hear wisdom say,
"Fear God and keep
His commandments always."
(Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Truth for Y: *The earlier in life I listen to God, the sooner I begin to enjoy His presence.*

Z is for Zealous

A heart loyal to God;
Knows God is jealous,
Bows before Him in awe.
(Exodus 20:5; Exodus 15:11; Matthew 4:10; Romans 12:11)

Truth for Z: *A heart loyal to God worships and serves only Him.*