



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

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Proverbs 29:15-21

Wisdom and Discipline

(1) **Discipline**: Hearing from God and Learning from Life

We end this brief sermon series in the Book of Proverbs with the short passage we've just had read to us. It's a very typical passage from Proverbs: *The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother. When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall. Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul. Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law* (29:15-18). It seems somewhat random and haphazard to us as we read it, doesn't it? It jumps from topic to topic in a slightly bewildering way.

You may remember the story of the not very bright person who was given a dictionary for his birthday by a well-meaning aunt, who later asked him how he was getting on with it. He said he was sorry to say that he was really struggling to make sense of the plot; but at least it explained every word as it went along (probably a Geographer!) Well, I suggested in an earlier sermon that the Book of Proverbs is laid out like this because life is laid out like that. It comes at us in just the same interrupted and random and haphazard and bite-size way. We never know what each day of our lives will bring to us, and so the wisdom to cope with life is cumulative: it builds up steadily as we think about what is happening in our lives today and use our minds to make connections with what has happened in the past; to try to make sense of each day as it comes along.

Look again at that passage, at verse 16: *When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall*. If we were reading our way through the Book and reached that point, that verse would have immediately set off an echo in our minds: because we would just have read verse 12 of the previous chapter: *When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding*. Glance to verse 28 of that chapter: *When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding; but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive*. Go on to verse 2 of chapter 29: *When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan*. So when we reach verse 16 of chapter 29: *When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall*, it comes as the fourth verse (in quite a short compass) on the same topic. But they haven't been placed consecutively. Just like in life, our mind has to make the link. The Book of Proverbs had several editors—if you wanted to follow that up you would need to look at the first verses of chapters 1, 25, 30 and 31. And there are other verses that indicate that several people have put these proverbs together for us. But they didn't lump all the proverbs on the same topic together. It is deliberately haphazard to teach us how to learn from life.

Last month one of my sons had a birthday; and as a birthday present his brother gave him this plaque for his bedroom wall: 'I never make the same mistake twice . . . it's more like three or four times'. Proverbs is all about learning from our mistakes, learning from experience. Part of wisdom is to recognise that often in life I've been here, or somewhere very similar, before. This is not dissimilar from other things that have happened to me in life. What lessons am I carrying forward? What lesson did I learn last time round—when someone lost their temper with me, or when I got into the sort of pickle I'm in at the moment? And in the same way, we keep coming across echoes and repetitions and linked verses in the Book of Proverbs—exercising our minds in that way.

The point is that we are not just left to ourselves, to try to make sense of our lives, to learn the lessons, to make the links. In that same bedroom at home (on the door in this case) there used to hang this particular poster: it was of a pig looking out of its sty, and the caption was, 'My Room. My Mess. My Business.' But that is emphatically not true of our

lives, according to the Book of Proverbs. No! There is a speaking God who addresses the human race as His creatures, with far more accuracy and far more authority than any parent has ever spoken to a child about the state of their room (I always like the remark of one mother who said she reckoned she needed a tetanus booster before she went into her son's room!) There is a speaking God who addresses the human race as His creatures: ***Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law*** (29:18). Well, you see, there is revelation, there is a living voice from God; there is law (the Hebrew word 'torah')—direction for us, to bring us to where we may be blessed: . . . ***blessed is he who keeps the law***. And so my life is not just my own business and my own mess. It has been spoken into by God.

The Book of Proverbs encourages you and me to bring the real, everyday, circumstances of our lives and the word of God together. I have said this a number of times in this series, but it seems to me that it is the number one lesson of this book that you and I need to take home. In your and my lives there will be a natural tendency for our thinking about God to float up to heaven, while the practical living of our lives sinks down to match the culture we live in. The way you and I are going to live this coming week is going to be exactly like the person beside us. We're going to look like them. But when we open our Bibles we will float away up to heaven. The Book of Proverbs is telling us to bring those two things together. If we are to be wise we must bring what we read in the Bible to bear on each day of our lives: on today, as we really experience it.

I must challenge you again, if we do that (if you're a believer)—what change occurred in your life last week because of what was happening to you, because of the real circumstances of the week; what was God saying through them, and because of what you read when you opened the Bible—if you did at all in this last week? It's a challenge for the believer: what change? If there was no change, the Book of Proverbs calls you a fool. If you're not a believer, are you open to the possibility that there is a living God speaking to you about the immediate circumstances of your life now? And that He has a will that is longing to connect with your will and to bring you to where He can bless you and show His power in your life and bring you the satisfaction and the fulfilment you and I were meant to have? To you, too, I'm afraid, if you're not prepared for that, the verdict of Proverbs is that you are a fool.

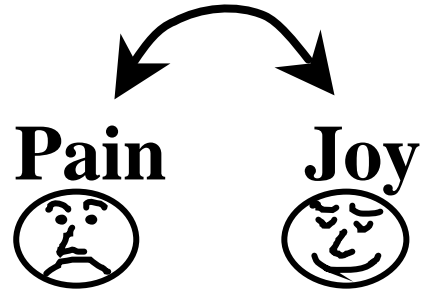
But (finally we get to the topic for today, as it were) for us to change in that way, we will need not just what the Book of Proverbs calls wisdom, but also discipline. As we discovered on recent Sundays, although the book is not arranged thematically, it's almost impossible (as far as I can make it out) not to preach it thematically. You can't not look at some of the themes that connect their way through it. And of all its themes, this one of discipline is one of the most important (and also one of the ones that isn't always noticed by the commentators).

You may remember that we discovered that there is a motto for the whole book, back in chapter 1, verse 7: ***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline***. Discipline is the application of God's revelation to my life. It is the opposite of the attitude of the scoffer, who will not listen to correction: ***Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid*** (12:1). There are a number of verses in Proverbs that connect discipline and correction—they go together. Previously I suggested that some of us are like the Gary Larson cartoon that shows a dog being shouted at by its owner entitled 'what dogs hear' with God's voice. The owner is shouting, but all the dog hears is its name surrounded by meaningless sound. Somebody told me that Larson has done a follow-up cartoon (which I don't have a copy of), which is what cats hear when we are shouting at them. And that one, as you would expect, is just complete silence! We sieve out every single thing we don't want to hear from God. So if He only says to us the things we're prepared to hear from Him (perhaps a little message that He loves us) that's all we hear God saying, if we're not careful. But discipline is to let God speak to us: to let His word come to bear on our lives. And that will at times be painful.

## (2) Discipline and Pain

Look again at the verse that began our reading: ***The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother*** (29:15). Few things in the Book of Proverbs will be more objectionable to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain than its insistence on the desirability of corporal punishment for the young. But it is insistent: ***He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him*** (13:24); ***Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him*** (22:15); ***Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death*** (23:13,14). Well, surely we want to say, "Here is evidence that the Bible is utterly out of date. It is culturally conditioned: it needs to be judged by your or my higher reason." We need to see it—to do what Ginger was doing—in order to hear the voice of God correctly for today.

Well, I want to suggest that our modern revulsion at smacking children needs perhaps to be examined. Our age has tried to understand human beings purely in animal terms. Desmond Morris once wrote: ‘183 types of ape and man the only hairless one.’ Animals avoid pain at all cost, and so we think that for humans also pain and joy are at the opposite ends of the spectrum of human experience. Here is a little diagram of it:



Now all religions try to provide some explanation for those two human experiences; the way you and I know what it is to have great happiness and joy, and the way we also know to have heartbreak and pain and suffering and grief. Some religion’s (in fact one very major religion’s) tradition tries to deny the reality of pain. For their followers, the highest achievement is to rise above pain—indeed above all human feeling.

You may know the limerick about the faith-healer of Deal:

There was a faith-healer of Deal,  
who said, “Although pain isn’t real,  
if I sit on a pin  
and it punctures my skin,  
I dislike what I fancy I feel.”

Well, I don’t mean to belittle it, because obviously there is an enormous Eastern tradition—tied up in Buddhism and Hinduism—which goes in that direction in regard to these two poles of human experience. But Christianity does not go in that direction. It acknowledges the reality and the horror of pain. Pain and suffering are never belittled in the Bible. It never pretends that they are something that you can rise above or forget about; that if you understood the world properly you wouldn’t be affected by them. The Bible asserts the meaning of pain (or rather that pain need not and should not be meaningless).

And so, on that spectrum of human experience (Fig 2) Christians discover that pain and joy don’t lie at opposite poles, but often very close together. In life they may march hand in hand, so that it is possible to rejoice even in suffering at times, as we come to know a God who Himself suffers and who takes human suffering upon Himself: whose Son died in our place on the cross (Fig 3). Pain is a constant reminder to us of sin (humanity’s rebellion against the Creator God), and a pointer for us to where sin is dealt with: at Calvary, where Jesus died for your and my sin, and paid the penalty for us. And for the Christian believer, that truth is the source of the greatest joy: that sin has been dealt with, and that pain will one day be dealt with once and for all: there will be no more grief, no more death, no more crime. That is God’s ultimate purpose for this world.

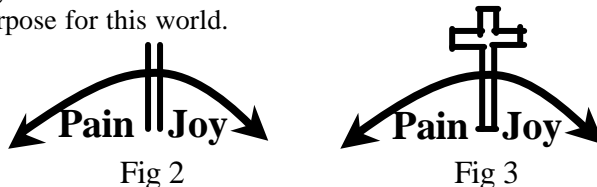


Fig 2

Fig 3

The unbelieving viewpoint thinks that life and death are merely physical states; the one to be clung to for as long as possible, the other to be shunned with the utmost dread. The believer knows that such clinging and such shunning are only appropriate for the spiritual state: of which physical life and physical death are merely pictures. Oh yes, there is a life to be clung to, but it is not physical life. Oh yes, there is a death to be dreaded and shunned, but it isn’t physical death. The human experience of pain must be understood in that light.

I don’t know if that’s any help, but I’m trying to provide a background to help us to understand Proverbs 23. Let me read again the verses I quoted a little bit earlier: *Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death* (23:13,14). The Book of Proverbs doesn’t rebuke our child-centred age for taking our children too seriously, for loving them too much, for being too soft on them. According to the Book of Proverbs we don’t love them enough, we don’t take them seriously enough; our smotherlove that wants them never to experience pain is not real love at all. Because they weren’t born for this earth: they were born to live with their Creator in heaven. And we would be wise to listen to that Creator on how to rear them in the most loving way, for their greatest happiness: *He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him* (13:24).

And this painful aspect of discipline is not, of course, confined to childhood. Discipline will hurt us too, as it restrains the evil within us. Glance back again to chapter 29, verse 11: ***A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.*** That's discipline, the application of wisdom: it always hurts to say 'No' to what we long to do. But the pain of discipline will also develop what is good inside us; it won't just restrain what is bad: ***The rod of correction imparts wisdom . . .*** (29:15a). It doesn't just restrain folly, it also imparts wisdom: it prunes, it trains up the good things that are inside us. It is linked to revelation ***Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint . . .*** (29:18a). That's God's word to us, but it has to be more than mere words: ***A servant cannot be corrected by mere words; though he understands, he will not respond*** (29:19).

So what I am suggesting is that God in His love and wisdom does not just speak to you and me through His word in the Bible: He also acts upon us through the circumstances of our lives (even—or perhaps especially—through what we suffer). I think Traffic Wardens have a tough enough life as it is. But imagine a Traffic Warden with no power to instigate a fine, who could only (as it were) fall on his knees and plead with you not to park on the yellow lines—but absolutely nothing more. I fear that, however much they harangued us, however eloquent they were, we would soon ignore them. Because words alone do not change behaviour; it has to be action. Just like those flashing 30 m.p.h. warning lights—I found one on the A1 once that had a little smiley face if you were under 30, and a little scowley face if you were over 30 (it was a great temptation to go backwards and forwards through it to see it change from one to the other). They are only novelty value: the police are not that interested in them, are they? For all their furious flashing, it's the single flash of the speed camera that's effective: because it has notoriously painful consequences.

Funnily enough, I wrote this down on Friday when I was preparing the sermon; and then yesterday I was sitting in a friend's car (not a member of the congregation!) driving a very nice Audi with satellite guidance (I couldn't believe my eyes, watching it) and as we were going through a little village in Suffolk we went straight through one of these flashing lights. I noticed he didn't change his speed one iota! But had it been the flash of a speed camera it would have been entirely different, wouldn't it? Because speed cameras denote action: painful action in terms of a fine. Flashing lights just say, "Oh, you're being naughty; you're being naughty!" It makes no difference. You can tell your children they are naughty for all their lives: it won't stop them being naughty. There has to be action to change behaviour. And that is what God does for you and me: He hasn't just spoken and told us that we should change our lives, He has acted, and is acting through your and my lives at the moment.

We're going to end by turning to a New Testament passage—in the book of Hebrews. We're going to read a few verses that I want to leave with you this morning, because they are fundamental to understanding wisdom and discipline (what I'm trying rather feebly to explain to you): ' . . . ***“My son [he means daughter as well], do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as a discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it'*** (Hebrews 12:5b-11).

That painful discipline from God in our lives is when things don't work out the way we want them to; when our hopes are dashed; when relationships are really difficult; when we struggle to keep going in one way or another. And it is by that painful action on God's part, coupled with His words, that He changes you and me into the people He wants us to be. It hurts: but it's wholesome and it's spiritually healthy and it takes time. ***No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*** (Hebrews 12:11).

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*