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## *God's Twitter: Wisdom for Discipline* Proverbs 3: 11-12

Because our Proverbs today are mostly just short sayings, and because their meanings are mostly intended to be easily understood, I'm not going to spend time unpacking the Proverbs we've just read. Instead, I want to tell us a story from the life of King David and his family. It's a tragic story, and at its heart, the reason for all the terrible losses in this story has to do with David's lack of wisdom about discipline: discipline that David didn't have personally, discipline David didn't exercise in his family when it was desperately needed, discipline he didn't pass on to his sons the way Proverbs says fathers and mothers ought to do. David loved his children very much, but love without discipline is not enough, as we'll see. You can find most of the story I'm going to tell in II Samuel in chapters 13 through 18.

David's first born son, and the heir to his throne, was a young man named Amnon. Like all the kings of his day, David had many wives, which meant his children had brothers and sisters by different mothers. Amnon fell in love with one of his half-sisters. Her name was Tamar, she was very beautiful, and she was a virgin. The story says that he was so in love with her that he became obsessed with her and even became sick with love for her. If that sounds more like lust to you than love, you're probably about on target. With a little evil advice from a cousin who was shrewd but not wise or godly, Amnon managed to get Tamar alone in his bedroom and then raped her. And then, predictably, his fascination with her disappeared and he simply cast her aside instead of marrying her, which he could have done in that ancient time. For Tamar, of course, that was an absolute disaster: the rape was a terrible wound personally and in that day, though not in ours, it literally changed everything about her future possibilities. But, Amnon had gotten what he'd wanted, and he was still the heir to the throne, so life was good

David's second son was named Absalom. Tamar and Absalom had the same mother and Absalom hated Amnon for what he had done to his sister. And as her eldest brother, it was his responsibility to make sure that Tamar was avenged.

David was the head of the family, the king, and he knew that if he did nothing about this rape he would be forcing Absalom into the terrible position of either killing the heir to the throne of Israel or of failing to be a man of honor. David was furious with Amnon the Bible says, but even so, he didn't say anything or do anything to discipline Amnon. Maybe that was because David himself had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged to have her husband killed in order to cover it up. Who was he to call Amnon on his sexual, violent sinfulness?

Tamar's big brother Absalom was smart. He didn't act immediately. He stored up his hatred for Amnon, and waited for the right time. After two years, he invited Amnon to a feast in the countryside, away from the palace, got him drunk, and had his servants kill him. Then Absalom beat it out of the country in order to let things calm down a bit—it was one thing to rape the king's daughter, but another thing to murder the heir to the throne, apparently. After three years, he was allowed to return to Jerusalem, but his father refused to see him.

Because he loved Absalom, David would not punish him; but even though he loved him, David did not do the work needed to forgive him and restore him to the family and the nation. And in the end, that made two horrible things—rape and murder—even worse. Unresolved conflicts rarely go away; instead they tend to fester and get uglier and more painful as the years pass by. Wise people know that about conflict.

Absalom did not forgive his father for failing to secure justice for his sister Tamar. And, with Amnon conveniently out of the way, Absalom was the heir to the throne of Israel.

Over the next few years, Absalom began to undermine his father's popularity with the people. He recruited 50 men to run before him as he journeyed around the countryside. That sounds kind of comical to me, but it was Absalom's way of saying, "Look at me, I'm somebody . . . maybe the next king!" And, he began to say to anyone who would listen how sad it was that there was nobody in the kingdom who would do justice for people (something he knew very well because David had not done justice by Tamar or Absalom, nor even by Amnon).

David must have known what Absalom was doing, but he did nothing about it. It was the same old pattern all over again: David knew, but he didn't actually *do* anything about it. And, after four years of working at it, Absalom had undermined David's authority so much he was able to lead a revolt against his father. But, David was an old lion and a great warrior, and he still had many supporters. He gathered an army and attacked Absalom. During the battle, the long hair that Absalom was so proud of got so tangled up in a tree that

he couldn't escape. The commander of David's army found him hanging by his hair and killed him on the spot. David was absolutely devastated by his son's death, and in one of the most poignant lines in all of literature he cried out, "O my son, Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son."

There is no happy ending to that story, is there? So, what do you think: did David love his children, Tamar, Amnon, Absalom? He was clearly a man of tender feelings toward his children. But did he love them? How could you tell?

A great psychologist from another era, Bruno Bettelheim did pioneering work with autism and wrote a book David should have read. Its title is *Love is Not Enough*. Whatever else Bettelheim meant, he meant this: having affectionate, warm feelings about our children, is not all that they need; and it's not all our spouses need, or all a church needs, either, by the way. Love matters. My father the psychologist used to remind people that love not expressed is love lost. Let me say that again, love not expressed is love that is lost—if you never find a way to say it or show it, there's no way for others to know whether you love them or not. But, still, love is not enough.

Among the many things that are necessary to producing healthy children and families, I want to lift up three things that emerge from our story about David today—three things that involve discipline from a loving parent.

Before we look at those things, though, I want us to be REALLY clear about something: when the Bible talks about discipline it is not really talking about punishment. Pastor Jeremy told me of an interview he saw between Oprah and the actor Will Smith. She asked him how he punished his children, and he said, "I *don't* punish my children." Then he explained that he gave his children lots of freedom within clear boundaries, and when they didn't use it wisely, he took some of that freedom away. Sounds lots like parenting with love and logic—which is what we teach parents at CHPC. Be sure to take the class the next time we offer it—it's good for marriages, too!

The first thing I want to say about discipline is the most important: children will not learn to be loving, empathetic, thoughtful, caring adults unless they are taught limits and boundaries and unless they are given some experiences of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Wise parents give children such experiences.

We tend to think that if we are just loving to your children, if we give them lots of hugs and attention and cuddling that they will grow up to be loving, caring adults. But social research does not support that view. Carefully done research shows that the children of parents who are highly nurturing—loving and attentive—yet who fail to set limits on behavior, who fail to give their children experiences of self-sacrifice, tend to grow up lacking in compassion, lacking in the ability to behave lovingly toward others. The psychologist who led this 25 year study said, "We were amazed to find that how affectionate parents were with their children made no difference in empathy." Amnon is the perfect example of that: he wanted his sister and he took her, his father's love for him did nothing at all to make him a loving, caring man.

One day just before Christmas, when my sister and I were in middle school and high school and middle school, my Dad told each of us to pick three of our toys/possessions and come with him. He knew a family that was going to have no Christmas, and we were going to provide them from our own stuff. It wasn't exactly a request from my Dad. We got our possessions, got in the car, went to the home, met the family and gave them the toys. They had a Christmas, and we learned something about being adults who were like Jesus. Jesus who gave up so much for our sake.

So, beloved, what have you done in the last week, the last month, to help your children experience setting their own needs aside for someone else . . . just for a time? To share a toy with a friend? To give up what they want to do so others can choose what they'd like to do? Children who don't learn to put themselves and their needs second to the needs of others on some occasions grow up to be adults who have little sense of justice, little concern for others, little ability to give and receive love in any way that really matters. And, that means they won't do very well in kindergarten, won't make very good spouses, parents, citizens, participants in the economic and business life of the world, or participants in the body of Christ—and when they get to heaven by God's grace, it's gonna be a real shocker-oo for them, because in heaven things are done *God's* way, not theirs, and God disciplines all the children he loves! So, learn discipline now, or learn it later, but if we're God's children, we're going to learn it one way or another.

The second thing I want to lift up about discipline this morning is a very simple and obvious one: we need to help our children learn to be responsible. It's best when that starts early in life, but as we say, it's better late than never.

Here's a charming, tiny little example of what I have in mind. A young mom once told me how she was training her child to be responsible about cleaning up her room. She was just a little thing, 2 or 3 years old—too young to clean up her room by herself. But, after playing with the blocks, this mom would get down on the floor with her and say, "Wasn't that fun? Now, let's pick up the blocks and put them away," as though that were the most natural, almost fun, thing in the whole world to do. And then the two of them would do it together. Very cool lesson: you play, you put your toys away and then do something else—as natural as breathing in and

breathing out.

Yeah, I know, if only it were that easy.

Here's a story on the opposite end of that. Some years ago in premarital counseling a bride-to-be told me about a conversation she'd had with her fiancé's mother. The mom thought she could use some advice from an experienced homemaker, so she explained how she had always folded her son's underwear in such a clever way that when he took them out of the drawer, they were ready to put right on. My, what a helpful bit of advice for a bride! That mom would have done vastly better to teach her son to fold his own shorts, don't you think? It was a symptom of lots of other things in that young man's life—he married a girl ready to be an adult, but he was still only ready to be the one that everyone else did stuff for, the center of his own universe. Needless to say, their marriage was a very, very rocky one.

Children don't learn to be responsible by themselves, of course. Moms and dads: someday your child is probably going to grow up and get married. If you want their spouse to bless you, help them learn the discipline of picking up after themselves and of doing their homework and of helping out with their share of household chores.

If you don't, their spouse is going to wonder what you thought your job as a parent was!

Next week I'm going to talk about helping them to learn to handle money, so that when they grow up they'll *be* financially secure instead of just *looking* rich.

You know, a few years ago there was lots of chatter about children and their self-esteem. And there were lots of silly and useless ideas about building up kids' self esteem by telling them how wonderful they are. Give me a break. There is no mystery about how you build self esteem into a child. Years ago a psychologist named William Glasser nailed it on the head. Self esteem has two components: the ability to give and receive love and the ability to follow through on the things you're supposed to do. Giving and receiving love and being responsible, those are the keys to self esteem—and wise parents know that each takes discipline to teach and discipline to learn them.

The third thing I want to lift up about children and discipline is this: we have to be willing to have conflict with the children we love if we want them to grow up to love the Lord, live Jesus' way, and just plain be healthy grown-ups.

Again, David can serve as a vivid example of what not to do. David's third son was named Adonijah, and like his older brother, he tried to seize the throne from his father. The book of Kings says, "His father had never at any time displeased him by asking 'Why do you behave as you do?'" (I Kings 1: 6) David was a master at avoiding conflict with the children he loved so much. And, in the end, that was a tragedy for him, for them, his family and even the nation: a daughter raped and two sons who led rebellions against him. All the conflict he had avoided when they were younger bought David nothing at all that mattered—and it badly damaged his children.

If you can't bring yourself to make your child angry with you, you won't be able to discipline them; if you can't bear to make your child sad or to hurt their feelings, you won't be able to help them learn to give and receive love and to be responsible adults. In the end, beloved, if you have to choose between your child's affection and your child's respect, choose respect. Real love between people always involves accountability as well as affection, understanding and forgiveness.

The story of David's family is the story of the consequences of affection without discipline and love without skill. Parents who really love their children discipline them: they train and equip them to be adults who know how to live Jesus' way, who are able to set their own needs aside for the sake of others, who are able to give and receive love, who can do the things they need to be doing.

In the end, parents can't completely control the way their children will turn out as adults. No matter how much we love them, no matter how skillful we may be, we aren't the only forces in our children's lives. But there is no more important influence in a child's life than her or his parents. Proverbs 22: 6 says, "Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not turn from it." As Pastor Mark has said, that's not a promise we can take to the bank, but it's godly wisdom we ought to take to heart.

The Lord is with us—and with our children. Amen.

Below is a listing of this week's readings from Proverbs on discipline. Go around your circle and have each person read just one proverb—when you get to the Hebrews passage, read just one verse. Then, read them a second time, and this time circle or underline words or phrases that caught your attention. Each passage is about discipline. Please note that “discipline” is not the same as “punish”.

### **Reflecting Individually** (5-7 minutes)

- 1) Take time to reflect on the words or phrases you underlined. Look up the passage in your Bible and if you have a study Bible, check the footnotes to see what scholars have said about the word or phrase or passage. Jot down your reflections.
- 2) Try your hand at writing a definition of discipline that fits in with the passages you read.
- 3) Apply: in light of the words or phrases and your reflections on them, what might the Spirit be saying to you, to the church, to the world in this passage? Is there anything about what you/we ought to do, how we live, what it means to be God's people?

### **Friends Reflecting Together** (7-15 minutes)

Share with each other the words or phrases you reflected on, what you learned and thought. Then share your definitions of discipline and your applications of the scripture passage.

### **Prayer** (5-10 minutes)

Tell the Lord something you are thankful for and something you'd like prayer for.

## **Proverbs 3:11**

<sup>11</sup> My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline  
and do not resent his rebuke,

<sup>12</sup> because the LORD disciplines those he loves,  
as a father the son he delights in.

## **Proverbs 12: 1**

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,  
but whoever hates correction is stupid.

## **Proverbs 13:18**

Those who ignore discipline comes to poverty and shame,  
but whoever heeds correction is honored.

## **Proverbs 13:24**

Those who spare the rod hate their children,  
but those who love them are careful to discipline them

## **Proverbs 15:5**

A fool spurns a parent's discipline,  
but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.

## **Proverbs 19:18**

Discipline your children, for in that there is hope;  
do not be a willing party to their death.

## **Hebrews 12:4-9** (Today's New International Version)

<sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says,

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

<sup>6</sup> because the Lord disciplines those he loves,  
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child."

<sup>7</sup> Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? <sup>8</sup> If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, we have all had parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!