

The Wise Parent

Proverbs 22:6

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We together turn in God's word to the book of Proverbs as we finish in this series on wisdom. Next week, we will begin a series on James which is the application of wisdom from the book of James in the New Testament.

This morning, we are covering the Wise Parent. And in fact, there are many Proverbs that we can turn to that give different pieces of information, different pieces of advice. In fact, major portions of the book of Proverbs are set up by particular Proverbs that then deal with the issue of parenting and also addressing children directly or addressing parents. It is a major theme throughout the book of Proverbs. And there are many resources that you could go and find. You could simply do research on the Internet through various websites, and many articles and books have been written on what does it mean to be a parent, and to lead with wisdom, and the parent with wisdom.

This morning is going to be not a technical look. In other words, it's not about here are the five steps to better parenting. Any time with me, you would know that's generally not my approach. Those are valuable in and of themselves. That is not my approach this morning.

But before I go any further, let me just say as a parent of one, I lose count after that. So, those of you who have more than one child, I don't know how you do it. And the fact that you're still here and breathing is a sign of God's grace. But I also enter into this as a parent, recognizing that parenting is at one form a tremendous thing to be celebrated. But in another side, it is also completely crazy because we are sinners, and then we decide to have more sinners, and then we all live under one roof. What could possibly go wrong?

I appreciate this book. And please, if you have notes, you can write this down. This is one of the books I want to recommend, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. It's very true. And what's being applied there is more than just to parents, but also to relationships in general. But the other is *My Crazy Imperfect Family*.

Our families are imperfect. And so, I come as one who is in the struggle and who does it imperfectly. I wanted to remind us all that we depend, as we say each Sunday, on the gospel of grace. Perhaps, there is no better place to see our need and dependence on the gospel than in the act of parenting. Amen?

And so, let's look at one particular Proverb which is well known to many. And I want to look at it and then use that as a jumping off point to look at other Proverbs and other things which are inferred within this one verse. Proverbs 22:6,

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we now ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would come and you would teach us, you would apply this word to our hearts, and that you would help me and all of us who are in the role of parents, that you would give us wisdom that we might be wise parents where we first come and kneel before you and ask you for mercy. Help us, O Lord. And may the children of our families, regardless of their age, Lord, before your return may they flourish. May they come to know you, depend upon you, to glorify you, to walk with you. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

There are several things I want to say at the outset. First, as I said, this is not going to be a sermon where if we do these five things, we'll learn to be better parents. There are several things that I'm going

to take as a common foundation that we who profess faith in Christ - and I also know that not everyone here does - who are parents, we are called by God's word in various places to teach our children the word, to teach them what it is that we believe, and to give a reason for the hope that we have within us and our dependence on Christ for salvation and what it means to live out the gospel and to walk wisely.

This is evident in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. It is all about how, in fact, a father is teaching his son about the ways of the world, the way to pursue wisdom, and to avoid folly. He's teaching him the law.

Now, the law doesn't always have a narrow meaning, specifically meaning the commandments or even the first five books. But it means the ways of the Lord, the broadest definition of the word "law" that all of that which belongs to the Lord, not just His expressed teachings of what He's called us to obey, but His very character of what He's calling us to because of what He reflects. We are called to do this.

So, I take it as a common understanding and an agreement among us that we are called to teach the word to our children. We are also to teach them what it is that we believe and how we understand the gospel, and the fact that the gospel doesn't just have two chapters: we are sinners and need to be saved. The gospel begins with the fact that God has created all things from nothing and that He also rules over a world that has fallen into sin and our need for redemption. But that He is also, through Christ and His resurrection, bringing about restoration. So, there's creation, fall, redemption, restoration. We try to teach our children. And we need to teach our children what we believe concerning these things grounded in the word.

But we can teach our children all of these things and yet miss what is underneath and embedded and inferred in much of what we read in the Proverbs. What it means for us to be wise as parents is more than just knowing what to teach our children, the content of how to give them instruction, but what one might call the soft skills, how the gospel actually changes the way we relate to our children.

You'll see the two points. First, parenting where the wise parent is relational before it's instructive. Secondly, as the wise parent, we seek to be provoked before we're offended. Relational before instructive, provoked before offended.

So, first, relational. One of the things we can see embedded within this verse 6, it says, "Train up a child." So, this whole idea of parenting is bound up with passing onto the child and to our children that which we believe. And so, on one level, it might seem as though what is being called for here is instructional. But in fact, what we see in the first nine chapters of Proverbs as we have already looked at in the previous weeks, what we see is something happening well before the instruction happens. There's a profound relationship. In many ways, our children learn by what they see before they learn by what they hear.

So, I want to say to us as parents first and foremost, this whole task of training and raising our children in being relational means it must be led with humility. What do I mean? What I mean is this. Jesus in teaching His disciples in Matthew 18 talked about the nature of the issue of forgiveness, that that for which we have been forgiven, we ought to take account. And how we respond to being forgiven gives an indication for what we really think about the nature and depth of the gospel, for if we recognize we've been forgiven a great debt - for that is what sin is, we've created a debt between us and God - yet fail to forgive others, we indicate we do not understand the depth of the gospel and the power of the gospel.

The whole idea of training up a child as a sinner, I know from the outset that I am going to make mistakes. Who of us as parents would ever say that we are perfect? How many of us would say in the last week that if we had to do it over again that we have sinned in some way whether it be attitude, intention, motivation, or actual words to our very children?

But here's what's remarkable. Over almost 22 years of pastoral ministry, having conducted nearly 60 plus weddings, less than eight of those couples which I have spent months of doing pastoral pre-marital counseling, less than eight have indicated that they ever had the following happen: a parent ask

them for forgiveness, or that they actually could give an example of when they've seen their parents sin against each other and then go to each other to ask for forgiveness and seek reconciliation. Is it any surprise then that many of those who are getting married have very little idea of even how to fight with each other much less what does forgiveness look like? And then what does reconciliation look like?

If we're going to train up our children, it's more than just what we teach. It's how we relate to them. Have we gone to them and asked them for forgiveness for words that were said in haste, in anger? Have we taught them by our very modeling to them that we've been forgiven a great debt and that there are times when we need their forgiveness?

And it may seem awkward. I remember the first time that I needed to do this with our own daughter. It was awkward. She had no idea what I was doing. I don't remember what the subject was, but I had yelled at her. I had become impatient. And you know, she went off into her room. She even said, oh dad, we're fine. But the point was that I knew in my very soul what I had done and that I needed to make it right with her. And I knew that my wife Kate would remind me. Thank you, my love. Relational before instructive means we understand that we must teach our children and train them in a way that leads with humility.

Secondly, it's relational before instructive not just because we lead with humility and teach with humility and remind our children that we, too, are children of the Lord, but that we also treat them with respect. What do I mean? Well, if you look at verse 6, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it," the common way in which this verse is translated is if you train up a child in the way he should go, meaning if you teach them the way they ought to live, then they will take on board that instruction. And they may not follow it to the T, but they will always remember what they are taught.

And on one level of reading the Proverb, that is exactly right. But I would also argue that there is an equally weighted way of interpreting this very Proverb because embedded within the Hebrew is far more nuanced than we have in our English. When we read the phrase "Train up a child in the way that he should go" has embedded in it this idea to train up a child in who they are, meaning each child has their own personality, their own agency, their own way of processing information, their own way of looking at the world because of how God has made them and reflected who He is in them, and that fundamentally throughout life, we don't largely change our core personality and who we are. Yes, we mature. We grow. We take on parts of others that we respect and love and let it have shaping power in us. But at our very core, we don't change.

So, you train up a child meaning as we do so, we do it with respect to who that particular child is. How many of us have been frustrated when we recognize that our child is very different than us? And I don't know how they got like this, but that is so not me, that is so your dad. Or that is so your mother. I don't get it. Right? And so, we get frustrated and we want to give up, and we try to train them in the way that we process information, in the way that we learn and the way we see the world. And we do it without respecting who they actually are.

Do we know how our children process information? Many of you probably already do. Do we know how they process emotions? Do we know how they process working with strangers or those that they know? What is God teaching us about how they understand the world and even process emotions? Are we cued into that? And then therefore, as we seek to model before them the gospel and teach them the gospel both in content and modeling, are we taking into consideration that we need to respect their person? Because they are not going to depart from who God has made them in their core.

One size of instruction does not fit all which is why we have to be careful in how we understand the Proverbs. It's not one plus one equals two, if you do this, then this will happen. No. This is what we are called to do recognizing it is the Lord who has our children. They belong to Him.

But we also not only respect them for their individual personality, but also for their stage. To respect a child is not only to respect their uniqueness, but also parents, you know there is that time of life roughly from age 0 to 10 where generally speaking, we get to enjoy a lot of the same things with them. We get to sing the same songs. We get to watch the same movies and same shows. We sort of share a lot of the same things. But there is that magical point where our child begins to develop their own tastes, things which they're into, and you are not. And very easily, we fall into dismissiveness.

Now, here, I want to specifically talk to two generations: Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers. Baby Boomers, you were there in the 60's. You saw what happened, right? It was peace, love, and no authority, right? For us Gen-X's, by and large, we were at the dawn of MTV.

I have to be careful here in the event that any of my family members actually listen to this sermon. But I say this with great love for my brother. Three years ago, I was home visiting my parents, and I got to see my nephew who I didn't get to see very much. And I hadn't seen him in almost seven years, and he had changed and gone a certain direction that his parents did not want him to go, that we did not want him to go. And as we got a chance to talk, I could see how he was rolling his eyes at his parents and they were rolling their eyes at him.

I remembered that when he was around 10 years old, he decided that he was done with baseball, and he totally wanted to embrace skateboarding. He had no interest in rock n' roll, and he completely embraced rap music. And I remember he came into the house when he was a 10-year-old, and he had his skateboard with him. I grew up as a skateboarder, so I got it. My brother was a skateboarder and a surfer, so he got it as well. But my nephew was really into this rap music thing. And as he was listening to it in his earphones, my brother completely called it out, completely dismissed it, and rolled his eyes. And I thought, there you go.

What he was just teaching his son was that what you're into is completely ridiculous. How could you be into that? And what that began to do is it created a creeping separateness, and that separation still bears itself out today.

I'm reminded of Proverbs 18:21 where it says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit." Eugene Peterson did a twist on that Proverb. Basically, "Your tongue will spit out poison or it will spit out honey." It depends on which one you like more. But whichever one you like more, that will be your feast. We reap what we sow.

And if we think that our children cannot see us rolling our eyes or dismissing their tastes or their likes and dislikes, we don't understand how much our children actually take in. And when we dismiss them, they're beginning to see and understand their parents don't get them. We then miss an opportunity to build relationship.

There is also this idea of returning authority. So, let's say you don't dismiss your children's tastes. Let's say you seek to model before them the gospel. Let's say you teach them, and you've actually asked them for forgiveness. You're teaching them how to deal with confrontation. Many of you have done just that. But you and I both know - because we have prayed for many within our congregation who struggle because their children aren't relying on Christ as Savior, who are not presently in any part of the visible church - that what parents begin to do is the following. While respecting the child for their unique personality and the way we teach them, we also begin to lose respect for ourselves when we see our children's missteps as being the result of something we did.

We have to remember this valuable point that Proverbs sets up very clearly. There is no doubt that parents have shaping power and have an important role of authority in their children's lives. But our children are also individual moral agents. They have the capacity to choose. And so, we have to remember to return authority to our children.

Consider Derek Kidner, a fabulous commentator on the book of Proverbs. I cannot recommend more highly a very readable commentary on Proverbs other than Derek Kidner's. Here's what he says.

“Many are the reminders, however, that even the best training cannot instill wisdom. It can only encourage its work.” We cannot instill wisdom in our children. We can only encourage it. And it’s their choice to seek it.

Kidner says, “a son may be too opinionated to learn, Proverbs 13:1. A good home actually may produce an idle child, Proverbs 10:5, or it may produce a child of profligacy.” There’s a big word. “Proverbs 29:3. A child may rebel even enough to despise or mock their parents, Proverbs 15:20. They even may curse their parents, Proverbs 30:11. A child may run heartless through all of their money, Proverbs 28:24. Even to turn a widowed mother out of their doors, Proverbs 19:26.” And here’s what he says. “While there are parents who have only themselves to thank for their shame, it is ultimately man himself who must bear his own blame for it is his attitude towards wisdom and his consent he gives to wisdom that will shape his life.”

We bear responsibility, but not ultimate responsibility. And if you are a child of very bad parents, it is never a license to throw off wisdom. We can choose how to respond to the gospel and the call to wisdom even if our parents did not teach us.

But also, parents, if you have loved your children well and you’ve cared for them and you’ve taught them our holy faith, it is ultimately by God’s grace alone working in them by their own consent and choice that they must take up that wisdom. And we must return authority to them and say, this is up to you. I’ve done everything that I can do.

That is hard to do. And I remember when we first had Caroline, one of our dear friends in our church in New Jersey said, Randy, one’s capacity to be a parent, I have found, is one’s willingness to live with your heart outside of your chest planted firmly outside your sleeve. How much can you stand for your heart to be hurt and hurt very easily? And we want our children to avoid foolishness. We want them to trust in the Lord. We want them to walk in faith and trust. Lord, help us all to do this relationally.

And I want to say this to fathers, to sons. I stand before you not because my parents taught me the faith. My parents did not. I knew they believed Jesus. It was sort of a cultural thing in the south. But they never taught me the ways of the faith. But I stand before you only because God’s grace so worked, whether my father realized it or not. I know this, that even when I was rebelling against them, I never left the house without my father telling me he loved me. And he hugged me regularly.

You have to figure that out, fathers. But if your sons don’t know that you love them and don’t know what it’s like to receive a male hug that is unconditional, many of them grow up to be adults that don’t know how to give it. And they’re longing for connection.

While my parents were imperfect, yet I can say I always knew where I stood with my parents. Some of you who are familiar with my story, I will say that it was God’s grace that while they did not teach me the faith, they gave me a relationship of love and unconditional love that set the stage for what God’s Spirit would do. Parenting is relational before it’s instructive.

It’s also that the wise parent is provoked before they were offended. So, again, when it says here in verse 6, to “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it,” this whole language of 22:6 brings to mind all that happens in the first nine chapters of Proverbs where in very graphic detail the father is explaining to his son - and we need to understand that has broad application for sons and daughters, mothers and sons, mothers and daughters - it is very clear that those parents were provoked before they were offended.

What in the world do I mean by that? My friend Mike Metzger said a number of years ago the following. He says, “When confronted with the corruption of the world, Christians ought to be provoked to engage, not offended and withdrawn.” To train up a child requires that we are provoked to know what is happening in the world and to resist offence, but to see it as an opportunity to teach our children how

to operate in the world as it is as a sinner guided by wisdom and learning how to navigate all of the gray and not just the black and the white, not just the good and evil.

But how do we navigate the gray? And how do you see the world? If you think about the word “provoke,” when God was provoked in the Old Testament, God was never offended. He was provoked to the point of intervention. He got involved. He came down. He made Himself known sometimes in wrath, sometimes in love. But He always reminded them that He was the Lord. And even when He was provoked to response, it was never to go back up into heaven and go, well, I’m just not going to worry about that. I’m just going to pretend as though it’s not happening. No. He got involved.

The same is the case with Jesus. When Jesus was provoked in the temple, when Jesus was provoked by His disciples, what did He do? He didn’t go up into a room by himself and close it off. And I recognize I’m simplifying here. He didn’t just go off by himself and be offended that, oh my goodness, the disciples treated me in such a horrible way, or these people are responding in the complete opposite way than I expected. What did he do? He was provoked to being involved. He knew what was in the heart of man. He knew it, and yet He still entered into it.

And so, what I mean to say is the following. As you see the world, as you and I see the world, let’s think of it as a giant glass window, and you and I are sitting at our collective kitchen tables. And every day, we come to that kitchen table and we look out into the world, and there’s this glass pane. I choose this metaphor because of the following illustration given to us by Eugene Peterson. He said,

“Imagine yourself moving into a house with a huge picture window overlooking a grand view across a wide expansive water enclosed by a range of snow-capped mountains. Several times a day, you interrupt your work and stand before the window to take in the majesty and the beauty.

“One afternoon, you notice some bird droppings on the window glass. You get a bucket of water and a towel, and you clean it. Another day, visitors come with a tribe of small dirty-fingered children. The moment they leave, you see all the smudge marks on the glass. They’re hardly out of the door before you have the bucket out.

“Keeping that window clean develops into an obsessive neurosis. You accumulate ladders and buckets and squeegees. You construct a scaffolding both inside and out to make it possible to get all of the difficult corners and heights. And you have the cleanest window in North America.

“But it’s now been years since you ever looked through it. Welcome. You’ve just become a Pharisee.”

What’s wrong with the world that often causes us to be offended is the very same sin that operates inside our hearts as parents. And instead of first responding in offense, we learn to be provoked. And to train a child means we are training them for what, exactly? It’s not just that we’re giving them the content of our doctrine of our Bibles and the content of our faith and how we understand the outworkings of the gospel. We are also training them how to take that and to walk with it in a world that looks nothing like the gospel.

But are we teaching them that the problem is out there? Or are we teaching them that the reality is the problem is in here in our own hearts? And that by leaning into that which often seems to offend us, but we lean into it with provocation, we actually seek to engage it so that we can train our children to be involved and to interact and to think.

I am mindful of this whole calling of training up a child in this modern day. And of course, as a pastor, I’m preaching so I get to speak from my own experience. I’m in that college phase. Our daughter

is a freshman in college. And we knew it was coming. Many of you, college is coming, or it's already here, or for many of you it's already passed.

But there's also this reality of what have we been preparing our children for? Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up A Generation for Failure* has outlined two things when it comes to being provoked over offense that we must be aware of. First, in our desire to protect our children, have we given them overprotection? In other words, if we're responding to the world in offense, then what we're teaching them is to have a reactive response to that which they see in the world as opposed to a proactive one leaning into what's happening in the world.

I remember as Caroline was growing up - and this is insight into our conversations - she very quickly became very conservative politically as well as in her faith so much so that it might have been on one hand, woohoo, she's done it. But what I saw was the possibility that if we didn't lean into this reality, that she was going to be in trouble. Even though she could with great gusto defend some of her ideas and her passions, what I saw in fact was the following. If we did not teach her to learn the wisdom behind her zeal, she's also going to meet the zeal of someone on the other side of that argument that if we did not greet her with opposing arguments that were also refined, then her belief system would buckle under the refined argument of someone she might meet in college. It doesn't mean that she won't keep to her beliefs, but just simply having the right ideas or the right beliefs, I needed her to understand that that's great. But how will you answer this?

It's easy to want to protect our children against that which we find offensive which even they may find offensive. But there in line falls with what Jonathan Haidt calls one of the three bad ideas that has led to our overprotection of our children.

It goes something like this. "Number one, what doesn't kill me makes me weaker." Do you hear that? "What doesn't kill me makes me weaker." What does he mean? If I'm exposed to that with which I disagree, I will be harmed. We are not fragile. Our children are not fragile. But unless we teach them how to engage with those who believe completely opposite of what we believe or practice, then their belief system will buckle because there are people out there who are far more eloquent in defending the opposite of what we say we believe than our children are. Are we preparing them? Are we training them in more than just content? Are we preparing them to be engaged?

The second idea that is killing and in many ways hurting our children is to always trust your feelings. There's this notion that if somebody says something that I'm offended at, then that's the problem. And oftentimes, that's how we respond to each other. We often want to blame somebody else or some other thing for the reason we feel the way we do. What we are forgetting is that in fact, absolutely no one or no idea ever makes you and I feel anything. Our feelings are a response and a response by which we have agency. Now, we may not realize we're responding the way we are. But that means we might be living an unexamined life.

But if our children believe that someone has said something and made them feel awful, if we allow them to rest in that or if we respond in that way, then what we're saying is I don't have agency over my feelings; other people do. And therefore, we will succumb to the next person who offends us.

The third idea that is actually very unhelpful in how we coddle our children is that life is a battle between good people and evil people. It's that somehow, we live in this world, and there's the good, the "us," and the "them." There's the good and there's the evil. And if we sense that our children believe that or are growing up into that, then we're not preparing them to swim in all that is gray in the world. In fact, all that is gray in you and me. In fact, there aren't good people and evil people. We are all human beings made in the image of God, and we are sinners desperately in need of redemption and restoration. And my own emotions never reflect purely good or purely evil. There's a whole lot of mixed in between.

And so, are we enabling our children to respond to the world not being offending but learning to be provoked, to avoid some of these really bad ideas that actually make us and them far more susceptible to some really bad things that are happening on today's college campuses? Everybody's afraid to say something for fear that it might offend somebody else. Professors are afraid. Students are afraid.

And what's interesting is that in their research, what they have noticed is that since 2010, persons age 12-17 who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year has gone up nearly 20 to 25 percent. Secondly, sadly, the reality is the suicide per 100,000 between the ages of 15 and 19 have also gone up nearly 25 percent since 2010. Why is this?

The researchers were from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health. But this is the point that Jonathan Haidt is pointing out. That in our desire to coddle our children actually in some ways doesn't equip them, doesn't train them. We might have the right content, but they don't know how to engage with it in the world that looks and believes very differently. And so, many of our children feel alone, feel disconnected from each other, feel disconnected from us. And there is a crisis of loneliness. And when people feel lonely, they are desperate. Social media has played a part, but social media isn't the only source.

The realities are when we look out through this big glass pane, there is a beautiful world made by God that has been marred by sin, but that sin didn't start out there. It began in here. And as we train our children, are we preparing them to see an "us" versus "them" world, to protect them from that which might be offensive? How are we training them and preparing them to move into the world?

This is the whole point of James 1 when he says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask for it. And God gives without partiality." We'll be looking at this next week. So, as we pray for our children, as we ask for wisdom as parents, as we pray for our children to have wisdom, we begin to see by God's grace that we have an intricate role to play, relational before instructive, provoked before offended.

But I end with this. Where we begin with our children and where we will be with them for the rest of our lives and their lives is we will always be their parents. And it will always, always be a new day where we can respond with the gospel to them and to those around us. Why is that?

It is because at the heart of our faith, we have a heavenly Father who had every right to be provoked with such wrath that none of us would see the light of day. But in His mercy and His grace and in the mystery of the wisdom of God, He has borne us into the world, and He's blessed many of us with children. And what a glorious mess it is. But at the center of that faith is a God of mercy who has borne us into the world who has also said, instead of being provoked to the point of wrath which you deserve, I gave of my Son who is provoked to the point of going to the cross, and I will pour out my wrath on Him.

You see, at the center of our faith is a God who's not offended because He's not surprised with what's in the heart of man. But knowing it, He came to us. We who are sinners who rest upon Jesus Christ alone who have children, who have had children, or who maybe one day will have children, by God's grace, it begins, is guided by, and will always end with this one reality. We cannot do it without realizing that God in His provocation loved us and died for us and has given us a word of truth that enables us to navigate the gray of life. And we do so imperfectly. But by His Spirit and word, we learn how to love our children as we have been loved. We forgive them as we have been forgiven.

This is our calling. And what a high calling it is. We are all a work in progress. Our children, whether they are 55 or they're 5 months old, are all a work in progress. And absolutely none of them are beyond God's grace. As long as we are called mother or father, may the Spirit begin to work in us what it looks like to be the wise parent. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for what you've called us to do. And we acknowledge at the outset, or we acknowledge in the middle of it, or we acknowledge even if we are empty-nesters, Lord, we get this wrong all the time. And we need your mercy. We need your forgiveness and we need your grace. So, we ask you, O Lord, that you would enable us then by your word to train up

our children, to love them, to respect them, to honor them. But also, to train them and prepare them for the world that they will enter into. And as long as it is called today, you give us the ability because it is today, and we still have life and breath in our lungs that today, we can talk to our children, we can call our children, and we can say, I love you because I have been loved. Do this in us. Restore relationships where they need to be restored. Bring forgiveness and reconciliation which only you can do. Bring peace where there needs to be peace. Tame our tongues, O Lord. And bring a harvest of good fruit because you are in it. It is in the might name of Jesus we pray. Amen.