

Proverbs-Ray Pritchard

Studies in Proverbs by Ray Pritchard

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The ABC's of Wisdom: Building Character with Solomon - Introduction

Almost everyone agrees that we are living in a day of moral and cultural confusion. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett says that it is almost as if our society has conspired to make it impossible for our children to grow up as decent, moral individuals. He argues that if we want to improve our nation, we must once again dedicate ourselves to the hard work of inculcating virtue in the lives of our children. We must teach them about things like justice, humility, honesty, hard work, thrift, self-control, kindness, and perseverance.

But William Bennett is not the only one saying these things. Newsweek magazine recently published a cover story titled "The New

Virtue-Crats.” The lead article reported that 76 percent of all Americans surveyed agree that our nation is in a serious moral and spiritual decline. Although we can argue about why it happened or even about how it happened, the fact itself seems to be beyond debate. Somewhere, somehow, we as a people lost the concept of character and virtue.

Chuck Colson argues that for the first time in our history we have raised an entire generation of young people who have no conscience. Since their parents had no solid moral foundation, they had nothing to pass along to their children. As a result, many young people today do not know the difference between right and wrong.

As a result of losing the concept of absolute standards, we have entered what Newsweek calls “the age of enlightenment skepticism,” where it’s OK for you, but not OK for me; it’s right for you, but not right for me; wrong for you, but not wrong for me; you’ve got your way and I’ve got my way. But if there are no absolute standards, then dishonesty is just as good as honesty, hatred is just as noble as compassion, and laziness is as commendable as hard work.

If America is going to change, the hearts of people have to change one by one. That can only happen as Christians begin to live by moral standards that truly are not of this world. As we face an increasingly skeptical society, we must consciously demonstrate a superior kind of ethical behavior, for we can preach all we want, but until others see the difference incarnated in us, it will be all talk, just another Sunday morning sermon.

All that I have written so far may sound rather gloomy-and indeed there are dark clouds on the national horizon. But here is where the good news begins. If virtue is what we need, then I know where we can go to find it. Three thousand years ago the wisest man who ever lived (with the exception of Jesus Himself) wrote down the fundamental principles of moral behavior that have informed Jewish and Christian thinking ever since. In fact, those truths laid the foundation for what we know today as Western civilization.

I am speaking of the ancient book of Proverbs. King Solomon wrote most of the book. It was evidently intended to be an ancient Book of Virtues for the young people of his day. It represents the distilled wisdom of the ages. His sentences are direct and to the point. He never uses three words when two will do. He doesn’t preach in the normal sense of that word, nor does he threaten. In hundreds of pithy sayings he sets forth the basic principles of moral behavior.

In this book we are going to take a look at one hundred areas of moral and spiritual concern. You should know right up front that this is not a commentary on Proverbs. It is instead a practical handbook for virtuous living based on the sayings of Solomon.

One final note and we’re ready to begin. Please don’t feel compelled to read this book straight through. Actually, I hope you won’t do that. You’ll get the greatest benefit from reading one section at a time and pondering the questions at the end. The sections are arranged alphabetically to make it easy to find the topics of greatest interest to you.

This book is not really about children or even for children. But I do believe that the up-and-coming generation needs to heed these words. For that matter, we could all benefit from some practical, down-to-earth teaching about what is right and what is wrong and how to treat the people we meet every day.

For a world that has lost its way, God wrote a book to bring us back to reality. If you’re interested in learning how life is supposed to work, turn the page, and let’s get started.

PROVERBS 1

Proverbs 1:1-7 Diary of a Wise Old Man

August 1994 – We are beginning a new sermon series. In order to get it off on the right foot, I’d like to ask you to take your Bible and turn with me to Proverbs 1:1-7. The title of this series is Street Smarts, a Handy Guide to Streetwise Living. If you want a theme text for this sermon series, Proverbs 1:20-21 says this. “Wisdom calls aloud in the street. She raises her voice in the public squares. At the head of the noisy streets she cries out. In the gateways of the city she makes her speech.” Wisdom cries from the streets. What we want to do in the following sermons is get street smart. There is church smart, there is book smart, there is school smart, and then there is street smart.

As I begin, I want to make a little exhortation. I want to encourage you to open your Bible every time you’re reading one of these sermons. These sermons will not be nearly as helpful to you without your Bible. This will be really practical, nitty-gritty, not much theory, right down where you live, right where the rubber meets the road. I want you to follow along with me in your Bible because most of the sermons will not be like this one. This one will be just in this one passage. But most of the sermons in this series will

take you all over the book of Proverbs, putting verses together, and you will be lost without your Bible.

I imagine that many of you know who William Bennett is. During the Reagan-Bush years he was the Secretary of Education. After that he was the drug czar. After that he resigned from government and went into private consulting practice and began making speeches and writing columns around the country. He became moderately well known. However, about eight or nine months ago, possibly a year ago, his name burst on the national scene in a big way because of a book—a book that he didn't write. It's a book that he basically edited, an anthology of stories, short stories, poems, and sayings put together by him called *The Book of Virtues*. It's a great book. It's thick, over 700 pages long, and you wouldn't think that a hard back book that long would be a best seller. This week it's on the Best Seller list. It's been on the list ever since the day it was released. It has sold over 1,000,000 copies, at about \$20-25 a copy.

What's in the book? Why is it a best seller? Basically, it is a book of stories arranged around nine virtues or characteristics of a good or wise or virtuous person. There are a whole bunch of stories about hard work, perseverance, courage, compassion, faith, and several others. In those sections there are famous poems and short stories that illustrate what the virtue of perseverance, or compassion, or faith, or hard work looks like in real life. It is interesting that out of all the things that are being sold today, this thick book should be a best seller.

William Bennett wrote an article in the September 1994 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. The article is entitled "How to Teach Children Values". This is the first sentence. "We live in an era that almost seems dedicated to the corruption of the young, to assuring the loss of children's innocence before their time." Then he goes on to give some statistics in the very first paragraph. He says, "Since 1960, there has been more than a 500% increase in violent crime, more than a 400% increase in out of wedlock births, tripling of the percentage of children living in single parent homes, tripling of the teenage suicide rate, doubling of the divorce rate, a drop of almost 75 points in the SAT scores of our students. In comparison with the other nations of the industrialized world, the U.S. ranks at or near the top in the rate of abortion, divorce and unwed births. We lead the industrialized world in murder, rape and violent crime. Intelligent public policy can address some of our plights, but we need to recognize that many of the problems afflicting society today are moral problems, and therefore, remarkably resistant to government cures."

"After much debate they passed the great crime bill up in Washington—\$30,000,000,000 of anti-crime legislation. I know that it has been very controversial. After it was passed, the President said, 'This is going to make every home and every street in America a safer place.' I hope and pray that is the truth. But do you feel any safer today? Do you think the streets of your town are going to be measurably different because they passed this huge crime bill in Washington D.C.? I'm not making a political statement at this point. I am just saying that if you really want to get to the root problem of crime, you're not going to solve it in Washington, D.C. That's probably the worst place in all of America to solve that problem. The real answer to the perils of our times is that we simply must become more civilized, and the best way to become more civilized is to inculcate virtue in our children. We must pay attention to something that every civilized society has given great importance: instilling in our children some real traits of character. Traits like honesty, compassion, courage, perseverance, altruism and fidelity to one's commitments."

Bennett is not the only one saying that. Even such a liberal icon as *Newsweek Magazine* came out about with it two months ago, on June 13, 1994, in their cover story. This is what really got my mind moving toward this sermon series. There was a painting of three pictures on the cover—Hillary Clinton, Bill Bennett and Peggy Noon. Underneath the picture it said, "The new virtue-crats." Not aristocrats, but virtue-crats, holding up those three people who are calling for our nation to return to the teaching of what we used to call old fashioned character and is now called virtue, those traits that Bill Bennett was just talking about. If you read the article, it says that there has been a fraying of the moral fabric of America, that in American today we no longer believe anything is right, we no longer believe anything is wrong, therefore we're not sure what's virtuous and what's not virtuous. The article quotes a survey from this year in which 76% of all Americans surveyed said that America is in a serious moral and spiritual decline. That's three out of four. (I want to ask what's wrong with the other 24%!) All you have to do is walk out the door or turn on the TV or read the newspaper or go to a public school or go to a modern office place, and you will see what's wrong with America today. We have lost the concept of character and virtue.

Have you ever heard that five minute program on the radio by Chuck Colson called "Turning Point"? It's sort of a commentary. He had a word about this a few weeks ago. He said that America now has gone down to such a point that we basically have done something that has never happened in the whole history of America. Because we have moved away from a moral spiritual foundation, we have now at the end of the 20th century, for the first time raised an entire generation of young people who have no conscience. He said we have a whole generation of teenagers, pre-teens and young adults who have no conscience because their parents have no sense of morality or right and wrong. Since the parents had nothing, they had nothing to pass along to their teenagers. So we are raising a group of young people today who know not the difference between what is right and what is wrong.

Tony Evans, preaching on the same subject, made this observation. The situation in the American cities is this. If you are walking down the street late in the day and you are by yourself and you see a group of teenager kids coming down the street toward you,

they are laughing and goofing off and talking, it doesn't matter the race involved, black, white, Asian or Hispanic, if you're by yourself and you see a group of kids you don't know coming down toward you, your first thought is, I'd better cross the street, because I don't know what these teenagers are going to do. That is why here in Oak Park people are scared to walk the streets. That is why on Harrison Street they are scared. That's why they have the parents patrolling Riem Park this summer. We have raised a generation without a moral conscience.

What is virtue? A virtue is a universally agreed-upon standard of moral and ethical behavior, like honesty, like compassion. Bill Bennett is right. If we want to change America, what we have to do is go back to the basics, back to things like character and virtue. What has really happened all around us is that our society has lost the concept of absolute standards. We are now living in what Newsweek calls the "age of enlightenment skepticism," where it's OK for you, but not OK for me; it's right for you, but not right for me; wrong for you, but not wrong for me; you've got your way and I've got my way. There are no standards of absolute right and wrong. But if there are no absolute standards, then dishonesty is just as good as honesty and hatred is just as good as compassion and laziness is just as good as hard work. That's what happens to a society that loses the concept of what's right and what's wrong. If America is going to change, the hearts of people have to change one by one. I think if things in this area on the western side of Chicago are going to change, we have to see a group of people who are living changed lives. We have to see people who hold a different moral standard and values and different kinds of ethical behavior, because we can preach all we want to, but until they see the difference incarnated in us, it will just be talk, another Sunday morning sermon.

So what I want to do in this sermon series is really simple. I wish I had a pulpit to speak to the whole nation, but I don't. I want to address the inculcation of character and virtue—Street Smart—learning what God has said about what is right and wrong. Practical, down to earth teaching about what is right and what is wrong, and how you ought to treat people and how you ought to live, how your behavior ought to be different if you call yourself a believer in Jesus Christ. For a world that has lost its way, God wrote a book to bring us back. That book is called Proverbs. We don't often preach on it because its an unusual book. We don't often do a lot of sermons from this book, but we're going to be in Proverbs for several sermons. We are going to study what it has to say, learning its principles, trying to become different people so we can make a difference when we go out into the world.

I begin now in Proverbs 1. "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel." If I could say anything about the Book of Proverbs by way of introduction, I think it would be this. I would give you these three words about the book of Proverbs. #1. The Book of Proverbs is practical and down to earth. #2. The Book of Proverbs is timeless. Though it was written 3000 years ago, it speaks to us today. #3. It is amazingly relevant. By the way, the word Proverbs itself in the Latin comes from Pro-verb, and it means in place of words or in place of speaking. What is a proverb? It is a short statement that encapsulates wisdom. In just a few short words it says something that would otherwise take a long sermon to get across. For example: a stitch in time saves nine; a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise; trust in the Lord with all thine heart, lean not onto thine own understanding; in all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths; train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it. Those are proverbs. They are short sayings that take the place of a long explanation. They are practical, timeless, relevant. They will teach you street smart living.

Proverbs are principles, not promises. They tell you how life is supposed to work. Proverbs are short sayings that teach us how to live life skillfully from God's point of view. Having said that, let's jump in and look at the four benefits that God promises to you and me from studying this book.

1) You will learn the art of skillful living.

"Wisdom and discipline." The word for wisdom is "hokma" in the Hebrew. It refers not just to head knowledge or even just heart knowledge. Actually, hokma in the Old Testament was used for anybody who had an unusual skill in any area. For instance, if an artisan was excellent at making something, he was said to have hokma. A composer who could take notes and put them together and make beautiful music was said to be skilled and to have hokma. A person who was a great speaker and who could make his ideas clear was said to have hokma. If he was a good counselor, if he could solve the problems of people, he was said to have hokma. It means to be skilled in some area of life. When you take that definition and apply it to Proverbs 1, wisdom is the ability to live life skillfully from God's point of view. That is, you'll be good at living your life, at facing the problems of life, at handling whatever comes your way.

2) You'll gain mental alertness.

This is something some of us need. Verse 2 says, "For understanding words of insight." The word understanding means the ability to discriminate between two different things. Look at verse 6, "For understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise." By reading this book you'll be sharper mentally than you are right now.

3) You'll develop moral insight.

Look at verse 3, "For acquiring a disciplined and prudent life." The word prudent means shrewd and clever. I don't like that because

shrewd and clever kind of shade over into the negative area, but in the Hebrew they have a positive sense in this verse. It means street smart. It means that when you're out on the street you know how to handle yourself. If you have a problem, you know how to get out of it. A person who has prudence is clever and shrewd in the ways of the world. He knows how to do things that need to be done. He defines it here. He says, "Doing what is right and just and fair." So it's not just how to do things, but how to do things that are right and just and fair.

4) You begin to grow up.

"For giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. Let the wise listen and add to their learning. Let the discerning get guidance." Notice the two groups in verse 4. There are the simple and there are the young. Who are the simple? It does not refer to I.Q. It does not refer to mental ability in any way at all. In the Bible, the word simple refers to people who are naive or gullible. What are the signs that a person is naive or gullible? They are easily tricked, they are a sucker for a sob story, they are easily conned and scammed. They have "SUCKER" written all over their face. And they make the same dumb mistakes over and over again. Sometimes you talk to people and they ask for help. You tell them what went wrong and what they need to do. They agree to do it. But they go out and make the same mistake. They come back and ask what they did wrong. You tell them what they did wrong and tell them what they need to do. They go out and make the same dumb mistake again. And you go through the process again. They get into the same bad relationships over and over again. They make the same bad investments over and over again. They say the same foolish things over and over, they hurt their friends the same way, they make promises they break, they start out trying to do something but they bite off more than they can chew and they have to back off over and over again. Maybe you know somebody like that, or maybe you are like that. This book will teach you how to break the cycle of making the same mistakes over and over again. It will teach you how to get on the right path.

Who are the young? In the biblical sense, the young are people who aren't old. So who is old? The Bible talks a lot about old people. It talks about the wisdom of the aged and the crown of grey hair being the crown of the godly. That means this: if you follow the Lord from the time you're young, by the time you're old you'll be wise. You may start off foolish, simple and gullible, but by the end you'll be prudent and disciplined and wise. It's not chronological, but by the time you're 40 or 50 you ought to have some street smarts. There is no excuse for being gullible when you're 45. There are gullible 45-year olds all over the place, people in mid life crises and all that. There is no excuse for it. You ought to wise up and start living the way God says you ought to live. It is not a matter of age, because I have known some 75-year olds who are really quite gullible. They are making the same mistakes they made when they were 25. It's not strictly chronological, but the older you get, the wiser you ought to become. When you are young, you just don't know enough yet, you haven't lived enough, you haven't seen enough of life yet to be really experienced in street smarts.

How young is young? Let's say 30 years. You're young if you're under 30, because in the Old Testament you had to be 30 to become a priest. If you're under 20, you're a child. There is no such category as teenager in the Old Testament. You're a child, then you're a young adult, then you're an adult. If you are young, you really need this book. And the younger you are, the more you need the book, not because of any reason other than when you're young you haven't had enough experience to know what life is really all about. That's why this book is here—to help the young know how to grow up morally, ethically, and spiritually.

Now we come to verse 7, which is really the climax of this whole first passage. Verse 7 is the theme of the book of Proverbs. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." Let's take the last part of the verse first. "Fools despise wisdom and discipline." There are about five different words in the book of Proverbs that are translated by the word fool. So when you see the word fool you have to find out what the Hebrew word is because they all have different meanings. There is the young fool, the naive fool, the gullible fool, the angry fool and so on. And there is the arrogant, stubborn, hard-headed fool who will not listen to anybody's advice. That's the word used here. It's the most extreme form of the word.

Here is a two-way test to spot a fool. #1 A fool doesn't know what he is doing. #2 He doesn't care. He doesn't know what is going on around him, and he doesn't even care enough to wise up and figure it out. There is nothing wrong with saying, "I don't know." The wise man has to say that all the time. "I don't know, would you teach me?" "I don't know, I'd like to learn." "I don't know, can you help me?" But the fool says "I don't know, I don't care, I don't want to learn anything and you can't teach me anything."

Now let's look at the beginning of the verse, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The most important word here is "beginning". It has three meanings. #1 It means that which is first in order of priorities, that which is basic or foundational. #2 The essence or central truth of something. #3 The capstone or the ultimate goal of something. What is the fear of the Lord? It is not cringing terror. It is respecting God for who he is. It is understanding that God is God and you are not. The fear of the Lord is to bow the knee before Almighty God and acknowledge that he made the world and that it runs according to his plan. Respect for God is where knowledge begins, it is where knowledge continues, and it is where all knowledge ends up.

Let me give you my three conclusions.

#1 The road of wisdom leads to a temple, not to a palace. It leads back to God. If your learning leads you away from God, you're

learning the wrong things. If your learning leads you toward greater independence from God and his word, you have been studying at the feet of the wrong teachers, because all true learning begins with the understanding that there is a God to whom all of us must one day give an account.

#2 All education that leaves God out omits the central principle of the universe. Did you know that our public school system was founded 150 years ago by people who, if they were not practicing Christians, at least believed in Judeo-Christian principles and the truth of the Bible as the foundation for all learning? Go back and look it up. The public school system of America was founded on those biblical principles. That is why if you go back to the 19th century and read the McGuffey Readers, when they wanted to teach the ABC's it was "A—All have sinned," "B—believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," "C—confess your sins and you will be forgiven." All education was based on basically biblical foundations.

It occurred to me what would happen up here at this high school where my son just enrolled as a freshman if a teacher stood up the first day of class and said, "Because I am a Christian, I am going to teach you from the standpoint of the Christian faith. I am going to let my Christian faith influence all of my instruction. I am going to be up front about it. You don't have to believe what I believe, but I am not going to hide my Christian faith any longer. I am going to teach you everything I teach you, whether it's math or geography or algebra or English or world history or cultural diversity, I'm going to teach it to you from the standpoint of the Christian faith because I believe that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." How long would that teacher last? The students love the protest over the firing of left wing teachers. How much would they protest over that?

Down in Georgia this very week there is a big dispute over the so-called moment of silence. There are teachers who don't even want to do the moment of silence. Is it any wonder, brothers and sisters, that our young people have no conscience? When you take God out of the equation, there is no basis for a moral conscience. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When you take God out of the process, you are teaching them numbers, reading, writing and arithmetic, but you're not teaching them the most important thing in all the universe, that there is a God and that he has spoken and that his word is true.

I thank God for every Christian teacher. Those people in public schools have my 100% undivided support. One of the ladies of our church just this year started teaching down at Cicero. She came up and said, "Pastor, you have to read this article. It will shock you." Not much shocks me anymore. I folded it up and put it in my pocket. She said this to me, "You can't even believe or understand what is going on in the public schools." I support every coach, every teacher, every faculty and staff member, every administration official, and I say God bless you. You are missionaries. I am totally behind the Christian School, but I am totally behind the teachers and workers and students who are in the public schools. I had one of our teachers say to me a few weeks ago, "You know, I can't say I'm a Christian, really. But at least I can wear my cross...until they tell me I can't wear that."

Chuck Colson is right. When you take God out of society, away from the educational system, what you get is chaos. That's what we have in America today. No crime bill, no educational bill, no bureaucratic solution can solve that problem until we come back to what God said was the answer 3000 years ago. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." I believe in education. I attended three colleges and four graduate schools of theology. I have a Bachelors degree, a Masters degree, and an earned Doctors degree. There is nobody in here who believes in the value of education more than I do. But if you have a PhD in some field, but you don't have the fear of the Lord, what you have is an intellectual genius and a spiritual moron. If you have all the book learning and all the degrees but don't have the fear of the Lord, you would be better to be an illiterate reader of the Bible who at least believes in God. I am in favor of education that also bows the knee before Jesus Christ. If you have to make a choice, choose the fear of the Lord, because without it you're still in spiritual kindergarten. Without the fear of the Lord you may be an intellectual giant but you are a moral and spiritual pygmy.

#3. God honors those who build their lives on the unshakeable foundation of his unchanging truth. I believe that. I encourage you to do it.

I want to give a closing challenge to four groups of people.

#1 My challenge to the young.

If you're under 30, you're young. I want you to come and learn and listen. I am preaching these sermons for you first, for the young generation. I am preaching to my three boys, wherever they are. How many times does Proverbs say, "My son, listen; my son, my son, my son."

#2 My challenge to the parents or grandparents.

Listen and then pass on what you learn.

#3 My challenge to the men of the congregation.

Let me tell you what that Newsweek article said back in June, from a non-Christian perspective. The article said that one of the

problems about teaching virtue is we've left it to the women. We have women in Sunday School, women in the church, women doing all the teaching in public school. Newsweek said men have to learn virtue and they have to begin to teach it.

This week Newsweek again wrote an article, this time about Promise Keepers. It was a good article. At the very end, quoting what they called the "pastor of a biker church" in Las Vegas on the importance of men in spiritual leadership, this is what he said, "My grandmother was a praying woman. My granddaddy was a fishing man. It has been that way as long as I can remember. It's not going to change as long as the women do the praying and the men do the fishing. It's time for the men to do the praying and the teaching and for men to develop virtue and character and become spiritual leaders in their homes, in the churches, in their places of work, in the school and in our society. It's not going to change until we men make it change." Brothers, it has to start with you and me. There is nothing wrong with the women. They have never been the problem. It's always been us. When we change, our families will change. When we change, our churches will change. When we change, the world around us will change. So men, rise up and take seriously the call to be men of character.

#4 My challenge to all of us.

Pay attention to what God is saying; listen to his word. If you don't know where else to begin in applying this sermon, let's do what Billy Graham does. For over 50 years Billy Graham has had a special practice in his devotional life. There are 31 days in the month, and there are 31 chapters in the book of Proverbs. For 50+ years, Billy Graham has read one chapter a day of the book of Proverbs. If you don't know where else to begin with this sermon, start right here. Let's go back to God's word and let's get Street Smart.

Proverbs 1:7a FEAR OF THE LORD Where Knowledge Begins

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Proverbs 1:7a

The most important word in this verse is beginning. It has three meanings: (1) that which is first in order of priorities; (2) the essence or central truth of something; (3) the capstone, or the crowning achievement, of something. What is the fear of the Lord? It is not cringing in terror. It is respecting God for who He is. It is understanding that God is God and you are not. Those who fear the Lord bow their knees before almighty God and acknowledge that He made the world and runs it according to His plan. Respect for God is where knowledge begins, where knowledge continues, and where all knowledge ends.

Let's consider three implications of this truth. *First, the road of wisdom leads to a temple, not to a palace.* It leads back to God. If your learning leads you away from God, you're learning the wrong things. If your learning leads you toward greater independence from God and His Word, you have been studying at the feet of the wrong teachers. All true learning begins with the understanding that there is a God to whom all of us must one day give an account.

Second, all education that leaves God out omits the central principle of the universe. Suppose a high school teacher stood up on the first day of class and said, "Because I am a Christian, I am going to teach you from the standpoint of the Christian faith. I am going to let my Christian faith influence all of my instruction. I am going to be up front about it. You don't have to believe what I believe, but I am not going to hide my Christian faith. Everything I teach you—whether it's math or geography or algebra or English or world history—will start from the standpoint of the Christian faith because I believe that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." How long would that teacher last? Yet any education that doesn't begin precisely at that point can hardly be called education at all, for the fear of the Lord is the foundation of all true learning.

Third, education without God produces intellectual giants and moral pygmies. Chuck Colson is right. When you take God away from the educational system, what you get is chaos. No crime bill, no educational bill, no bureaucratic solution can solve that problem until we come back to what God said three thousand years ago: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." If you have four advanced degrees but don't have the fear of the Lord, you would be better off as an uneducated reader of the Bible who at least believes in God. I am in favor of education that bows the knee to Jesus Christ. If you have to make a choice, choose the fear of the Lord, for without it you're still in spiritual kindergarten.

Spirit of Truth, help me to know God so that through Him I might understand the universe He created. Amen.

Do you "fear the Lord"? What does that phrase mean to you?

How can Christian students and faculty members take their faith with them into the public school system?

Proverbs 1:10 TEMPTATION Just Say No

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. Proverbs 1:10

Playwright Oscar Wilde once jokingly remarked, "I can resist everything except temptation." We smile when we read those words because they speak an important truth about the human condition. Temptation pays a visit to each of us every day, and most of us struggle to say no.

Temptation is not new in any sense. Temptation is the same for us as it was for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan tempts us today in the same way he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. From the very beginning, a battle has raged for the souls of men and women, a battle that touches all of us sooner or later.

Think how many temptations you and I face in an ordinary day. Staying in bed late-the temptation to laziness. Dressing carelessly-the temptation to sloppiness. Growling at the breakfast table-the temptation to unkindness. Arguing over who should change the baby this time-the temptation to selfishness. Starting work ten minutes late-the temptation to slothfulness. Losing your temper when a co-worker crashes your computer- the temptation to impatience. Flirting with that good-looking woman, taking a second look at that good-looking man-the temptation to lust. Refusing to speak to a person who has hurt you-the temptation to malice. Repeating a juicy story of your neighbor's misfortune-the temptation to gossip. Taking a secret drink at a party- the temptation to drunkenness. Lying awake at night thinking sensual thoughts-the temptation to impurity. Taking your anger out on the children after a hard day- the temptation to cruelty. Going out to eat when you can't afford it-the temptation to self-indulgence. Having a second helping and then a third-the temptation to gluttony. Firing off a hasty letter to a friend who hurt you-the temptation to revenge.

It's important to remember that the issue is not the particular temptation we face but how we respond to it. God is able to use even the worst temptation to bring us to the place where we will begin to grow spiritually. When Joseph ran away from Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39), he ended up in jail, but the whole experience produced in him the strength of character that prepared him to become the second most important ruler in Egypt. Lest we miss the point, let's remember that temptation itself is not evil; only the act of yielding is sinful. When we resist, we actually grow stronger.

Not long ago a friend commented that during a tense exchange with her teenage daughter, she "bit her tongue" instead of blowing her top. Every temptation-whether large or small-requires a moment-by-moment decision. When your boss asks you to fudge the figures on the monthly financial report, you only have a few seconds to decide how to respond. When you are surfing the Internet and happen to run across a site filled with pornography, you must choose immediately whether or not you'll click the mouse button. Sometimes you truly will have to bite your tongue, and then bite it again to keep from sinning.

When temptation comes knocking at your door, just say no.

Lord, give me the strength to say no when temptation knocks at my door today. Amen.

Name the greatest areas of temptation in your life. Which ones are currently giving you the greatest difficulty?

How has the Lord demonstrated His power to help you overcome a particular temptation?

PROVERBS 3

Proverbs 3:5-6 When You Need to Know, You'll Know

October 2007 – "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

These two verses are among the most beloved in the entire Bible. You may have memorized them in Sunday school when you were a child. Or perhaps you made a cross-stitch pattern of these words and hung it on your wall. Or you may have learned to sing these words as part of a contemporary worship chorus. British Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan said that when he was leaving home for the first time, his father pressed a note into his hand. When Campbell Morgan unfolded it, he discovered it contained just one verse of Scripture: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Looking back years later, he noted that his father had written that verse with no accompanying comment. No comment, he said, except the comment of his father's godly life.

This text is striking in its simplicity. There is nothing difficult about it. It is so simple that it can be understood by the youngest believer, and yet it is a comfort to the oldest saint of God. And it is good for everyone in between. These words cling to the soul because they speak to a great need we all feel—the need for guidance. Proverbs 3:5-6 suggests the basis on which guidance will

come. It is a short course in knowing God's will for your life. If you learn what this passage is teaching and begin to apply it to your daily life, it will make a profound difference when you need to make a tough decision.

Five Key Words

I start with the assumption that some of us have known these verses for a long time. Sometimes when we know a passage so well, we almost know it too well. We have heard it so often that we have never stopped to think about what it is really saying. Not long ago I had a chance to study these verses in depth for the first time. As I did, I discovered that five key words unlock the message of this text. Let's take those key words one by one and see what each one teaches us.

Trust

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart." The word "trust" in Hebrew means "to lean with the full body," "to lay upon," "to rest the full weight upon." In our thinking the word trust means to rely upon or to have confidence in. But the Hebrew word is stronger. It has the idea of stretching yourself out upon a bed or resting on a hard surface. The word means to put your full weight on something. To trust in the Lord is to rest your whole weight upon him—to depend on him completely.

Lean

"Lean not on your own understanding." To "lean" means to rest upon something for partial support. Leaning is what you do when you walk with a cane or hold on to a walker because you are unsteady. This word is used for leaning against a tree or a stone cliff. You lean on something when you are not strong enough to stand alone.

Understanding

"Lean not on your own understanding." "Understanding" refers to the mental processes by which you analyze a problem, break it down into its smaller parts, and then make a decision about what you are going to do. Early in the morning when you make a list of all the things you have to do that day, you use your understanding to sort out your priorities. Or it's what you use on Sunday night when you map out the upcoming week. That's understanding. You use it any time you plan your life or solve a problem. Understanding is the decision-making ability that God has given you.

When you take the word "lean" and bring in the idea of "understanding," then add the negative, the meaning is something like this: "Use all your mental powers, but do not lean on them for total support." Don't trust in your own ability to figure out your life. Lean instead on the Lord! Rest your weight on Him!

Acknowledge

"In all your ways acknowledge him." This word deserves extra consideration because the word "acknowledge" can be hard to understand. In the Hebrew this word is an imperative—a command. You could translate this by saying, "In all your ways know him." The Hebrew word means to know deeply and intimately. It's the kind of knowing that comes with personal experience. It means to know something through and through. For instance, somebody might say, "Do you know the President of the United States?" I would say, "Sure, I know the President." If the President walked in the room, I would know who he is. If I heard his voice coming over the TV, I would recognize it. Or if I saw his picture on the front page of the newspaper, I would know it was the President. Now, I don't really know him. I can't pick up the phone and call the White House and say, "Mr. President, this is Ray Pritchard. Let's do lunch this week." He won't take my call because I don't know him personally. I just know him at the level of head knowledge. I don't know him intimately or on a friendship level.

There is another kind of knowing. My wife and I know each other in a completely different way. We've known each other intimately for over thirty years. After being together that long, strange things begin to happen. I will be sitting in the car thinking about a song—and she'll start singing it. How does that happen? I don't know. Or I will be thinking about a question, and before I can ask it, she'll blurt out the answer. How does she do that? I don't know. Or I'll start a sentence, and to my great consternation she will finish the sentence before I do. When I say, "How can you do that?" she says with a smile, "I know what you are thinking even before you say it." Things like that happen to all married couples eventually. When you live together for many years, you get to know each other at such a deep level that you actually begin to know what the other person is thinking even as he or she is thinking it. You know what your wife is going to say before she says it. You know what your husband is going to do before he does it. You have a deep, personal, intimate knowledge of each other.

Seen in that light, we might translate verse 5 this way: "In all your ways know God intimately ... deeply ... personally. When you know God that way in every area of your life, he will direct your paths."

Direct

"He will make your paths straight." That brings me to the fifth word, which in the King James Version is translated, "He shall direct

your paths.” That isn’t bad. But I think the ESV translation is a little better: “he will make straight your paths.” Imagine that you are driving along a road that appears to be impassable. The road winds through the mountains and down into the swamps. It seems to have a thousand switchbacks. As you travel on, you discover that portions of the road are washed out, others are filled with potholes, and still others are blocked by huge boulders. In some places the road apparently becomes a dead end. This is the road of your life. As you look at it, it appears to be covered with boulders and rocks. Some parts of it seem to be filled with potholes; other sections appear to be going nowhere. That’s the way life is.

Here is God’s message to you from Proverbs 3:5-6. If you will know God in every area of your life, he will take personal responsibility to make your way smooth and straight. He will remove the obstacles if they need to be removed. He will fill in the potholes if they need to be filled. He will redirect the detour so that what seemed to be a dead-end turns out to be the shortest way to reach your destination. All you have to do is trust in the Lord. Lay yourself completely on him for full support. Don’t lean for support on your own human understanding. In all your ways know God intimately. He will take the path of your life that seems to go up and down and around and sometimes seems to curve backwards, and He will make your way straight. That’s the promise of Almighty God to you.

Philip Yancey’s Definition

But it won’t always be easy or come quickly. For most of us, most of the time, the exact opposite will be true. Discovering God’s will takes times as the events of life unfold before us, often in ways that seem to make no sense at all. Rarely will we know the whole plan in advance. As I sit at my computer and ponder the course of my life over the last decade, I find it easier to recall the hard times than the good times. A very close friend died suddenly and without warning. Our youngest son went through a harrowing medical crisis seven years ago. Marlene was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer in 2005.

But that’s only one side of the ledger. In the last decade our three boys graduated from high school. Josh graduated from college, went to China, came back to America, married Leah, and now they are teaching English in China. Mark graduated from college, spent two years in China where he met Vanessa, and they got married after coming back to the States several months ago. Nick graduated from college last May and is now pursuing his master’s degree. I am blessed with a wife of amazing gifts who still loves me after thirty-three years of marriage. After serving many years in the pastorate, we felt led of God to start Keep Believing Ministries. My health is good. Marlene got an “all-clear” at the two-year mark of her breast cancer follow-up. So what do I have to complain about? Not much at all. Ten years ago I had no clue what the next decade would hold. Looking back, I’m happy that I didn’t know anything in advance.

My favorite definition of faith comes from Philip Yancey who said, “Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.” We want to know why things happen the way they do and why couldn’t things have happened some other way. It would be wrong to say that faith provides all the answers. It doesn’t. Perhaps in heaven we will fully understand, or in heaven our desire to know will be transformed by our vision of the Lord. By faith we see things that are invisible to others and by faith we believe in advance those things that right now make no sense but one day will make perfect sense because we will view them in reverse.

The world says, “Seeing is believing.” God says, “Believing is seeing.” We believe, therefore we see.

When You Need to Know, You’ll Know

I saw this principle in action when a young couple, recently graduated from college, came to see me. They had just finished the first part of a training course with a missions organization in the Chicago area. Their advisor told them they needed to talk with their pastor before making the next step. So they came to see me with the good news that God was calling them to the mission field. “Where do you want to go?” I asked. “We don’t know,” the husband replied. So I looked at the wife and she smiled in agreement. “You mean you have no idea at all?” “No idea at all.” Then I held up my hand and moved it as if I were twirling a globe. “You mean that in all the world, you don’t have even a tiny idea where you would like to go?” “No.” That does make it difficult when you are trying to raise funds because they couldn’t answer the first question: “Where do you plan to go?” I sat there silently for moment, pondering the situation. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. Looking right at that young couple, I said, “I’ve got the answer. The reason you don’t know is because you don’t need to know because if you needed to know, you would know, but since you don’t know, you must not need to know, because if you had needed to know by now, you would know by now, but since you don’t know, you must not need to know because when you need to know, you’ll know. If God is God, that must be true.” They were dazzled and speechless, and I was pretty amazed myself because all of that just came popping out at the spur of the moment. We prayed and they left my office, still smiling.

Not long after that, I happened to meet a young lady whose job as a music librarian was about to end in a few months. Our paths crossed in the sanctuary lobby between services. When I asked her what she planned to do next, she said she had no idea. So on the spur of the moment I decided to try it again. “The reason you don’t know is because you don’t need to know because if you needed to know, you would know, but since you don’t know, you must not need to know, because if you had needed to know by now,

you would know by now, but since you don't know, you must not need to know because when you need to know, you'll know. If God is God, that must be true." She laughed and said that sounded right. And off she went.

Several weeks later when I saw her again, she had a big smile on her face. "Pastor Ray, you won't believe what happened. I was talking with a friend about things and my friend asked me if I had ever considered going to the mission field. I said no and she said I should think about it. But I'm a music librarian. What would I do on the mission field? But a few days later I happened to pass by a missions display and saw a representative sitting there. Normally I would just walk right by but this time I stopped to talk. When I asked if they ever needed librarians on the mission field, the man said, 'Absolutely! We could use some librarians right now.' So I started doing some research and on a website I discovered a Christian school in Kenya that needed a librarian starting exactly when I finish my current job. I e-mailed them, they e-mailed back, and they checked my references. And guess what, Pastor Ray? I got the job! I'm moving to Nairobi, Kenya, in late July to get started as the librarian for a Christian school."

Not long after that, the young couple came back to see me with similar good news. "We're going to Russia." No kidding. Russia, that's great. Did you know about this when you came to see me? "No, we had no idea." So where in Russia are you going? "We're going to the Black Sea." That's fantastic. What are you going to do there? "We're going to teach in a school and help with church planting." When I asked them how they ended up going to the Black Sea to teach and do church planting, they told me a story that was so detailed that it was positively Byzantine in its complexity. They met someone who knew someone who "happened" to know a woman whom they met almost by chance. She came over to talk to them and one thing led to another and now there were going to Russia. I couldn't draw it on a chart if I tried. But they were so happy about it and I was happy for them. They are currently involved in their ministry near the Black Sea teaching and helping plant churches.

I am amazed as I thought about how God led that young woman and that young couple to Kenya and Russia, respectively. But on second thought, why be amazed? That's how God works, isn't it? When you need to know, you'll know. Not one day sooner, not one day later. And if today you don't know what to do next, it's because you truly don't need to know. Because if you needed to know, you would know. If God is God, that must be true.

That's why the search for God's will is so exhilarating. When God is leading the way, every obstacle will eventually be removed. The path may have many twists and turns, but in the end he will make your path straight. You have his word on it.

"Bless It All, Lord"

So many people struggle at this very point. The Bible says, in all your ways know God intimately, know him deeply, know him personally. Know him to that depth. Know him with that kind of intimacy. So often we skip this. When we get up in the morning, we say, "O God, help me. I'm busy today. I've got so much to do. Lord, I don't even have time to pray—so here's my list. Bless it all, Lord. I've got to go." We throw our list up toward heaven while we run out the door. What we are saying is, "God, here's my schedule. Please rubber-stamp it with your blessing." And we wonder why our days are filled with frustration.

Many of us go through life leaning almost completely on our own understanding. We like to be in control. I number myself among that group. I like to know what's going on. I like to be in charge of my own destiny. This passage is a warning to all of us who lay out life the way we want it and then say, "Here, God, stamp it with your blessing because I am going to go out and do it for you." God says, "I don't work that way. Know me first. Put me first in everything, including all your plans, all your thinking, and all your scheming. Put me first. And I then will make your way straight."

Do you want to know the secret of knowing the will of God? Here it is: in everything you do, know God. But we all want a formula. "I don't like that. Give me a formula. Give me three steps." Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us that the secret is a relationship with God. Let's talk about Joe, who has been dating Shirley for nine months. When he picks her up for their Friday night date, she asks the logical question: "Where are we going tonight?" "I don't know. I want to take you someplace you like. I wish you would give me a three-step formula so I could know where you really want to go on Friday nights." How would Shirley feel? Angry, upset, frustrated. "How is it that we've been dating every week for nine months and you don't know what I like and don't like? Where have you been all this time?" She has a right to be angry.

We want to reduce our relationship with God to a formula. God says, "Know Me. Spend time with Me. Put Me first in every area of your life because when you do that I will take care of all those details." This is a revolutionary way of looking at life.

Minnesota or South Carolina?

We're hung up on the decisions of life. Should I go here? Should I go there? Should I live in Minnesota? Should I live in South Carolina? Should I marry Jane or Sue or Ellen or Sherry? Should I take the job, or should I say no? Here is the teaching of this passage stated in one sentence: God is much less concerned with what you do than with what kind of person you are. So when you say, "Lord, should I go to Minnesota or should I go to South Carolina?" you are asking the wrong question. The question is not where are you going to go, but what kind of person you are going to be wherever you go. The question is not, who should I marry, but what

kind of person am I going to be no matter whom I marry?

While you are wrestling with the question of relocation, God wants to know, “Are you going to be my man or my woman whether you go to Minnesota or South Carolina or whether you stay in Santa Fe?” If you decide to put God first in everything, it doesn’t matter where you live. And if you are not going to put God first in everything, it doesn’t matter where you live either. We focus all our energy on decisions. But God says, “Know me and I will take care of the details.” We want specific direction. God says, “In all your ways know me, and everything else will fall into place.”

A few years ago I heard someone say that most of our decisions won’t matter at all in 10,000 years. That blew my mind at first. What a liberating way to look at life. The next time you face a tough decision, ask yourself, will it really matter in 10,000 years? Ninety-nine percent of what you worried about this week won’t matter three weeks from now, much less 10,000 years from now. In the year 2452 it won’t matter whether you lived in Minnesota, Santa Fe, or South Carolina. But what will matter is that you have decided in all your ways to know God. That is what will really matter. All these trivial, piddly details that just soak up so much energy will in that day be seen for what they really are—trivial, piddly details.

In light of this text, what is the will of God for your life? To know God in everything. To see him present everywhere and in everything, and to live in total surrender to him. The most important thing is not the decisions you face; the most important thing is your relationship with God. And the closer you get to God, the easier it will be for God to guide you in the way he wants you to go.

“Lord, Here Are My Hands”

Knowing God means using all your energies for him.

Lord, here are my hands.

Lord, here are my lips.

Lord, here are my eyes.

Lord, here are my ears.

Lord, here are my feet.

Knowing God means taking all that you have and placing it at the disposal of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Proverbs 3:5-6 ends with a promise: “He will make your paths straight.” God is able to remove the obstacles in front of you. He is able to fill in the potholes and turn a dead-end into a four-lane highway. God rewards those who show regard for him by leading them straight to the right end and removing all the obstacles along the way. We rarely see this in advance. We mostly see the potholes. The boulders block our view. Many times it seems as if there is no path at all. But he will make a way. No one can say how he will do it. There are thousands of ways in which God leads his children. He leads us through delays, detours, miracles, the advice of friends, unexpected opportunities, suddenly closed doors, answered prayer, unanswered prayer, inner impressions, and a still, small voice in the night.

You don’t see it on this side. On this side you see the problems. But when you know God, he leads you step by step. When the journey is done, you will look back and say, “I don’t know how I got from there to here, but I do know this: Jesus led me all the way.”

“How Did We Get Here?”

A friend of ours used those very words to describe a months-long ordeal that involved a change of jobs, a cross-country move, and a total redirection of her life. As the time drew near, the emotional stress of leaving the familiar for the unknown almost overwhelmed her. I think she would probably say that making this particular move was the single most difficult thing she has ever had to do. All along the way she was torn with inner doubts—wanting to do the right thing, but not sure if she was. When I saw her around a campfire one night there were tears in her eyes. “Are we doing the right thing? I’m not sure.” Then two weeks later she took a deep breath and moved to her new home. Just before leaving, she made an interesting comment: “How did we get here? In my heart I believe we’re doing the right thing, but looking back I’m not sure how we got from Point A to Point B. Only God could have done it because I never would have done it myself.” But she smiled when she said it.

Doing God’s will often involves great uncertainty and periods of deep doubt. But if you are willing to do what he wants you to do, he then takes responsibility to reach into the chaos of life and lead you step by step to the place where he wants you to be.

Life is a mysterious journey, full of unexpected twists and turns. The path ahead is a mystery to us all. No one can say for sure what is around the next bend. It may be a smooth road through a lovely valley or we may discover that the bridge is washed out and we have to find a way to cross a deep river. Often the road will seem to disappear or it may suddenly seem to go in three different directions and we won’t know which way to go. But there is One who knows the way because the past, present, and future are all the same to him and the darkness is as the light of day. He knows the way we should go. He promised to direct your path and he will do it. You can count on it.

When you need to know, you'll know. If God is God, that must be true.

Proverbs 3:5-6 TRUST Learning to Lean on the Lord

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

These two verses are among the most beloved in all the Bible. You may have memorized them in Sunday school when you were a child. Or perhaps you made a cross-stitch pattern of these words and hung it on your wall. Or you may have learned to sing these words as part of a contemporary worship chorus.

These words cling to the soul because they speak to a great need we all feel-the need for guidance. Proverbs 3:5-6 suggests the basis on which guidance will come. It is a short course in knowing God's will for your life. If you will learn what this passage is teaching and begin to apply it in your daily life, it will make a profound difference when you need to make a tough decision.

Not long ago I had a chance to study these verses for the first time. As I did I discovered that six key words unlock the message of this text. The word trust in Hebrew means "to lean with the full body," "to lay upon," "to rest the full weight upon." To trust in the Lord is to rest your whole weight upon Him.

To lean means to rest upon something for partial support. Understanding refers to the mental processes by which you analyze a problem, break it down into its smaller parts, and then make a decision about what you are going to do. To acknowledge means to know deeply and intimately. It's the kind of knowing that comes with personal experience. The words make straight picture a road that appears to be impassable. It winds through the mountains and down into the swamps. It seems to have a thousand switchbacks. Portions of the road are washed out, others are filled with potholes, still others are blocked by huge boulders. In some places the road apparently becomes a dead end.

It is the road of your life. As you look at it, it appears to be covered with boulders and rocks. Some parts of it seem to be filled with potholes; other sections appear to be going nowhere. That's the way life is.

Here is God's message to you from Proverbs 3:5-6. If you will know God in every area of your life, He will take personal responsibility to make your way smooth and straight. He will remove the obstacles if they need to be removed. He will fill in the potholes if they need to be filled. He will redirect the detour so that what seemed to be a dead end turns out to be the shortest way to reach your destination.

All you have to do is trust in the Lord. Lay yourself completely on Him for full support. Don't lean for support on your own human understanding. In all your ways know God intimately. He will take the path of your life-which seems to go up and down and around and sometimes seems to curve backwards-and will make your way straight. That's the promise of almighty God to you.

Lord, teach me to trust You even when I cannot see around the next bend in the road. Amen.

Name a time when God took the road of your life and "made your way straight."

What obstacles keep you from trusting God on a daily basis? What does it mean to know God deeply and intimately?

Proverbs 3:5-6 How to Make a Tough Decision

Sermon 1 of 4 from the Knowing God's Will series -

November 1993 – "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

These two verses are among the most beloved in all the Bible. Many of us memorized them in Sunday School years ago. In any listing of favorite Bible passages Proverbs 3:5-6 would rank near the top. I'll bet there are some of you who have those two verses on a plaque in your home somewhere to remind you of their great truth.

G. Campbell Morgan, world-famous Bible teacher of another generation, said that when he was leaving home for the first time to go out on his own, his father pressed a note into his hand. When Campbell Morgan unfolded it, he discovered it contained just one

verse of scripture: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Looking back years later, he noted there was that text and no comment. No comment, he said, except the comment of my father's godly life.

This text is striking in its simplicity. There is nothing difficult about it. It is so simple that it can be understood by the youngest believer and yet it is a comfort to the oldest saint of God. And it is good for all Christians in-between. It has been the hope and encouragement of countless multitudes of God's people across the centuries.

A Short Course in God's Will

Because it is utterly simple, we may prove it true any time we like. These words cling to the soul because they speak to a great need we all feel—the need for guidance. After all, there is no question greater than this: What is the will of God for my life? I do not know a Christian who does not wrestle with God's will sooner or later:

—"I wonder if I should get married. And if I should, should I marry Molly, Mabel, Melba or Marlene?"

—"I've been offered a new job. Should I take it or wait for a better offer?"

—"I've been accepted at two colleges. Which one should I attend?"

—"Should I go back to school for my master's degree?"

—"Should I try out for cheerleader?"

—"What courses should I take next semester?"

—"Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Proverbs 3:5-6 suggests the basis on which guidance will come. It is a short course in knowing God's will for your life. If you will learn what this passage really is teaching, and begin to apply it in your daily life, it will make a profound difference when you come to make those really tough decisions.

I am beginning this study with the assumption that most of us have known these verses for a long time. Sometimes when we know a passage so well, we almost know it too well. We know it so much that we really have never stopped to think about what its words are really saying.

Five Key Words

Not long ago I had a chance to study these verses for the first time ever. As I did, I discovered that five key words unlock the message of this text. Let's take those key words one by one and see what each one teaches us.

1. Trust.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart." That's a word that in Hebrew means "to lean with the full body," "to lay upon," "to rest the full weight upon." In our thinking the word trust means to rely upon or to have confidence in. But the Hebrew word is stronger. It is the idea of stretching yourself out upon a bed or laying on a hard surface. The word means to put your full weight prostrate on something. To trust in the Lord is to lay your whole weight upon him.

2. Lean.

"Lean not to your own understanding." It means to rest upon for partial support. Leaning is what you do when you walk with a cane or grab a walker because you are unsteady. It is used in the Old Testament for leaning against a tree or a stone cliff. You lean on something when you are not strong enough to stand alone.

3. Understanding.

"Lean not on your own understanding." The word has to do with your mental faculties. It refers to the mental processes by which you analyze a problem, break it down into its smaller parts, and then you make a decision about what you are going to do. It's what you use early in the morning when you make a list on a three-by-five card of all the things you have to do that day. You use your understanding to chart out the priorities of each day. Or it's what you use on Sunday night when you map out the oncoming week. That's understanding. You use it any time you plan your life or solve a problem. So the word understanding refers to those mental processes by which you look at a problem, you analyze it, and you decide how you are going to solve it. It is also how you set up the order of your life. It is not a bad word. Understanding is simply the decision-making ability that God has given you.

When you take the word "lean," put it with the word "understanding" and add the negative, you get an idea like this: "Use all your mental powers, but do not lean on them for total support." Don't trust in your own ability to figure out your life. Lean instead on the

Lord! Rest your weight on him!

4. Acknowledge.

I am going to stop and say a little bit more about this word because I think that “acknowledge” doesn’t do full justice to the original text. In the Hebrew this word is an imperative. It is a command. It is the imperative form of the verb to know. You could translate this by saying, “In all your ways know him.”

The underlying Hebrew word means to know deeply and intimately. It’s the kind of knowing that comes with personal experience. It means to know something through and through.

“Do You Know the President?”

For instance, somebody might say, “Do you know the President of the United States?” I would say, “Sure, I know the President of the United States.” What I mean is if the President walked in, I would know who he is. If I were in a room and heard his voice coming over the TV, I would recognize the distinctive voice of the President of the United States. Or if I picked up a newspaper, I might see his picture on the front page, and I would say, “I know who that is, I know that man. That is the President of the United States.”

Now, I don’t really know him. I can’t pick up the phone and call the White House, and say, “Bill, this is Ray. Let’s do lunch this week.” He won’t take my call because I don’t know him personally. I just know him at the level of head knowledge. I don’t know him intimately or on a friendship level.

Singing the Same Song

There is another way of knowing. I know my wife and she knows me in a completely different way. We’ve known each other intimately for 20 years. After being together that long, strange things begin to happen. You will be sitting there thinking about a song. And she’ll start singing it. How does that happen? I don’t know. Or you will be thinking about a question, and before you can ask it, she’ll blurt out the answer. How did she do that? I don’t know. Or you’ll start a sentence, and to your great irritation, she will finish the sentence before you will. When you say, “How can you do that?” she says with a smile, “I know what you are thinking even before you say it.”

Things like that happen to all married couples eventually. When you live together that long, you get to know each other at such a deep level, that you just don’t know each other on the outside, you actually begin to know what the other person is thinking as they are thinking it, you know what they are going to say before they say it, you know what they are going to do before they do it because you have a deep, personal, intimate knowledge of each other.

Seen in that light, we might translate verse 5 this way: “In all your ways know God intimately. In all your ways know God deeply. In all your ways know God personally. In every area of your life know God intimately, deeply and personally because when you know God that way in every area of your life, then he will direct your paths.”

5. Direct.

“He will make your paths straight.” That brings me to the fifth word, which in the King James is translated “He shall direct your paths.” That is not bad. But I think the NIV is a little better: “He will make your paths straight.”

It has the idea of a road which appears to be impassable. The road winds through the mountains and goes down into the swamps. It seems to have a thousand switchbacks. As you study it, you discover that portions of the road are washed out, others are filled with potholes, still others with huge boulders. In some places the road apparently becomes a dead end.

It is the road of your life. That’s the road you are traveling right now. As you look at it, it appears to be covered with boulders and rocks. It appears to be filled with potholes. It appears to be a road to nowhere. That’s the way life is. Some of you have come through a week filled with boulders. And you spent your whole week trying to drive around them. And as far as you can see in the future, the road is filled with nothing but potholes and nothing but sewage in the bottom of those potholes. So you’ve come out of the tough week, and you are not looking to the week ahead with any excitement because the road seems filled with obstacles and potholes.

He Will Move the Boulders

Here is God’s message to you from Proverbs 3:5-6. If you will know God in every area of your life, he himself will take personal responsibility to make your way smooth and straight. He will remove the obstacles if they need to be removed. He will fill in the potholes if they need to be filled. He will redirect the detour so that what seemed to be a dead-end turns out to be the shortest way to reach your destination.

All you have to do is trust in the Lord. Lay yourself completely on him for full support upon him. Don't lean for support on your own human understanding. In all your ways know God intimately. He will take the path of your life which seems to go up and down and around and sometimes seems to curve backwards, and he will make your way straight. That's the promise of Almighty God to you.

"Bless It All, Lord."

You are trusting when you are waiting on God to show you the next step you should take. So many of us don't do that. The Bible says in all your ways know him intimately, know him deeply, know him personally. As a man knows a woman, know God that way. Know him to that depth. Know him to that kind of fellowship and that kind of intimacy.

So often we skip this. When we get up in the morning, and we say, "O God, help us. I'm busy today. I've got a lot of stuff to do. Lord, I don't even have time to pray so here's my list. Bless it all, Lord. I've got to go." We throw our list up toward heaven while we run out the door. What we are saying is, "God, here's my schedule, rubber stamp it with your blessing." And we wonder why our days are filled with frustration.

Many of us want to go through life leaning almost completely upon our own understanding. A lot of us are basically control freaks. I number myself among that group. I like to know what's going on. I like to be in charge of my own destiny. This passage is a warning to all of us control freaks who lay out life the way we want it and then say, "Here, God, you stamp it with your blessing because I am going to go out and do it for you."

God says, "I don't work that way. You know me first. Put me first in everything including all your plans and all your thinking and all your scheming. Put me first. And I then will make your way straight."

We Want a Formula, God Wants a Relationship

Do you want to know the secret of knowing the will of God? Here it is. In everything you do, know God. But we all want a formula. "Pastor Ray, I don't like that. Give me a formula. Give me three steps." Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us that the secret is a relationship with God. But we want a formula.

Let's talk about Joe who has been dating Shirley for nine months. They have a date on Friday night. When he picks her up, she asks the logical question: "Where are we going tonight?" "I don't know. I want to take you someplace you like. I wish you would give me a three-step formula so I could know where you really want to go on Friday nights." How would Shirley feel? Angry, upset, frustrated. "We've been dating every week for nine months. And you don't know what I like and don't like? Where have you been all this time?"

We want to reduce our relationship with God to a formula. Give me three steps so I will know what to do. God says, "Know me. Spend time with me. Put me first in every area of your life because when you do that I will take care of all those details." Wow! Brothers and sisters, do you understand that this is a revolutionary way of looking at life?

Minnesota or South Carolina?

We're hung up on the decisions of life. Should I go here? Should I go there? Should I live in Minnesota? Should I live in South Carolina? Should I marry Jane or Sue or Ellen or Sherry? Should I take the job, or should I not? Wait a minute.

Here is the teaching of this passage stated in one sentence: God is much less concerned with what you do than with what kind of person you are. He is much less concerned with what you do; he is much more concerned with what kind of person you are. So when you say, "Lord, should I go to Minnesota or should I go to South Carolina?" you are asking the wrong question. The question is not where are you going to go, but what kind of person are you going to be wherever you go. The question is not: Who should I marry, but what kind of person am I going to be no matter who I marry?

Wasting Energy on the Wrong Questions

While you are wrestling with the question of relocation, God wants to know, "Are you going to be my man whether you go to Minnesota or South Carolina or whether you stay here in Oak Park?" If you decide to put God first in everything, it doesn't matter whether you do that in Minnesota or South Carolina or Oak Park. And if you are not going to put God first in everything, it doesn't matter whether you do that in Minnesota or South Carolina or Oak Park.

We focus all our energy on decisions. God says, Know me. And I will take care of the details. We want specific direction. God says, In all your ways know me and everything else will fall into place.

What Difference Will It Make in 10,000 Years?

That is a revolutionary way of looking at life. A few years ago I heard Vernon Grounds say that most of our decisions won't matter at all in 10,000 years. That blew my mind at first. What a liberating way to look at life. The next time you face a tough decision, ask

yourself, Will it really matter in 10,000 years? And 99 percent of the stuff you worried about this week won't even matter three weeks from now much less than 10,000 years from now. In the year 1994, it won't matter whether you lived in Minnesota, Oak Park, or South Carolina. But what will matter 10,000 times 10,000 years from now is that you have decided in all your ways to know God, to put him first in everything. That is what will really matter. All these trivial, piddly details that just soak up so much energy will in that day be seen for what they really are—trivial, piddly details.

In light of this text, what is the will of God for your life? To know God in everything. To see him present everywhere and in everything.

Here in the sanctuary, there in the workplace.

Here when we sing, there when we work.

Here when we worship, there when we study.

Here when we pray, there when we play.

Here when we clap, there when we date.

Here when we listen, there when we speak.

God is saying, "I want you to know me just as much out there as you do in here. I want you to know me on Monday, on Tuesday, on Wednesday just as much as you do on Sunday morning at 10:45 AM." That's crucial. When you decide to know God in every area of life, he takes charge of the details.

So the most important thing is not just the decisions you are facing. The most important thing is your relationship with God. And the closer you get to God, the easier it will be for God to guide you in the way he wants you to go.

Lord, Here Are My Hands

Knowing God means using all your energies for him:

Lord, here are my hands. Use them to do your will this week.

Lord, here are my lips. Speak through them this week.

Lord, here are my eyes. I am going to be watching for you this week.

Lord, here are my ears. I am going to be listening for you this week.

Lord, here are my feet. I am going to be going for you this week.

Knowing God means taking all that you have and placing it at the disposal of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Rarely Seen in Advance

Our text ends with a promise. "He will make your paths straight." God is able to remove the obstacles in front of you. He is able to fill in the potholes and turn a dead-end into a short-cut. God rewards those who show regard to him by leading them straight to the right end and removing all the obstacles along the way.

We rarely see this in advance. We mostly see the potholes. The boulders block our view. Many times it seems as if there is no path at all. But he will make a way.

No one can say how he will do it. There are thousands of ways in which God leads his children. He leads us through delays, detours, miracles, the advice of friends, unexpected opportunities, suddenly closed doors, answered prayer, unanswered prayer, inner impressions, and a still small voice in the night. The old hymn says, "All the way my Savior leads me, What have I to ask beside? Can I doubt his tender mercy, he through life has been my guide."

You don't see it on this side. On this side you see the problems. But when you know God, he leads you step by step. When the journey is done, you look back and say, "I don't know how I got from there to here, but I do know this: Jesus led me all the way."

This verse is true. Thousands of saints living and dead can testify to that fact. He will lead the way. He will remove the obstacles. You will have a straight path for your journey.

The Final Secret

One more thought and I am done. What is the secret of this text? One word: He shall direct thy path. Who is the “he” of Proverbs 3:6? The “he” is the God of the Bible. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of Moses. The God of Israel. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who spoke and a thousand million galaxies sprang into being. The God who has numbered the grains of sand. The God who knows the hair on your head. The God who sees the sparrow when it falls. The God who holds the universe in his hands. That God, the Almighty, Transcendent God of the universe, he will direct your paths. That’s the God who says, “If you will but know me, I will take care of the details. Trust me. Rest your full weight on me. Know me in everything. And I, the God of the universe, will direct your paths.”

If God has said he will lead you, then why are you so fearful? If God has said he will take up your cause, then why are you worried about tomorrow?

No evil can battle if he leads the way.

No enemy can stop you if he leads the way.

No opposition can derail you if he leads the way.

No obstacle can stand forever if he leads the way.

In all your ways know him, and he shall direct your paths. He has promised, and it is so. It may not be easy. It may not be exactly the way you want to go. It may not be what seems to you the shortest way. But he will direct your paths.

All he says is “Know me. Know me deeply and intimately in every area of your life, and I will take care of all the rest.” What is the will of God for your life? The will of God for your life is that you in all your ways should know him because when you know him in every area he has said he will direct your paths.

He promised—and he will not fail—he will direct your paths.

Proverbs 3:34 The Rod of God: When Love Says No Hebrews 12:5-11; Proverbs 3:34

May 1999 – “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” It’s an old saying and like most things old, it has been neglected of late. But there is the ring of truth about it. If you spare the rod, you will indeed spoil your child. This is the clear testimony of Holy Scripture and of centuries of human experience.

To begin my sermon that way is to wade into the waters of hot controversy. Not everyone agrees with what I have just said and many people disagree vehemently (dare I say violently?). Many experts flatly declare that corporal punishment is wrong and some even say it should be outlawed. They believe it is the first step on the road to child abuse.

Well, now, before going any further, let me say that this is not a sermon about spanking. To be more precise, it is and it isn’t. I’m going to talk about spanking because I don’t think you can discuss the topic of child discipline without at least touching on corporal punishment.

This week it occurred to me that it had been a long time since I preached on child discipline. In checking my records, I discovered that the last time was December 7, 1980—when I was only two years out of seminary and pastoring Redeemer Covenant Church in Downey, California. Back then we had only one child who was 13 months old. For whatever reason I have not revisited this topic since then. During the intervening years two other boys have joined our household. I hardly qualify as an expert on childrearing and I gladly confess to my share of mistakes. Like most parents Marlene and I have learned as we have gone along and we have discovered that what works with one child doesn’t necessarily apply at all to the others. I hope I have gained some wisdom and a better perspective than I had the last time I approached this topic.

“My son, 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 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.

This marvelous passage teaches us how God deals with his children. Along the way we learn by analogy something about the way earthly parents discipline their children. Three points deserve our attention:

Discipline is a sign of love. v. 6

Discipline is a sign of sonship. vv. 7-8

Discipline produces godly fruit. vv. 10-11

We discipline our children because we love them, because they are our children (and not someone else's children), and because we want to produce the fruit of godly character in them. This perspective is vitally important because from a biblical point of view, discipline is far more than correction of wrongdoing. It is everything parents do to raise their children successfully. It involves years of teaching, training, direction-giving, instruction, praising, rebuking, correcting, and sometimes punishing. It requires patience, prayer, positive reinforcement, and helping children see the consequences of bad behavior. When we have done our job well, our children grow up healthy, independent, productive, positive, well-balanced, obedient, respectful, enthusiastic about life, and wholly devoted to Jesus Christ. That's a tall order, and it won't be realized overnight, but this is our aim as Christian parents. In a sense Hebrews 12 calls us to look to God as the model parent. We are to study God's methods in dealing with us and then use those methods in dealing with our children. As God raises his children, so we are to raise ours. Godly parenting begins with the study of God—his character, his methods, his ways, and most of all, his Word.

With that as background, we turn now to consider biblical principles regarding raising our children for the Lord. I'm going to organize my remarks under six major headings.

Fact #1: We shy away from this topic because of cultural pressure, past mistakes, and our own personal uncertainty.

Earlier I mentioned the issue of corporal punishment. As I researched this sermon, I discovered that there is a large, well-organized, well-financed, and well-publicized antispanking movement in America. It is led by psychologists, social workers, and educational leaders who strongly oppose all forms of physical discipline of children. It has led to something called "child-centered parenting" where parents are instructed to look at their children as friends more than as children needing their direction and guidance. (See "When to Spank," US News and World Report, April 13, 1998 for a detailed analysis of the factors that led to the antispanking movement.)

It isn't my purpose to offer a detailed argument in favor of spanking. I would note that Focus on the Family believes there is a place for mild spanking in the discipline of children ages two to ten. I would also refer you to the policy statement by the Family Research Council called "Spare the Rod?" which offers a detailed rebuttal to the antispanking arguments.

It's also fair to say that no one I know believes that spanking should be the major tool parents use to raise their children. If you are spanking your children every day, or almost every day, then you probably need some instruction in good childrearing methods. I urge you to contact Pastor Bob Boerman who heads the Family Ministries at Calvary. We offer numerous classes that can help you refine your parenting skills. Our position is the same as Focus on the Family: Mild spanking has a place in a child's discipline but it should never be the main tool parents use to motivate their children to obey.

As I look back to the way I was raised, it occurs to me that either there was no antispanking movement when I was growing up or else my parents had never heard of it. I was spanked a few times (probably more than a few but I seem to have forgotten most of them) during my growing-up years. As far as I can tell, I seem to be none the worse for it. As I recall I think my Mom did most of the spanking but we always knew that if Dad got involved he was going to get his money's worth, so to speak. In my memory my father doesn't strike me as a mean or harsh man at all. He was a very good father who was no-nonsense when it came to raising children. You obeyed or eventually you would pay the price. That price might be exacted in a number of ways but judgment day would come sooner or later. There is ample biblical precedent for that approach to raising children.

Fact #2: Biblical discipline must reflect a proper mixture of law and grace.

Ray Stedman makes this point in his sermon called "The Disciplines of God." He notes that God always begins with law and moves to grace. Even in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam not to eat from one particular tree. That's law. Later would come words of grace and forgiveness. When we raise our children, we must start with law. We must give them rules and we must set limits. We must tell them what to do and what not to do. Grace must be our attitude but law must flow from our lips. If we leave our children to fend for themselves, we have abdicated our parental calling before the Lord.

Fact # 3: Biblical discipline produces the following positive results.

For parents who want God's view of childrearing, I recommend the book of Proverbs. Over and over again Solomon says, "My son, listen to my commandments and take heed to my words." If we would raise our children according to Proverbs, we could dispense

with 99% of the secular books on childrearing.

Since this sermon is about discipline, I have chosen five passages that deal directly with this topic. They show the good things that happen when parents dare to follow God's plan:

A. It teaches wisdom. Proverbs 29:15

"The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother." The "rod of correction" stands for the instrument used in discipline. It might be a belt, an actual rod, the palm of the hand, or from days gone by, a switch off a tree. In the larger context, it refers to whatever means you use to punish misbehavior, such as a time-out chair, taking away privileges, grounding a teenager, and so on. Children learn wisdom when there are consequences for disobedience. And when they "get away with murder" at home, that may be precisely what they do years later.

B. It purges evil. Proverbs 20:30

"Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being." I include this verse primarily because of the phrase "cleanse away evil." It's important to note that this verse is not talking about childrearing specifically. It probably has more to do with crime and punishment in ancient Israel. But the principle is the same. Effective discipline restrains evil by making the consequences so distasteful that the child wants no part of it.

C. It saves from death. Proverbs 23:13-14

"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." Don't misread verse 13. It's not calling for beating a child unmercifully, but it does remind us that God has arranged the human anatomy so that a mild swat on the buttocks can be useful in punishing misbehavior. And our discipline—though it may seem painful at the time—can actually save a person from physical death and perhaps also from spiritual death. Better to discipline today even though your child sheds a few tears than to look back and say that you failed to give proper guidance.

D. It demonstrates love. Proverbs 13:24

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." The word "careful" means "discriminating." It implies that godly parents watch their children at all times to make sure they are on the right road in life. To do anything less means you don't really love your child, no matter what you may say.

E. It promotes domestic peace. Proverbs 29:17

"Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul." Parents who care enough to say no, who set limits and then enforce them, who reward good behavior and punish disobedience—those parents are usually blessed with happy, well-adjusted, obedient children who bring delight to their souls. And what could be better than that?

Fact #4: When we discipline, our purpose is not simply to correct wrongdoing, but to encourage wise choices in the future.

Sometimes parents act as if discipline is just about crime and punishment. But that is an extremely short-sighted view. Here's a brief comparison of right and wrong reasons to discipline your children: [1]

Three Wrong Reasons

1. Anger
2. Arouse Fear
3. Seek Revenge

Three Right Reasons:

1. Teach right from wrong
2. Teach respect for authority
3. Establish justice

A few days ago Pastor Boerman gave me a statement regarding the Family Ministries position on the discipline of children. Here it is. Note that Bob uses the old word "chastisement," which means the same thing as discipline:

Chastisement is biblical and should not be ignored for correcting acts of foolishness. Foolishness is defined as acts of willful disobedience. Foolishness is different from childishness. Example: Young Mary runs through the house and knocks over a lamp, breaking it. She's young and no one had told her to not run through the house. This is childishness. If Mary had been told by her

parents to not run through the house and she did it, breaking the lamp, that would be considered foolishness. The first example would require her to help clean up the mess from the broken lamp, the second would bring on discipline. Maybe chastisement, helping to pay for the lamp, etc.

Fact # 5: We are to raise our children the way God raises us – with grace, patience, individual attention, and a clear purpose.

This brings us back to Hebrews 12 with its emphasis on how God raises his children. We are to do what he does. He disciplines us to bring forth the godly fruit of holiness and righteousness. To do that, he uses hardship, trials, setbacks, sickness, pain, unanswered prayer, and all manner of difficulties that at the time seem hard to endure. Yet in the end they bring us to maturity and conform us to the image of Christ.

Last week I mentioned that as parents our goal is to move our children from 100% dependence on us to the place of independence so that when they leave the home they are able to function successfully as adults. After the third service a friend told me she had heard it said this way. Our goal is to move our children from 100% dependence on us to 100% dependence on God. That's good, isn't it? When we have done our job well, our children will depend on the Lord just as much as they once depended on us.

Fact # 6: The Seven Bs of good discipline

Here are seven practical guidelines that will help you discipline your children the right way.

Be consistent

Have fewer rules and enforce them fairly. Remember, God summarized his will in only ten commandments. Wise parents keep it simple so their children won't forget what really matters.

Be calm

Many parents have gotten into trouble because they disciplined during a moment of sudden anger. Often our temper causes us to do or say things we later regret. It is better to walk away than to discipline in anger. This is why Colossians 3:21 warns fathers not to exasperate their children. And Ephesians 4:31 tells us to put away anger, malice, wrath, clamor, bitterness, strife and rage.

Be clear

Have definite standards of right and wrong. Make sure your child knows the consequences of disobedience. Before you punish, tell the child what rule he or she has broken. Otherwise, the opportunity for learning may be lost.

Be prompt

Don't drag out your discipline. Deal with the problem at hand and then move on. According to Ecclesiastes 8:11, "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong."

Be fair

When your children disobey, make sure you get all the facts before you do anything. Proverbs 18:17 tells us that "the first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him." Substitute "his sister" or "his brother" for "another" and you quickly get the point. Take time to hear all sides before you render your final verdict.

Be merciful

This is a basic biblical principle covering all human relationships. Be merciful just as God is merciful. Don't break the spirit of your children. Don't beat them or abuse them. Don't humiliate them in public or in private.

Be forgiving

When the discipline is done, don't hold a grudge. Do what needs to be done and then move on. Aren't you glad God doesn't hold grudges with us? He forgives and forgets. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Let God's forgiveness be the standard and your discipline will lead to joy and not to heartache.

In making these suggestions, I am simply calling on parents to practice tough love. If we want to raise happy, healthy, well-adjusted kids, we must love them enough to say no, to set limits, to establish boundaries, and to take action when those limits are willfully violated.

Shaping our Children for Eternity

Let's wrap this up with three words of application. First, a word to fathers. Get involved with your children. Don't leave all the hard

work of discipline to your wife. Make childbearing a team effort in your home. Second, a word to single parents. You carry a heavy load that most of us will never understand. I thank God for all the single parents at Calvary. We love you and we pray for you and we want to do whatever we can to help you. I urge you to get involved in our Family Ministries' classes. Don't give up on your children. With God's help you can raise a happy family. Third, a word to all of us. Pray for your children and your grandchildren. Pray for the children under your care. Pray for the children you know. Pray for the children on your block and in your extended family. Our kids are under enormous pressure today. They need our prayers to make it.

Parents have an awesome responsibility. God has ordained that parents are the single greatest factor in the spiritual growth of their children. Mom, Dad, no one can take your place. The pastor can't, the Sunday School teacher can't, the Awana workers can't, the Christian school teachers can't, the Allied Force leaders can't. God uses believing parents to shape children for eternity. Every day by our influence we are preparing our children for eternal joy or eternal woe. A child can never cease to exist because all our children will live forever somewhere.

How quickly they fly away. I have one son in college, another finishing his junior year in high school, and another finishing the eighth grade. There are no diapers in our home. The blocks and the Play-Dough have long since been put away. When I last preached on this topic, I had one son who was only 13 months old. How long ago and how far away that seems. Before we know it all three of our boys will be out on their own. The days of childrearing end almost as soon as they begin.

Someday we will all stand before the Lord to give an account of what we have done on earth. As parents we will answer for how we raised our children. In that day the Lord will not ask, "Did you know the latest theory on how to raise children?" But he will ask, "Did you train your children to love and serve me?" What answer will you give? No excuses will be accepted. [2]

From Littleton to Oak Park

I come now to the close of this sermon series. This is the first time I have preached on marriage and the family in the ten years I have been your pastor. I think I waited a long time because I wanted to be sure I had something worth saying. When I began this series on April 11, I did so with some hesitation, wondering how you would respond. Nine days later what happened in Littleton, Colorado changed the world. After the massacre at Columbine High School, the family has taken first place on the American agenda. From the White House to every house, people are discussing the disintegration of the family. We all know the problem, but few seem to have any answers.

A few days ago I received a message from a young man in our congregation. He wrote to compare Oak Park with Littleton and in so doing, he pointed out that similar killings have taken place for years in the inner city but we managed to ignore them. Now that white children in "safe" suburban schools are being shot, we are suddenly upset. His words were hard to read, but they are true. I liked his words so much that I sent them to a few friends. One person wrote back agreeing with his perspective and adding some important words of hope. Here is an abridged version of what she said:

Without figuring in God in our worldview, there is no avoiding the evil we face and are impotent to oppose. Often, we have even diagnosed the problems well, but collectively are too selfish to effect change for the better because the sacrifice to our personal comfort is too great.

People say, "It shouldn't take another massacre like this to get one's attention." But it often does – compromising on slavery, which paved the way to the Civil War, tolerating the AIDS epidemic, putting up with dictatorial regimes, ignoring the budding "Storm troopers" in Germany, the gay movement, rise of porn, rise of pedophilia, abortion. A pretty depressing pattern.

However, there's a lightning bolt from above. Christians are uniquely positioned to bless our society even though many today will not see it that way. Christianity offers the best understanding and logic to analyze and diagnose our society's ills, (the propensity towards evil, sin nature or whatever name we choose to call it) but better than that, it can offer healthy answers. Though our society may continue to reject our message, we must continue to offer God's answers, in swallowable sizes, bite by bite – recognizing the obstacles we face but trusting in God to direct.

History teaches us that individual Christians have changed the world through obedience to Christ (ending slavery, sponsoring child labor laws, building orphanages and hospitals, establishing police forces, humanizing the treatment of women, educating women, stopping infanticide, the binding of feet in China, bride burning, and the offering of young girls as human sacrifices in India, establishing representative government, improving economic conditions of primitive peoples, to name a few). The challenge really is to the Church, and ultimately, to us as individuals.

As a people we typically need to hurt a lot before we are willing to fix anything. Our tolerance for evil is far too high! However, we have a lot of hope in the analogy Jesus used in calling his people "salt" (Matthew 5:13). Salt is never the main ingredient in a recipe, but its presence is all pervasive! We need not be discouraged in well-doing no matter how small.

I have one little P.S. to what she wrote. In the 21st century Christian families will be more important than ever because Littleton is not the end. First there was Paducah, then Pearl, then that town in Oregon, and now Littleton. But the end is not yet. As our society disintegrates, we can expect more chaos. I wish it were not so, but we will see more heartbreak in the future. Against that backdrop Christians have an enormous open door into our culture. If we can create a community of families where husbands and wives love each other and stay together for the long haul, if we can build families where the father is the spiritual leader and the mother truly loves her husband and her children, and the children love and respect their parents, if we can do that, it will be like a beacon of light in the prevailing darkness. People will come running to discover our secret. When they do, we will point them to Jesus. In the years to come our families may become our ultimate apologetic. The world can answer our arguments, but it cannot answer a happy Christian home.

And to make that kind of difference we all need Jesus, don't we? There can be no Christian family without Christ as the true head of the home. And to be head of the home, he must be resident in every heart. Yesterday I met a woman who spoke with love and admiration for her brother. "He is such a fine man," she said. "I pray for him to be saved. He's so good in so many ways but he needs to be born again." All he needs is Jesus.

That is where this sermon and this series will end. We all need Jesus and we need him more than we know. Without him we are truly lost in this life and in the life to come. But with him we can build strong Christian families that will stand during all the storms of life. If you want heaven to help your home, you need Jesus in your heart. Trust in him. Make him your Lord and Savior. I urge you to open your heart and invite him to come in. May God help you to do it. Your life and your family will never be the same.

Notes:

1. The comparison comes from the Ray Stedman sermon mentioned above.
2. Many of the thoughts in this section come from a sermon by Carl Haak, "The Duties of Parents."

Proverbs 3:27-28 INITIATIVE No More Excuses

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"-when you now have it with you. Proverbs 3:27-28

Here is a warning against procrastination in well doing. It is a clarion call for doing good today-not tomorrow or some other time in the distant future. How easy it is for all of us to be great intenders. We intend to be generous, we plan to be kind, we even dream about the good things we would do if we ever won a million dollars.

But God is less concerned about the million you might someday have than He is with the twenty dollars in your pocket right now. By the same token, you can't help the poor, visit the sick, or lift up the fallen by putting these tasks off until tomorrow. As James 4:13-17 reminds us, how do you even know if you will be alive tomorrow? Or what if you lose your money in the meantime?

Life is uncertain. When asked how he wanted to be remembered, noted radio commentator Paul Harvey replied, "I want to be remembered as a man who left the woodpile a little higher than when he found it." That's a noble goal, but it won't happen by accident and you can't wait till the end of life to start stacking that wood. You have to pick up a few logs each day.

Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." When you help someone with his burden, your own burden grows lighter. When you reach out a helping hand to someone else, the Lord makes the way easier for you. So many of us are a little too inward-focused, a little too myopic, looking at ourselves. Write down the names of at least three people who have a burden you could help carry this week. Maybe you could give them a call, write them a letter, give them some money, give them a hug, go to see them, help them with a project, bake them some cookies or food, or spend some time with them. Instead of focusing on your own problems, think about carrying a burden for someone else. Ask the Lord to show you who you could help this week.

Oh, I know the excuses we make. "Let somebody else do it." "Let them get a job and earn some money." "I don't want to think about it." "Who cares, anyway?" "Nobody ever gave me anything." "You're just trying to make me feel guilty."

Hear the Word of the Lord:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

What are you doing in a practical way to help the poor, the needy, the hurting, and the hopeless? Before you answer, just remember three little words. No more excuses.

Lord, stop me in my tracks so that I won't insult You with more excuses for not doing what You have told me to do. Amen.

Name someone you know who is consistently involved with helping others in need. Would anyone list you as a good example in this area? Why or why not?

Name a situation where you are making some inward excuses for not getting involved. What should you do about it?

PROVERBS 4

Proverbs 4:7-9 WISDOM The Art of Skillful Living

Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor. Proverbs 4:7-9

The Hebrew word for wisdom refers to much more than an accumulation of facts. In the Old Testament this word was used for anyone who had an unusual degree of skill in a given area. For instance, if a potter could create beautiful tableware, he was said to have wisdom. The same thing would be said of a composer who could take notes and put them together to make beautiful music. A gifted speaker who knew how to use words to move people was called wise by those who heard him. The word means to be skilled in some area of life. Wisdom in the book of Proverbs might be defined as the ability to live life skillfully from God's point of view. It comes from viewing life from a vertical perspective and acting accordingly.

That's why the first step in acquiring wisdom is simply to desire it more than anything else. Like everything else in the spiritual realm, wisdom is free for the asking, but it will cost you all you have. Because it is supreme among the virtues, it cannot be had at a bargain basement price. Let no man think he will become wise by accident. No such thing has ever happened since the beginning of creation. No, a man must search after wisdom as if he were searching for silver or gold; he must set aside trivial pursuits in favor of that which comes only from God.

You must turn from evil if you truly want wisdom. In one place we are told that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10); in another, that to fear the Lord means hating evil (8:13). You can live in the darkness or you can walk in the light, but you cannot do both at the same time. God invites you to a brand-new life. Do you want wisdom? Then "come . . . eat. . . drink. . . leave . . . walk" (9:5-6). You can have it if you want it, but you must make the decision and pursue wisdom with all your heart.

But there is a further step you must take. It involves humbling yourself, admitting your need, confessing your lack, and asking God to help you. Several times Solomon warns against the man who is "wise in his own eyes" (26:12; 28:11). If you think you have arrived-well, you're right, for with that attitude, you aren't going to go any further with the Lord.

After his retirement, someone asked Charlie Riggs the secret of his success in overseeing follow-up and new believer discipleship for the Billy Graham organization. "Every day I always prayed, 'Lord, put me in over my head.' That way I knew if the Lord didn't help me, I was sunk," he replied. Solomon would heartily approve.

If you want wisdom, you can have it. It's free, but it will cost you all you have.

Lord, I seek Your wisdom-nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.

In what areas of your life do you need God's wisdom? What do you think it will cost you to get it?

Proverbs 4:18 PROGRESS Walking Toward the Light

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. Proverbs 4:18

Here is a wonderful promise for the believer. God has ordained that as we walk in His ways, obedient to His will, our path will grow brighter and brighter. Theologians call this "progressive sanctification," which refers to the process whereby we are changed little by

little, day by day into the likeness of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18).

This is God's promise, but like most of His promises, it isn't fulfilled all at once. No matter how long we live, God has more light for us to receive. We'll never be completely in "the light" until we stand in the presence of Jesus, the Light of the world.

Not long ago I ran into a friend who is involved in a twelve-step program. As we talked, he passed along a slogan that he first learned in his weekly meetings: "Our goal is not perfection, but progress."

A little bell started ringing in my mind when I heard those words. "Not perfection, but progress." My friend told me that whenever he falls back into his old way of thinking, he feels so defeated he wants to give up. When that happens, he said, the key is to remember that his goal is not perfection-which is always unattainable- but simple day-by-day progress.

What difference does it make?

Perfection says, "I must do this right all the time or I am a failure." Progress says, "I know I'm going to fail occasionally, but that won't stop me from getting up and trying again."

Perfection says, "If I fail, people will think I'm a loser." Progress says, "If I fail, people will understand as long as I don't give up and quit."

Perfection says, "It's wrong to admit my weaknesses." Progress says, "Admitting my weaknesses is the only way to get better."

Perfection says, "I've got all the answers." Progress says, "I've got a few answers and a lot of questions."

Perfection says, "It's not my fault." Progress says, "I was wrong."

Perfection says, "I can do it by myself." Progress says, "I think I can do it, but I need the help of God and a few good friends."

If we dwell on our failures, we will soon grow despondent. Who among us has not made mistakes that today make us blush with shame? But the past is more than a record of personal failure. It's also the story of God's amazing grace to us. Time after time God bailed us out when by all rights He should have given up on us. We were bankrupt and badly overdrawn in the Bank of Heaven when suddenly we discovered Someone had put more grace in our account.

In a fallen world we should not be surprised that we fall flat on our faces from time to time. It's what you do after you fall that makes all the difference. Remember, with God's help you can get back up and start moving in the right direction again.

Lord Jesus, You are a wonderful Savior. May I never delay when You call me to take another step toward the light. Amen.

How would you chart your spiritual growth over the last five years? In what areas would you most like to grow in the next five years?

Name several ways in which you have experienced God's grace recently.

Proverbs 4:23 HEART **Where Life Makes Up Its Mind**

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4:23

The term heart in the Bible generally refers to the innermost part of life. It is the decision-making center, the source of motives, the seat of the passions, and the center of the conscience. It is truly the place "where life makes up its mind."

Proverbs has a great deal to say about the heart. It is the source of wisdom (2:10) and understanding (8:5, KJV), the origin of both deceit (6:14) and joy (15:30). The heart may backslide (14:14, KJV) or trust in God (3:5). It may be cheerful (15:13), prideful (16:5), bitter (14:10), haughty (18:12), or prudent (18:15, KJV). The heart may lust after an adulterous woman (6:25), rage against the Lord (19:3), and eventually be hardened against God altogether (28:14). The Lord tests the heart (17:3) because He knows what is in it (24:12), which is why the heart must be guarded all the time (4:23).

Jesus almost certainly had this verse in mind when He spoke to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34b: "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." This verse cuts both ways. Whatever is on the inside will eventually come out-whether good or bad (v. 35). If a person's heart is dirty, he cannot produce purity in his life. Likewise, if the heart is stayed on the Lord, it will be seen on the outside eventually. The King James Version of Proverbs 23:7 reads, "As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he."

- If you think angry thoughts, angry words are sure to follow.
- If you fill your mind with sexual fantasies, your body will find a way to fulfill those desires.
- If you dwell on your problems, they will soon overwhelm you.
- If you feel like a victim, soon you will become one.
- If you give way to worry, don't be surprised when you get ulcers.
- If you focus on how others misunderstand you, you will soon become angry and bitter.

What goes in must come out. Sooner or later your thoughts translate into reality. You're not what you think you are, but what you think, you are.

The flip side is also true.

- If you focus on the truth, you will speak the truth.
- If you look on noble things, nobility will mark your life.
- If you seek out lovely things, your life will be lovely to others.
- If you dwell on the right, the wrong will seem less attractive to you.
- If you look for virtue, you will find it.
- If you search for higher things, you will elevate your own life.

Recently a friend sent me this prayer from the Book of Common Prayer. It seems a fitting way to apply the words of Proverbs 4:23.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your Holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

What words would you use to describe the state of your heart right now?

What has your heart been dwelling on recently? What has that produced in your own life?

PROVERBS 5

Proverbs 5 - Purity: Staying Clean In A Dirty World – Proverbs 5 Sermon 5 of 12 from the Street Smarts series

October 1994 – This sermon is different, unusual, in that it is directed only to men. In 16 years as a pastor I have never directed a sermon only to men, but I am this time. My heart has been heavily burdened on this subject. As I thought and prayed about this sermon Tuesday afternoon as I was driving back from the Billy Graham Center, I felt an overwhelming sense from the Lord that I should address my remarks to men. I hope women gather something of usefulness and ask you to pray for the men.

Men, I am going to ask you to do two things. I am going to ask you to listen with all your heart, then I am going to ask you to respond.

My focus this morning is on sexual purity. The Bible has a great deal to say about the subject of purity, but the greater part of what it has to say has to do with the whole area of sexual purity, morality vs. immorality. So this sermon speaks as a brother to my brothers on the subject that every man here has thought greatly about—the subject of sexual purity.

I. The Trap Pr 5:1-5

It is not easy these days. There is a lot that militates against sexual purity. For one thing, the media is all against us. Every year, every week, every month, every day you turn on the TV, listen to the radio, buy a magazine, read a book, put a video into the VCR, and out comes a veritable tidal wave of sexual innuendo. Did you know that in America on the major TV network screens this year there will be over 20,000 acts of simulated or suggested physical intercourse? It will be there for everybody to see. And Ted Turner was absolutely right a few years ago when he said that the media is the most powerful force in America today. The media taken together is a vast conglomerate that is pushing our society in a particular direction—far more powerful than education, far more powerful than the churches of America, far more powerful than the government in Washington. Take the media moguls of today and the leading media companies of today, and those are the people who are setting the agenda for the American culture. They are not

setting it toward biblical morality. They are certainly not setting it toward purity.

There is a second reason it is difficult, and that is the scourge of pornography. Pornography in America today has become a multi-billion dollar business. I speak not just of adult pornography, but also of child pornography. It is as if somebody has turned a valve and a giant sewer has been let loose, pouring raw sewage of pornography across our society. We're all slimed with it today. I think the main change today is that if 40 years ago you wanted to buy a dirty magazine, you would go down to some disreputable portion of town with \$5.00 in your pocket, and would find some disreputable type person and slip them the \$5.00. They would reach down under the counter and out of that brown wrapping paper they would pull a magazine and off you'd slink back to the darkness to look at it. But today all kinds of pornography are easily available, not just to adults but to teenagers and children. I read an article the other day by somebody who said that the main problem facing our children today is boredom because by the age of 10 the average child in America will have seen, read or heard implied every kind of sexual activity there is. Between man and woman, man and man, woman and woman, man and beast, every possible grouping of degenerate and perverted sex that could be. The problem is that in the old days sex was something mysterious. There is no mystery anymore. Now kids are simply bored with it. We as men understand that.

Then there is the problem of divorce and remarriage. There was a time when the church of Jesus Christ was hardly affected by divorce. Thirty or forty years ago divorce was like the scarlet sin. People who had been divorced had a hard time coming to church on Sunday morning. I am glad things have changed in one sense, because now we tell people that it doesn't matter what their past is, we're glad to have them here. But I think it has been a mixed blessing, because as our society has begun to change and disintegrate and as the traditional family has begun to disintegrate and as the nuclear family has blown up and exploded into smithereens, we see now there is divorce and remarriage and sexual innuendo. We are now in a society where marriages aren't expected to last very long and where the traditional family isn't much in evidence anymore. Now it seems as if the moral standard of our society has gone downhill and now we're heading on down to the bottom.

And so, men, I want to ask the question this morning: where are the men who will stand against the tide? Where are the men who will dare to be different? Where are the men who cannot be bought and sold on the altar of sexual expediency? Where are the men who make a promise and keep it? Where are the men who say, "I will wait," and wait. Where are the men who say, "I won't," and don't. Where are the men who will say, "I am faithful," and are faithful? Where are those men?

I want to tell you something right up front. I think women have a right to know. I think our wives and daughters have a right to know. I think our parents, our grandchildren, the girls in the youth group have a right to know whether the guys they date are committed to moral purity.

I have been preaching from the book of Proverbs, taking a different subject each week. We come this time to the subject of purity. There are two whole chapters in the book of Proverbs that are devoted to the question of sexual purity. One is Proverbs Chapter 5 and the other is Chapter 7. Taken together, those two chapters form the longest, most extensive teaching on sexual morality that is found in all the pages of God's Word, in the Old Testament or the New Testament. I find it very interesting that the writer of Proverbs, King Solomon, decided to put down his words of wisdom. He felt it important to spend so much time and so much space on the subject of sexual purity. He knew, even back 3000 years ago, that it is hard to stay clean in a dirty world. It is hard to stay pure in a world that has decided to live in the sewer.

This sermon is about what Solomon had to say about the young people of his generation. In so doing, we are moving toward the answer to the question: where are the men who will stand against the tide?

Yesterday somebody came into my office and said to me, "Pastor Ray, what does that passage mean that talks about the qualifications for elders and says 'he must be the husband of one wife'?" There has been a lot of controversy about that. I will tell you what I think it means. At Calvary we understand it to mean that the elder, the spiritual leader, must be a one-woman man. That is not just a statement about whether you have ever been divorced or not. It is a statement about fidelity. It is a statement about honor, about integrity, about the focus of your life. That is to say, those who are spiritual leaders are expected to be men who are focused on just one woman. A husband, focused on just one wife. Not just that he has been married to her, but that his heart is toward her. Not just that he has never been divorced, but that he is focused on her and her alone, that she is the object of his affection, that he is not flirtatious, that he is not known as a ladies' man.

This week I made a list of the Christian men I have known who have fallen into immorality. There was a doctor, a principal, a businessman, an accountant, a pastor, another pastor, a union man, a small business owner, a pastor, most recently another pastor, an investor and another doctor. It took me only five minutes to come up with this list.

Where are the men who will stand against the tide? Where are the men whose word is their bond? Where are the men that the women of this church can trust? Where are the men who will say, "We will be different?"

II. The Warning Pr 5:7-14

Proverbs 5:1 says, “My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight, that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve knowledge.” Then he explains to the young men of his day how women with bad motives will come and lead a man away. He says, “For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.” It is true that most of us men struggle with the question of ego. Most of us for all our bravado on the outside basically are weak on the inside and need somebody to come alongside and scratch us on the head and pat us on the back and kiss us on the cheek and tell us how good we are and how good-looking we are and how wonderful, great, strong and powerful we are. That’s what this woman does. She comes along to this man who is craving affection and attention, and she says, “Oh, you’re so cute. You’re so strong. You’re so muscular. You are the best there is!” She’s got dripping lips. That’s a trap. And she uses her lips to entice you in. But read on to what it says. “In the end she’s bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.” Her lips promise honey, but her feet lead you straight to hell. Solomon warns men to be careful what they listen to, be careful of the women they look at, who they shower their attention on, because out there are women whose lips drip honey, but once they get you near, they stab you with a two-edged sword and lead you on the primrose path down to destruction. And he begins to give warning in verse 7, “Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house.” If you do, there are four things you are going to lose.

A. Your strength.

Proverbs 5:9 says, “Lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel.” If you follow a woman like that, your strength is going to be dissipated, you will end up weak in the end, old and grey and worn out.

B. Your wealth.

Proverbs 5:10 says, “Lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man’s house.” Men, if you decide to commit adultery, somebody is going to get rich—it’s going to be your wife’s lawyer. If you decide to break God’s law, you will be sorry in 1000 ways, and one of them is that you will be dragged into court and it will cost you thousands of dollars. You will watch all that money you saved disappear before your eyes.

C. Your health.

Proverbs 5:11 says, “At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent.” In the sex education classes at school they teach our kids three letters—STD, sexually transmitted disease. Way before the federal government discovered that, the Bible told us 3000 years ago that men who commit adultery are open to the risk of venereal disease, syphilis, hepatitis, a hundred other diseases, and worst of all, HIV developing into AIDS. We are seeing all of it in our society around us. Open the Tribune or the Sun Times and you see people dying of AIDS and these other sicknesses. Solomon warned us about it. He said if you go down that path and follow that road, this will be how you end up.

D. Your reputation.

Proverbs 5:14 says, “I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly.” Men, I hope you enjoy it, because we are going to find out about it. You will try to keep it quiet, you will do those telephone calls late at night, fax back and forth, write little notes in secret, but be sure that your sin will find you out. I hope you enjoy your ten or fifteen minutes of happiness because that is all that you are going to get.

Sometimes we talk about breaking the Ten Commandments. Brothers, nobody has ever broken the Ten Commandments. You are broken on the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are like the huge boulders at the base of the cliff. If you decide to jump off the cliff and you hit the boulders, you will not break the boulder, the boulder will break you. When you dare to disobey what God has said, you will pay the price.

Here is the problem in verse 12. “You will say, ‘How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors.’” “Brothers, the reason we get in trouble in this area is because we will not listen. I have to speak loudly about this, because I have to shout over ABC, NBC, CBS, Ted Turner, CNN, TNT, Lifetime, MTV, VH-1 and all the rest, and they are shouting a lot louder than I am. They are begging you to come on in. Come on in and have some fun. Come on in, nobody will know. God says don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it.

III. The Alternative Pr 5:15-20

Is there any good news? Yes. Proverbs 5:15 says, “Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.” God has given you a biblical way for handling the sexual drive within you. It’s called marriage. Read on. “A loving doe, a graceful deer —may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated (in the Hebrew this word means intoxicated) by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an

adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?" Listen to me, brothers. God has created a way that is better than looking at dirty movies. He has created a way that is better than going to some prostitute, a way that is better than looking at some cheap magazine, than flirting with someone else on the job. It's called loving your wife. If you love your wife and enjoy her and her body, you will find release for what God has put within you. Before Hugh Hefner messed it up, God thought it up. As man and woman come from the hand of Almighty God, they come as male and female. Within that relationship, the sexual relationship of a man and woman is holy, righteous, pure, good and ought to be enjoyed. That's what the Bible says. To men who feel this tremendous urge, don't go running somewhere else, go back to the wife that God has given you.

IV. The Reminder Pr 5:21-23

Finally, there is a warning at the end. Proverbs 5:21 says, "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord." That means he sees everything you do. He sees what you do, where you go, who you go with, even the thoughts you think. That ought to make you stop and think. Verse 22 says, "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast." That means that sexual sin is self-defeating. It never satisfies or brings happiness in the long run. This is the promise in verse 23, "He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly."

You want a good biblical example of what happens when a man ignores those words? Look at Solomon, the man who wrote those words. Later in his life, led astray by his many wives, he got into immorality and idolatry. He died basically a broken and ruined man. The man who wrote those words came to no good end.

First Steps in a New Direction

Do you want to make a new start? I give you three suggestions.

1. Listen to what God is saying. Turn off the TV, the radio, put those books away.
2. Talk it over with another godly man. If you have a struggle in this area, and about 75-80% of men do struggle in this area, don't fight this battle alone.
3. Stay away from temptation. This is very simple. Brothers, there are some books you ought not to read. I don't know which ones they are because I don't know what you're reading. But every time you read it you know it. There are some magazines you ought not to read, some radio stations you ought not to listen to, some TV programs you ought to turn off. There are some relationships you ought to be breaking in your life right now because they are leading you in the wrong direction. It could be a group of guys just kind of pulling you that way by their talk. Or it could be a relationship with a woman in your life that you know is not going in the right direction. You need to break it off right now. If you have the Holy Spirit living inside you and you know Jesus Christ, then you know what you ought to and ought not to be doing, so stay away from temptation. If you play with fire long enough, you will get burned.

The temptation to sexual impurity is very real. A man would be a fool to deny it. The problem is very prevalent because we live in a sex-saturated society. We're told in Proverbs 5 that we have a two-fold defense.

1. Stay out of harm's way.
2. Enjoy your own wife.

I tell you this on the basis of God's word. If you choose to ignore this teaching, you will die. We'll be having a premature funeral for you, because sexual immorality leads to an early grave.

Now then, where are the men who will say, "I will be different. I will be pure. You can count on me." The women deserve to be told by the men that they can trust us. And if they can't trust us, then they need to know that as well. Where are the men who will say, "Honey, you don't have to worry about me any more. If I go on a business trip, you don't have to worry about me. When I go into that motel room and see that stuff on top of the TV and can push a button, you don't have to worry about me any more. I'm not going to do that." For the sake of your wife, for the sake of your children, for the sake of your mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and for the sake of the unsaved multitudes out there who expect us to be different, where are the men who will say, "By God's grace I will be pure. I will be clean. I will be different."

I have spoken to men, but many men are single. Some are in high school, junior high, students at Moody Bible Institute or others colleges and universities in our area. Some are career professionals who are single. What are you supposed to do? That's another sermon. But let's understand this. God doesn't have two standards. He doesn't have a high standard for married men and a low standard for singles. You are still called to purity, faithfulness, holiness, and abstinence. I am not saying it is going to be easy. God set the bar, not me. Singles have to make the same commitment as married men.

There is a certain category of people who have dirty hands, dirty bodies. They would say, "You don't know where I've been, what

I've been doing." I am not that interested where you slept last night. I want to know where you're going to sleep tonight. I am not interested in what you read last week, I want to know what you are going to read this afternoon and tomorrow morning. I am not that concerned with what you watched on TV last week. I want to know what you will watch in the weeks to come. I am not too concerned about your past. I am concerned about your future. I want to know where you are going to go from here. If you are feeling guilty, the Lord can take that guilt away and you can have a fresh start.

If you don't know Jesus Christ, your deepest need is to know him.

I want to know where are the men who are willing to stand for purity and righteousness. Let's stand together in the name of Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 5:19 PASSION The Flame That Keeps a Marriage Burning

A loving doe, a graceful deer-may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Proverbs 5:19

There are many secrets to a good marriage, such as respect, communication, commitment, forgiveness, a good sense of humor, and the ability to disagree agreeably. While it may not be the most important factor, certainly a healthy sexual relationship must be high on any such list.

Solomon emphasizes this truth in his warning against adultery in Proverbs 5. First, he details the terrible cost of unfaithfulness. You lose your strength (v. 9), your wealth (v. 10), your health (v. 11), and your reputation (v. 14). Is there any good news? Yes. Proverbs 5:15-18 says,

Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

God has given you a biblical way for handling the sexual drive within you. It's called marriage. Verse 19 offers a graphic explanation: "A loving doe, a graceful deer-may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated [in the Hebrew this word means "intoxicated"] by her love." Verse 20 gives the alternative, "Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?" God has created a way that is better than looking at dirty movies. He has created a way that is better than going to some prostitute, a way that is better than looking at some cheap magazine, than flirting with someone else on the job. It's called loving your wife. If you love your wife and enjoy her and her body, you will find release for what God has put within you. As man and woman come from the hand of almighty God, they come as male and female. Within that relationship, the sexual relationship of a man and woman is holy, righteous, pure, good, and ought to be enjoyed. That's what the Bible says. To men who feel this tremendous sexual urge, don't go running somewhere else; go back to the wife God has given you.

There you have the whole case for marital faithfulness. Stay home and enjoy your wife. Don't be a fool and look at some other woman. Enjoy the wife you have. Let her body satisfy you. Be intoxicated with her love.

If you wonder about the propriety of that statement, I encourage you to read the Song of Solomon. It contains the Bible's most detailed description of romantic love between a man and a woman. It is sensual, yet pure; frank, yet chaste; erotic, yet ennobling. Many couples would find their love life rejuvenated simply by reading the Song of Solomon out loud together. So how does a wife keep her husband satisfied? God has given you a way. Men, how do you stay satisfied? Solomon-who had great experience in this area-spelled it out. Enjoy your wife. And not just her cooking either.

Father, I thank You for creating the human race as male and female. When I am tempted to misuse Your gifts, remind me of the joy that comes from following Your plan. Amen.

If you are single, will you commit yourself to sexual purity in all your relationships?

If you are married, will you commit yourself to faithfulness so that you can enjoy your spouse as God intended?

PROVERBS 6

Proverbs 6:6 Common Goal

“Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” Proverbs 6:6

Let’s start with a piece of Bible trivia. How many times are ants mentioned the Bible? Ants are mentioned in only one book once in Proverbs 6:6-8 and once in Proverbs 30:25.

Both references are worth considering. In Proverbs 6 Solomon invites us to study the ant for the purpose of learning wisdom. For instance, ants have no commanders (v. 7), yet they work together to store food for the winter (v. 8). Proverbs 30:25 makes a similar point: “Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer.” How do the ants with little strength manage to store enough food to make it through the long winter months? The answer is, they start early, they look to the future, they pool their strength, and they work together for the common good.

Several years ago I had a chance to see this for myself. As I was taking an afternoon walk, I looked down and saw a vast army of ants carrying an earthworm. It was so startling that I stopped to watch the action.

The earthworm shaped more or less like a treble clef appeared to have dried out in the sun. All around the earthworm were ants pushing away. And they were moving it one micro-inch at a time. I didn’t count but I would bet there were at least 50 ants pushing away at that poor dead earthworm. All around them were other ants, several hundred of them, “junior varsity” ants waiting for their chance to get in the game.

As I watched they slowly pushed that ant toward the grassy edge of the sidewalk. I didn’t stay for the denouement but I suppose the ants feasted on file of earthworm that night. There was certainly enough food to feed the whole colony for many days to come.

One thought lingered in my mind: A single ant is no match for an earthworm. As Proverbs 30:25 says, “Ants are creatures of little strength.” A single ant could push for a year and never move an earthworm off the sidewalk. But what one ant couldn’t do, many ants did by working together. Which is why Proverbs 6:6 says, “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise.”

By the way, it’s no accident that I saw the ants during the summer. You can’t find many earthworms in Chicago in January. The ants know that (with an instinct placed in them by God), so they gather their food now in preparation for the cold weather which must eventually come. Solomon saw the same thing I did and he praised the ants because “they store up their food in the summer.”

There’s a lesson here about individual weakness and united strength. There’s also a lesson about the value of working together to accomplish the greater good. And finally, there’s also a lesson about preparing for the future. An old children’s song says, “The ants go marching two by two, hurrah, hurrah.” Indeed they do, which is why they teach us that we can accomplish so much more when we work together.

As you have placed me in the body of Christ, Lord, so teach me to depend upon my brothers and sisters to accomplish your work. Amen

Going Deeper

Name a time recently when, by working with others, you accomplished a significant task.

Would your friends say that you are better at cooperation or competition?

Proverbs 6:6-11 Hard Work: The Reason We Get Out of Bed

September 1994 – Turn in your Bible to the Book of Proverbs, beginning in Chapter 6. We are going to begin the sermon with a number of verses from Proverbs.

Proverbs 6:6 “Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.”

Proverbs 10:4 “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in the summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.”

Proverbs 10:26 “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him.”

Proverbs 12:11 “He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.”

Proverbs 12:14 "From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things, as surely the work of his hands rewards him."

Proverbs 12:24 "Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor."

Proverbs 12:27 "The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions." That's a picture of the man who goes out hunting and he captures his prey, but because he is lazy, he doesn't even bother to roast it. He just lets it sit there and rot. It is just a game to him. He's not even taking care of the things he has, whereas a diligent man prizes everything that he has because he had to work to earn it.

Proverbs 13:4 "The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied."

Proverbs 14:23 "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." That is a warning to those of us who make our living speaking.

Proverbs 15:19 "The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway."

Proverbs 16:26 "The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on."

Proverbs 17:2 "A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers." That means that if you are a servant and you work hard, you will some day be promoted over a son who is legally due the inheritance. You will be honored because of your hard work.

Proverbs 18:9 "One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys."

Proverbs 19:24 "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish. He will not even bring it back to his mouth." It's the picture of the man who is so lazy that the food is put in front of him and he just dips his hand in the soup or in the dish and is too lazy to bring it to his mouth. He wants somebody to spoonfeed him.

Proverbs 20:4 "A sluggard does not plow in season, so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.

Proverbs 20:13 "Do not love sleep or you will grow poor. Stay awake and you will have food to spare."

Proverbs 21:5 "The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty."

Proverbs 21:17 "He who loves pleasure will become poor. Whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich."

Proverbs 21:25 "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him because his hands refuse to work. All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing."

Proverbs 22:13 "The sluggard says, 'There's a lion outside' or 'I'll be murdered in the streets' " This is the man who makes silly excuses for not going to work.

Proverbs 22:29 "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings. He will not serve before obscure men." This is an important verse for children and young adults, because we are told over and over again that it is not what you know, it's who you know. There is some truth to that. But a more fundamental truth is this: the key to success in life is finding out what it is that you like to do, what it is that is the passion of your life, and then become very good at it. Be skilled in what excites you in life, because once you have determined what it is that God has gifted you to do, if you will become skilled at it, you will not serve before obscure men. You will rise until you serve before kings. That is the word of God.

Proverbs 24:27 "Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready. After that, build your house." Interpreted, this means, take care of business first, then take care of your personal affairs.

Proverbs 24:30 "I went past the field of the sluggard and past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgement. Thorns had come up everywhere. The ground was covered with weeds and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

Proverbs 26:14 "As the door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed." He just rolls over and puts the pillow over his head and doesn't get up in the morning. He just sleeps his life away.

Proverbs "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly.

Proverbs 27: "He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit and he who looks after his master will be honored." That is to say, when you watch out for your own affairs, and then when you take care of the business that you are employed in, you will be honored.

Proverbs 27:23 "Be sure you know the condition of your flocks. Give careful attention to your herds. For riches do not endure forever and the crown is not secure for all generations." Hard work yesterday does not guarantee tomorrow's success. Hard work yesterday has to be followed up with hard work today to guarantee tomorrow's prosperity.

Proverbs "When the hay is removed and new growth appeared and the grass from the hills is gathered in, what will happen when the harvest does come in? The lambs will provide you with clothing and goats with the price of a field. You will have plenty of goat's milk to feed you and your family and to nourish your servant girls."

I am struck with how much Proverbs has to say about hard work. I did not read every single verse that addresses this subject. There are other verses in there that apply to the whole topic of hard work. I am impressed and amazed with how much God's Word has to say about it.

This is Labor Day Weekend, the weekend when everybody who can go somewhere goes somewhere so they can play for one last weekend because the real hard work of the last part of the year starts on Tuesday morning.

In all of life, every day you face a choice of going one of two ways. You can go the easy way or the hard way. The easy way is the way of procrastination. It is the way of staying in bed. It is the way of saying it doesn't matter whether I work today or not, it doesn't matter what time I show up at work, it doesn't matter if I check out of here a few minutes early. The easy way is the way of saying the boss isn't around, nobody is seeing me, it is good enough for government work. The easy way is saying take it easy, slow down, back off, don't have a heart attack. It is saying tomorrow. It is the way of no plans, no forethought, no enthusiasm, no diligence. That is the easy way. It is the soft and cuddly way. It is the pleasurable and luxurious way. It's the way of laziness, the way of the sluggard. Understand something. All of us are born on the easy way. What does the Bible say? "Foolishness is born in the heart of a child." We're born wanting to go the easy way. That's what the sin nature does. It says, "Take a short cut. Cheat if you have to. Cut some corners. Pull some strings. Take it easy. Don't work too hard. Where's the fire? Slow down, man." That's the way our society is going today. Our number one concern now is not what is the work, but how much vacation time do we get? It's not what job do you want me to do, but how many benefits can I get? How much time off? How many days and weekends off? That's American society today.

Here's the hard way. It is the way of getting up early and staying up late. It is the way of working with your hands. It is preparation, long-range planning, goal setting, future orientation, diligence, forethought, preparation, showing up for work on time, giving eight hours of work for eight hours pay, doing what you're told and then doing what needs to be done even if you're not told.

God is over on the hard road. He is not with the couch potatoes. That's where we are. The hard road looks difficult and daunting. All of us would rather be on the easy road. God is calling all of us to the hard road.

Do you want to know the ironic thing between the easy road and the hard road? The easy road looks easy but once you get on it, it turns into the hard road. And the hard road looks hard but once you do the hard thing in life, it turns out to be the easy thing. The easy road is deceptive. It is the way of destruction, poverty, starvation and desperation. It is the way of total financial collapse, the way to wasted days, wasted weeks, wasted months, wasted lives. The hard road which appears to be so difficult is ultimately the road of prosperity, the road of wealth and blessing, the road of fulfillment, happiness, and personal satisfaction. It is the road that leads you to the top. The easy road takes you down to the bottom. The only road that goes to the top is the hard road. It is tough, but it is the only one that goes where you want to go with your life.

We were on vacation a few weeks ago. Let the records show I am in favor of vacations. We went down to Mississippi and saw my brother, then went to Memphis, to Graceland (that's another story), to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, the biggest tourist trap east of the Mississippi River, and were meandering our way back up toward Chicago. We came through Knoxville and got on I-75 heading toward Lexington and Cincinnati. We weren't in any hurry, and soon it was past lunch time. Sounds began to come from the back seat indicating that an imminent stop would be well advised. We stopped in a little town called Corbin, Kentucky. We drove through that little town, looking for a fast food place.

There was a sign up that said, "Visit the original Kentucky Fried Chicken." We went there and found out that it was a regular KFC, but besides being a restaurant, it was also a museum. Back in 1940 a man named Harlan Sanders was in Corbin, KY and he bought this old dilapidated restaurant and built a motel which was very advanced for that day. There was one in Asheville, NC and one in Corbin, KY. The number one recipe in the restaurant at the motel was the best fried chicken in all the state of Kentucky, made from 11 herbs and spices. 1

In 1956, 16 years later, he was successful, but he was not known. He was just successful locally. He was now 66 years old, the time when most men retire. Calamity struck—I-75 was being built, and would bypass the town of Corbin, KY, meaning nobody would stop at the motel or eat at his restaurant. If he was going to survive, he had to do something else. So he sold his restaurant and the motel and went into the chicken spice business. supplying to restaurants. Out of that little business, at the age of 66, came the idea to start

a restaurant where people would come in and buy nothing but fried chicken which used his 11 herbs and spices, and he decided to call it Kentucky Fried Chicken. The rest is history.

If you go to Corbin, KY and if you visit that museum at the restaurant, there is a sign that I took pictures of. It is the credo of Colonel Harlan Sanders. It is called "The Hard Way." "It is comparatively easy to prosper by trickery, the violation of confidence, oppression of the weak, sharp practices, cutting corners, all those methods we are so prone to pileate and condone as business shrewdness. It is difficult to prosper by the keeping of promises, the deliverance of value and goods and services and deeds and denouncing the so-called shrewdness with sound merit and good ethics. The easy way is efficacious and speedy, the hard way arduous and long. But as the clock ticks away, the easy way becomes harder, and the hard way becomes easier. As the calendar records the years, it becomes increasingly evident that the easy way rests upon a hazardous foundation of shifting sands, whereas the hard way builds solidly a foundation of confidence that cannot be swept away. Thus we build it."

The next time you go to Kentucky Fried Chicken, remember that those thousands of restaurants all over America and now all over the world were started by a man who at the age of 66 decided that he was not going to go the easy way. He, by the way, was a born again Christian. He decided that at the age of retirement he was going to go the hard way and every one of those restaurants is a testimony to the fact that when you take the easy way, it turns out hard but when you take the hard way of hard work and diligence, it always ultimately turns out to be the only easy way there it.

I close this sermon with several conclusions.

1) Hard work is a Christian virtue. It is a sign of increasing godliness. Somebody said to me, "Well, what about the work-aholics?" I answered, "One sermon at a time, please. I am preaching about the value of hard work. We'll come to the other later." I am not talking about the number of hours that you work. I am not calling on you to work 70 or 80 or 90 or 100 hours a week. I am calling on you not to let life pass you by. The call to hard work is a call to truly purposeful living. It is a call not to waste your life but to get up and get out and do something with the opportunities that God has placed before you. Don't just sit there, don't just roll over, don't be a couch potato. Get up and in the name of God do something. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. Use your power, your intelligence, your vision, your gifts and all that God gave you, to do something. So many Christians just while away the hours, looking at the flowers, consulting with the rain. All the while the game of life is being played all around us and we are sitting on the bench, sound asleep.

2) Though your work will differ from my work and from everybody else's work, the qualities of success are always the same: planning, forethought, diligence, enthusiasm and full commitment to whatever God has called you to do.

3) Rest and relaxation are good. They too are a gift from God, but they are meant to be a reward for hard work and preparation for more hard work.

4) Hard work is God's work when you are doing what God wants you to do.

5) God honors hard workers by crowning them with his personal blessing.

There is a world out there. Get in it. There is something going on out there. Don't sit on the sidelines. God gave you two hands. Use them. God gave you a voice. Speak up. God gave you two feet. Go on a journey. Do something with the life that God gave you. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

Here is the application. What is it that you know you need to do this week that is undone in your life? It will take you less than three seconds to answer that question. I already know what it is in my life. Now that you know what it is, name it. Plan it. Schedule it. Do it. This week. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might because in the grave where you are going there is no planning, no foresight, no work. You want to rest? You will have time later. Go out to the cemetery. There is not much work out there.

An old gospel song says it this way:

Oh land of rest, for thee I sigh

When will the moment come

When I can lay my burden down

And dwell in peace at home?

We'll work 'til Jesus comes

We'll work 'til Jesus comes

We'll work 'til Jesus comes

Then we'll be gathered home.

May God help us to let our light shine this week by going from this place and doing hard work for the glory of God. Amen.

Proverbs 6:6 Cooperation

Proverbs 6:6 COOPERATION Working with Others on a Common Goal –

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! Proverbs 6:6

Let's start with a piece of Bible trivia. How many times are ants mentioned in the Bible? Ants are mentioned in only one book—once in Proverbs 6:6-8 and once in Proverbs 30:25.

Both references are worth considering. In Proverbs 6, Solomon invites us to study the ant for the purpose of learning wisdom. For instance, ants have no commanders (v. 7), yet they work together to store food for the winter (v. 8). Proverbs 30:25 makes a similar point: "Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer." How do the ants with little strength manage to store enough food to make it through the long winter months? The answer is, they start early, they look to the future, they pool their strength, and they work together for the common good.

Several years ago I had a chance to see this for myself. As I was taking an afternoon walk, I looked down and saw a vast army of ants carrying an earthworm. It was so startling that I stopped to watch the action.

The earthworm-shaped more or less like a treble clef appeared to have dried out in the sun. All around the earthworm were ants, pushing away. And they were moving it one micro-inch at a time. I didn't count, but I would bet there were at least fifty ants pushing away at that poor dead earthworm. All around them were other ants, several hundred of them, "junior varsity" ants waiting for their chance to get in the game.

As I watched, they slowly pushed that worm toward the grassy edge of the sidewalk. I didn't stay for the denouement, but I suppose the ants feasted on filets of earthworm that night. There was certainly enough food to feed the whole colony for many days to come.

One thought lingered in my mind: A single ant is no match for an earthworm. As Proverbs 30:25 says, "Ants are creatures of little strength." A single ant could push for a year and never move an earthworm off the sidewalk. But what one ant couldn't do, many ants did by working together. Which is why Proverbs 6:6 says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!"

By the way, it's no accident that I saw the ants during the summer. You can't find many earthworms in Chicago in January. The ants know that (with an instinct placed in them by God), so they gather their food early in preparation for the cold weather that must eventually come. Solomon saw the same thing I did, and he praised the ants because "they store up their food in the summer."

There's a lesson here about individual weakness and united strength. There's also a lesson about the value of working together to accomplish the greater good. And finally, there's also a lesson about preparing for the future.

An old children's song says, "The ants go marching two by two, hurrah, hurrah." Indeed they do, which is why they teach us that we can accomplish so much more when we work together.

As You have placed me in the body of Christ, Lord, so teach me to depend upon my brothers and sisters to accomplish Your work. Amen.

Name a time recently when, by working with others, you accomplished a significant task.

Would your friends say that you are better at cooperation or competition?

Proverbs 6:20 PARENTS Treat Them with Respect

My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Proverbs 6:20

The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. Proverbs 30:17

The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). For too long we have relegated this

commandment to young children and sometimes even used it as a club over their heads. But God never intended that this commandment be aimed primarily at young children. This commandment is primarily for grown-up children. It is God's way of telling us how to treat our parents!

But how can we honor our parents when we no longer live under their authority? First, by speaking well of them. Sometimes I hear adults saying terribly disrespectful things about their parents. They speak with bitterness and anger over things that happened many years ago. That raises a question: How do you speak well of people who hurt you deeply? Here I think we're left with some advice we all learned as children. "If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all." Speak well of your parents if you can; if you can't, refuse to speak evil of them.

Second, by obeying them. This sounds odd to our modern way of thinking. For many people the whole point of moving away from home is so that you won't have to obey your parents anymore. Most of us have heard it said that while you don't have to obey your parents, you always have to honor them. That's true enough, but it doesn't grasp the full biblical implication of the fifth commandment. In God's eyes we are forever children, always under obligation to honor and-as far as possible-to obey our parents.

Third, we honor our parents by forgiving them. Here we come to the heart of the problem for many people. How do you honor parents who have hurt and abused you? By choosing to forgive the unforgivable. We must not use the hurts of the past as an excuse to evade this commandment. Think of it this way: If we do not forgive our parents, we may repeat their mistakes with our own children.

Fourth, by not forsaking them. At this point we have the example of Jesus who, while hanging on the cross, took time to remember His aging mother. To His mother He said, "Dear woman, here is your son." To John He said, "Here is your mother" (see John 19:26-27). While dying for the sins of the world, He took time to keep the fifth commandment!

D. L. Moody said, "I have lived over sixty years, and I have learned one thing if I have learned nothing else-no man or woman who dishonors his father or mother ever prospers."

This commandment is the one that helps you obey all the rest. The first place you can show the reality of your religion is at home. To say it another way, religion that doesn't begin at home doesn't begin at all.

Lord God, if I would call You heavenly Father, I must learn to honor my earthly father and mother. Show me what that means. Amen.

Do you find it easy to honor your parents? Why or why not?

Which of the four steps listed above is most difficult for you? Name one way you could honor your parents today.

PROVERBS 7

Proverbs 7:4-5 PURITY Staying Clean in a Dirty World

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinsman; they will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words. Proverbs 7:4-5

Solomon felt so strongly about the dangers of sexual temptation that he devoted three chapters of Proverbs (5-7) to this subject. Three thousand years have passed and his words still ring true. How can we stay pure in a very dirty world? There are four decisions you must make.

First, you must purposely avoid lust-producing situations. This is an extremely personal matter. Each one must know his own limits. What produces lust in my life may bore you. What makes you think impure thoughts may put me to sleep. That's why it's hard to draw absolute limits. But there is a line you must not cross. Make sure you know where that line is for you-and then make sure you don't cross it!

Second, you must purposely avoid provoking lust in other people. This is another very sensitive area. Sometimes we Christians act as if freedom in Christ means we no longer need to worry about how other people think or feel. But that's not true. We have to be concerned about the way we dress, but purity in this area also involves our language and our casual physical contact. It even includes our facial language-the smile, the glance, the wink, the knowing look. The rule is simple: Don't lead other people on! Don't be a tease! Don't be a flirt! Even if "nothing" happens, you have defrauded the other person.

Third, you must purposely choose purity. The decision to choose purity must be made in advance, based on a daily walk with God and grounded in a life of healthy activity.

So many people think Christianity is prudish. Far from it. Christianity is not prudish, but it is modest and clean. This week I ran across a striking sentence: "The way to clean out a stable is not with a shovel but with the Mississippi River." Nothing will clean out the corners of your life like a commitment to a life filled with wholesome activity. When the "Dos" outweigh the "Don'ts," you will begin to experience the joy of purity and the thrill of victory.

But you must make the choice! Not just once-but every single day-and often you must make the choice many times a day.

Fourth, you must be honest about your personal struggles. Lust is such a tricky matter that you will never win the victory on your own. Let me say that again: You will never win the victory over lust simply by praying by yourself. God never intended you to fight this battle alone.

Find a friend or a small group of friends and ask them to hold you accountable. Tell them you want them to ask you hard questions. Tell them not to let you off easily. Ask them to be tough enough so that you can't get by with sin.

The temptation to sexual impurity is very real. A man would be a fool to deny it. But you can stay clean- even in this dirty world-if you are willing to pay the price.

Heavenly Father, purify my heart, so that I will be clean from the inside out. Amen.

Which one of the four decisions do you most need to make right now? Who do you need to tell about the decision you are making?

What does it mean to you to purposely choose purity?

PROVERBS 8

Proverbs 8:32 Obedience The Benefits of Playing by the Rules

Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Proverbs 8:32

Here is a simple promise from God. Those who walk in the way of wisdom will be blessed. The word listen means to hear and to obey. After all, any fool can hear the truth, but the truth means nothing until it has penetrated the heart and changed the way you live. A thousand sermons on purity won't keep you from a tragic mistake until you set your heart to obey God's command.

A friend pressed a cartoon into my hand just before a worship service. Because it was a long day and I was busy, I didn't get a chance to look at it until Monday. The cartoon strip is called "Hagar the Horrible." It shows a short, squatly Viking laboring up a steep, snow-covered mountain. As he nears the top, he cries out, "What is the key to happiness?" The wise man answers, "Abstinence, poverty, fasting and celibacy." With a crestfallen look, the Viking shouts, "Is there anyone else up there I could talk to?"

Good question. All of us would like it if there were someone else "up there" who would tell us what we really want to hear-that life is basically easy, that the key to happiness is self-indulgence, that you can take shortcuts and still make it to the top.

As I ponder the matter, the following facts seem true to me:

1. Life is hard.
2. Even the best days are filled with difficulty.
3. We're all secretly looking for "someone else" to tell us what we want to hear.
4. Abstinence, poverty, fasting, and celibacy are not much fun-but they bring more lasting joy than their opposites.
5. Happiness isn't found in self-indulgence.
6. In general, happiness isn't "found" at all.
7. Happiness comes as a by-product of other things.
8. There is little, if any, correlation between leisure, luxury, and happiness.

9. Obedience won't necessarily make you happy, but disobedience will definitely disappoint you in the end.

On the campus of the Moody Bible Institute there is a small plaque on the brick wall of one of the dormitories. This is what it says: "Near this spot in the spring of 1889 Dwight L. Moody knelt in prayer and asked God for this land on which to build a Bible school." Underneath are the words of 1 John 2:17 from the King James Version: "He that doeth the will of God abideth forever."

Was D. L. Moody a happy man? Historians tell us that he was a jovial, gregarious man whose heart burned with a passion to win the lost to Jesus Christ. His life stands as a testimony that the happiest people on earth are those who seek and find the will of God. If you seek happiness, you will never find it; if you seek to do the will of God, you will find more happiness by accident than most people find on purpose.

Lord God, I want to do Your will more than anything else. If that is not true of me, do whatever it takes to make it true. Amen.

Do you agree that happiness is a by-product of doing the will of God? How does your life match up with that principle? What act of obedience have you been putting off? What are you going to do about it?

PROVERBS 10

Proverbs 10:4 DILIGENCE Staying by the Stuff

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. Proverbs 10:4

Ponder this definition of diligence: "Long, steady application to one's occupation or studies; persistent effort." That's clear, isn't it? If you want to make it to the top in any field of endeavor, you need many things working in your favor. Some of them can't be orchestrated but must be supplied by the Lord's providential favor. However, Solomon teaches us that you can tip the scales of life in your favor through "long, steady application" and "persistent effort."

Often that will require persistence in the face of doubt and ridicule. Michelangelo took a piece of marble that no one else could use and eventually produced the incomparable David. Christopher Columbus ignored his critics and eventually discovered America. Skeptics tried to convince Henry Ford to abandon his idea of a mass-produced motorcar. People laughed at Wilbur and Orville Wright when they attempted to create a flying machine. But in each case diligence won the day.

Most of us have heard the story of Thomas Edison and the invention of the incandescent light bulb. For months he struggled to find the proper material for the filament inside the bulb. Nothing seemed to work. Some materials would conduct electricity but wouldn't produce light; others produced light but immediately burned up. Month after month he stayed in his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, doggedly trying one combination after another. Eventually he had tried 799 different combinations. "Don't you feel like you've wasted your time?" someone asked him. "Oh no," Edison replied, "now I know 799 things that won't work."

In a recent article in Leaders for Today, Harold Keown examined the lives of Christian leaders from many countries and asked how it was that, in the face of intense opposition, they accomplished so much for Jesus Christ. His conclusion startled me: "People serious about achieving seemingly impossible goals often assume the stance of a turtle."

It sounds strange because turtles seem like anything but a role model for outstanding achievers. But it's true. As Aesop pointed out several thousand years ago, the turtle plods along even though he is soon passed by the swift-running hare. But who gets to the finish line first? The turtle, because he just kept on going. That's a turtle truism: Successful people just keep on going despite the opposition, despite their apparent lack of progress, despite the fact that others pass them by. They stay the course, keep moving ahead, always marching toward godly goals.

Calvin Coolidge summed it up well when he said, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (KJV). Do you feel defeated today, trapped on a dead-end street? Remember the turtle and take hope. You can do more than you think you can.

Lord God, forgive me for giving up too soon. Create in me new determination to keep on moving in the right direction. Amen.

Have you ever known someone who succeeded in some worthwhile project through nothing more than sheer determination and persistence?

Can you think of a part of your life where you are currently tempted to give up too soon? What do you need to do about it?

Proverbs 10:8 SUBMISSION How God Works Through Others

The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin. Proverbs 10:8

Submission is one of the more difficult lessons to learn, especially when we have more wisdom than the person to whom we must submit. It's not that difficult to obey a person we admire greatly. Most of us will even obey people we don't like if they seem to know what they are talking about. But what do you do when you don't like the person, don't respect him, and truly believe he doesn't have a clue?

The temptation at that point is to become a "chattering fool." We talk back, we argue incessantly, we filibuster, we stonewall, we make excuses for not obeying, we stage a work slowdown, we gossip, we complain-we do everything but accept the commands of those in authority over us.

"But a chattering fool comes to ruin." Talking too much eventually gets us into trouble. We may end up losing our job or that promotion we coveted. It might mean that we irritate our superiors to the point that they take action against us.

Shouldn't we speak out when we have valid concerns? Yes, of course. But there is a fundamental difference between expressing a concern and refusing to accept direction from others.

Behind the principle of submission stands the truth of God's providence. If you believe that God works through the details of life, then you must also believe that He has placed you exactly where you are right now for a particular purpose. Consider Joseph. First he was Jacob's favored son; then he found himself in a pit; then in Potiphar's house; then in prison. Finally he became prime minister of Egypt and, as a result, was reunited with the brothers who sold him into slavery. In the end he could confidently proclaim, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, NKJV).

When everything else is stripped away, we are to accept commands from others because we believe in God, not because we believe in the person giving commands. He (or she) may or may not be a worthy person. We may in fact be more qualified. But that has nothing to do with how we respond. If we believe that God is in charge of where we are right now, we can obey with joy (if not with happiness), because we know with certainty that by receiving commands from others, we are ultimately obeying God-who definitely has more wisdom than we do.

This has very practical ramifications for Christian wives who struggle with the issue of submission to their husbands. In the light of God's providence, submission means believing that God is able to work through your husband to accomplish His will in your life, to protect your interests, and to meet your deepest needs. To state the matter this way does not answer every question, nor does it make submission easy, but at least it puts the matter in the proper context-not between a wife and her husband but ultimately between a woman and her God.

Submission to any human authority doesn't come naturally to any of us. But if we believe in God and His involvement in our lives, we can find the strength to submit when we're tempted to become chattering fools.

Lord, give me eyes to see Your invisible hand at work through those in authority over me. Amen.

At what points in your life are you most tempted to talk back instead of obey?

How do you personally define the difference between expressing valid concerns and refusing to accept direction from others?

Proverbs 10:9 INTEGRITY The Ultimate Virtue

The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out. Proverbs 10:9

The dictionary uses words such as whole and complete to describe what integrity means. To borrow a modern expression, a man with integrity "has his act together." There are no loose ends that threaten his reputation.

Recently I ran across a full-page ad for an international relief organization. The picture shows a young child-perhaps from Central America or possibly Asia- writing at her desk. The ad copy contains the following sentence: "Integrity. It's as simple as being what you say you are." That strikes me as an excellent definition of integrity. It means being what you say you are-all the time and in every situation.

To be called a man of integrity is the highest possible compliment. Several years ago my older brother took me to visit a cemetery outside Florence, Alabama, near the remains of an antebellum mansion called Forks of Cypress. The mansion was built in the 1820s by James Jackson, an early settler of northwest Alabama. My brother and I walked among the ruins of the mansion and then crossed the country road into the dense forest on the other side. After a quarter mile we found the Jackson family cemetery. There is no sign marking the spot, only a five-foot-high stone wall surrounding about fifty graves. Inside we found a tall marker over James Jackson's grave, with a long inscription extolling his virtues, which were many.

I walked along, my eyes fastened on the marker for one of his sons, William Moore Jackson. There was his name, the dates 1824-1891, and this simple five-word epitaph: "A man of unquestioned integrity."

Five words to sum up an entire life. Sixty-plus years distilled into five words. But, oh, what truth they tell.

"A man of unquestioned integrity." I cannot think of a better tribute. Then the thought came: What will they put on my tombstone?

At a recent leadership retreat, the speaker hammered away at one point: A ministry with integrity will stand the test of time. Everything else fades away-fads come and go, glitz will attract people but it won't hold them, good programs lose their appeal, new buildings grow old, pastors stay for a while and then leave. But integrity never goes out of style. If you have it, people trust you; if you don't, they don't. And if you lose their trust, it's hard to get it back.

We hear a lot these days about family values and the need to rediscover virtue in American society. The basic building blocks of virtue are actually very simple. We've known them all along:

Honesty, perseverance, faithfulness, determination, kindness, loyalty, self-control.

We've known these truths since the beginning of time. The problem isn't in the knowing; it's in the doing.

The mind wanders back to a forgotten tombstone and to those five simple words: "A man of unquestioned integrity." The more you think about it, the greater it seems. Five words aren't much to sum up a life of sixty-seven years, but those five will do nicely. In fact, you could do much worse.

I'm not sure what anyone will write on my tombstone. But I wouldn't mind if someone felt I deserved those five words.

Lord, help me to live in such a way that integrity will be one of the first things people think of when they think of me. Amen.

Related Sermon

January 1995 – I want to begin this sermon by giving you a verse of Scripture that is hard to know where it fits. It is Proverbs 24:26. It seems to fit well on the first Sunday of the new year. It says, "An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips." What does that mean? What is the relationship between an honest answer and a kiss on the lips. I think it is three things.

1. Just as it is relatively rare to be kissed on the lips, even so it is relatively rare to hear a true and honest answer.
2. Just as the kiss on the lips means more than the kiss on the cheek, even so an honest answer is a mark of true sincerity.
3. Just as a kiss on the lips can be and should be deeply satisfying to the soul, even so an honest answer is satisfying to the soul.

I was reading Proverbs, literally thumbing through it, and came across that verse. It seemed to me to say so much to us that we need to think about. An honest answer is as rare, as sincere and as satisfying as a kiss on the lips.

If you look in the the dictionary for the word integrity, what you will find is almost always a definition that includes the word "wholeness," because the very word integrity itself has the idea of that which is wholehearted, that which is completely honest, whole, complete and true. I actually did a little study in the Bible to see how many times the word integrity comes up. I am going to read you several verses.

The first is a reference to King David's integrity. It is found in Psalm 78:72. "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; and with skillful hands he led them." That text is telling us that the thing that made David's reign as king so wonderful was that he was a man who performed his task of leadership with integrity.

I Kings 9:4-5 is what the Lord said to Solomon, who followed his father, David. "As for you, if you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever." God told Solomon that he values integrity so much, that if he would be a man of integrity as David was, what God did for him, he would do for Solomon, and even more than that, and establish him on his throne forever.

I Chronicles 29:17 is what David said, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." That tells us two things. First, that God does indeed search the human heart. Second, what God is looking for inside the human heart is this quality of integrity.

Nehemiah 7:2 says, "I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do." That is an unusual phrase.

Proverbs 10:9 says, "The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out." The man of integrity has security in his life, whereas the man of crooked paths is going to be uncovered.

Proverbs 11:3 says, "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity." Notice the comparison between the man of integrity and the unfaithful who are destroyed by duplicity. What is integrity? It is wholeness of purpose, total honesty, a whole-hearted, blameless approach to life. It is the opposite of those unfaithful, unreliable people who say one thing and then do another.

Proverbs 13:6 says, "Righteousness guards the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner." We are being told that the man of integrity is kept straight by God.

Proverbs 29:10 says, "Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity and seek to kill the upright." That is a warning that if you decide to live according to integrity, not everybody will like the way you are living. Integrity will bring you protection from God, but it does not mean that you will have an easy road in the world.

Matthew 22:16 is a comment by the Pharisees who are talking to Jesus. "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity." That is important because that testimony comes from the Pharisees, who basically were trying to trap him. This is a testimony even by his enemies—even his enemies had to say that Jesus was a man of integrity. "You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are." Integrity means that you tell the truth, and aren't unduly swayed by human opinion.

Integrity is a combination of three things: honesty, dependability, and purity of motive.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday we went down to visit my brother Andy in Florence, Alabama. Andy asked me if I would like to go see a mansion built by a man who was a general for Andrew Jackson. I did, so he took our family out to a place called Cyprus Forks, which is about 12 miles west of Florence. There is a beautiful mansion that is mostly burned down. The columns are still remaining. The mansion is about 150 years old, built by General James Jackson (no relation) who was a general serving under General Andrew Jackson. Andy showed us around the remains of the mansion, then said he wanted to show us the cemetery. We crossed the road, way out in the country. Nobody else was living out there at all. We walked through the woods and down the dirt road until we arrived at the cemetery. It is the cemetery of the James Jackson family. Most of the graves in there are 150-160 years olds. There I saw the monument to General James Jackson, but I also saw the monuments to his sons who were buried in the graveyard. One caught my eye. It was one of the sons who served during the Civil War and who died about the time the Civil War was coming to an end. Underneath his name they had this sentence: A man of unquestioned integrity. What a phrase to put on your tombstone! A man whose integrity was so strong that during his life and even after his death, no one could call his integrity into question at all.

I want to give you the four marks of integrity, what it looks like in the life of the believer on a practical basis.

1. Integrity means telling the truth even when it hurts.

Proverbs 12:17 says, "A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies."

Proverbs 22:1 says, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." The first mark of integrity is that you tell the truth even when it hurts you.

Not long ago I had a discussion with a man who is living far away from here. This is a man who is undergoing a difficult and bloody, bitter divorce. The facts of it do not matter for my story. As I listened to his story, I could not say for sure who was right and who was wrong. It seems that in those situations there is plenty of guilty to pass around on both sides. As we talked about his upcoming divorce proceedings, this man told me that some things had been uncovered that he hoped would not come out in court. He said, "If I get up there, I will deny it." He would get on the stand and tell a lie because the truth would hurt him badly in the divorce proceedings. I looked at him straight in the eye and said, "My friend, whatever you do, tell the truth, even if it hurts you. Remember,

you can always get your money back, but you can't get your integrity back." You can't. Once that is gone, you can never really get it back again. If you do, it will take you years. Tell the truth even when it hurts you. Integrity means that you are an honest witness, that what you say is the truth of what actually is.

2. Integrity means keeping a promise when you would rather not.

Psalms 15:1 says, "Who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous." Then he gives a list of what it means to be righteous. Psalm 15:4 says, "He who keeps his oath even when it hurts." The man of integrity keeps his promise even when he would rather not. He keeps his oath even when it hurts. How do you do that? When you sign a contract, you are making a promise. When you use a credit card, you are making a promise. When you sign up to do something, you are making a promise. When you say you are going to join something, you are making a promise. When you set an appointment, you are making a promise. When you say you are going to teach a class, you are making a promise. When you say you will be there, you are making a promise. And the man of integrity keeps his promises even when he would rather not.

How can we be the kind of people who keep our promises?

- A. Watch your words.
- B. Make fewer promises.
- C. If you can't, don't say you can.
- D. If you don't know, say you don't know.
- E. Avoid rash vows.
- F. Learn to say no.

3. Integrity means that you confront problems when it would be easier to walk away.

Proverbs 27:5-6 says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." I like the King James much better here. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Sometimes being a man or woman of integrity means that you don't walk away from a problem. It means you see a problem and you hit it head on, when it would be easier and more convenient and pleasant to just walk away.

A couple of years ago I was talking with one of the women of this church. She had a very interesting statement that stuck in my mind and came back to me as I thought about this sermon. She was talking about somebody else in our congregation that she needed to go talk to. She said this, "Pastor Ray, it is not going to be easy for me to do this because I don't like doing this kind of thing. It won't be easy for me to say what needs to be said. But I have now learned that I am old enough to do what I have to do." Integrity means that you see a problem and hit it head-on.

Norman Schwartzkopf, the great general of the Persian Gulf War, gave this response when asked what was his secret of leadership. "I never walk past a problem. I never see something going wrong and forget about it. I always stop and confront it right there."

I remember something I was told by a fellow pastor who has been in his church in the Chicago area for 27-28 years now, and has built one of the great churches of the Chicago area. We were together one night and I asked him how he survived 25 years in a church. He said, "I learned years ago when I was just starting out in the ministry that my tendency was when I see a problem, it is easier to just walk away. I discovered that I had to fight that tendency. I discovered through hard experience that the first price you pay is always the cheapest." What that means is that the first price you pay in handling human relational conflicts is always the cheapest. The reason that we don't want to get involved in solving problems that we see around us is that we think that if we just wait, they will solve themselves. That is rarely the case. We think the price will go down if we wait. I have discovered that this pastor friend is right. It applies to marriage problems. It applies to parent-child problems. It applies to relationships of any kind within the family, at work, in the church. Integrity means that you see a problem and you deal with it when it comes up. Problems never get better when you ignore them. You may think you love someone too much to say anything. No, if you really love them, you would speak the truth. You would speak it in love, but you will speak the truth they need to hear. Integrity does not ignore the problems of life.

3. Integrity means forgiving when you'd rather hold a grudge.

Some of us have come into the new year with some bitterness over things that have happened in the past. Maybe as you look at the holiday season, you feel that you have been mistreated. May I remind you of two truths. First, you are to forgive because God has already forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. Second, you are to forgive because you promised God you would forgive. Every time you pray the Lord's Prayer you are promising to forgive. "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors."

You are to forgive because bitterness destroys, while forgiveness sets you free.

You are to forgive because forgiveness sets you free to minister to those who have hurt you. As long as you hold a grudge, you are chained to the past. As long as you are angry about the way you have been treated, you are still living back in the past.

I was having a conversation with somebody two or three weeks ago. A statement stuck in my mind. Out of the blue, she said, "I have decided to forgive him." That, my friend, is a Christian statement. Integrity chooses to forgive. Integrity means forgiving when you'd rather hold a grudge.

It is always good to think about how you want the year to go. This year we ought to be people of unquestioned integrity. We ought to be people of honesty, truthfulness, dependability, people of truly pure motives. That means telling the truth even when it hurts. That means keeping your promises when you'd rather not. That means confronting problems when it would be easier to walk away. That means forgiving others when you'd rather hold a grudge.

As we stand on the brink of a new year, we know that our Lord Jesus Christ was and is a man of unquestioned integrity. If you are going to follow him this year, you are going to walk in integrity, you are going to live in integrity, you're going to be honest, truthful, dependable. The good news is this: integrity may seem hard, but through Jesus Christ, it is really easy. Dishonesty may seem easy, but for the Christian it is always hard. Jesus Christ can give you the power to be a person of unquestioned integrity this year. Honesty, facing your problems, paying the price, forgiving others, keeping your promises.

It's going to be a great year. Let's go through it as men and women committed to the ultimate virtue: the virtue of integrity.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for a brand new year. Please help us as we move through it. Lord, without you we can do nothing, but through your power all things are possible. So help us to be truthful, honest, open, and straightforward in all of our relationships. Help us to be men and women who walk before you with integrity of heart this year. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Proverbs 10:26 PUNCTUALITY On Time Every Time

As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him. Proverbs 10:26

If you've ever sipped raw vinegar or stood downwind from a campfire, you know exactly what Solomon means. Raw vinegar is so sour it sets the teeth on edge. Hot smoke irritates the eyes. That's what a sluggard is like when you send him to do a job.

This poor fellow has several problems. He doesn't understand why you want him when you could have chosen old Joe at the next desk. He's not very interested in delivering the message because it doesn't seem important to him. He's not sure of the address, and besides that, it's nearly lunchtime, so he's bound to stop for an hour or so at the local hamburger joint. What should have been a short trip ends up taking the entire day. No wonder the boss gets ulcers just thinking about it.

What is the cure for such deliberate procrastination? To do your work as if God were watching-because He is. Colossians 3:23 reminds us that "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." What does it mean-"working for the Lord"? It means understanding that every deed-whether small or large-is done for Him and in His name. His reputation is at stake when you show up at work fifteen minutes late or leave ten minutes early. People draw conclusions about the Lord Jesus from the way you do your work each day. If you do just enough to slide by but never enough to satisfy your employer, you are like raw vinegar to the teeth and hot smoke to the eyes-an irritation and not a blessing.

Sometimes we hear it said, "Don't sweat the small stuff." That's good advice if it simply means, "Focus on the things that really matter." But for the Christian on the job, there is no "small stuff." Details matter, deadlines count, promises must be kept, assignments must be completed, orders must be filled, records kept, and bills paid.

Punctuality is not the highest or most important issue in life. But it's not in the bottom ten, either. It matters more than we think. Some of us may have a lousy reputation simply because we don't do our jobs in a timely fashion.

Someone has pointed out that Jesus provides the perfect picture of a man who was never in haste, yet never missed an appointment. Because He was totally committed to doing His Father's will, He moved with purposeful dignity from one place to another.

Here is a good model for life. If you want to do the will of God on your job, a good place to begin is by showing up on time every time. Others will notice, our Lord will be honored, and you will find that punctuality brings its own reward.

Help me to be like Jesus, who was never in a hurry, never early, never late, but always on time. Amen.

Are you a punctual person? Can you be counted on to be on time every time? Why or why not? What excuses do you make for

being late or missing an appointment?

Does your procrastination bother you? If so, what do you plan to do about it? If it doesn't bother you, please reread this section.

PROVERBS 11

Proverbs 11:2 HUMILITY The Way Up Is Down

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. Proverbs 11:2

It's always tricky to talk about humility. How do you know when you're truly humble? Come to think of it, if you are truly humble, will you even know it? Humility is the virtue which, when you think you have it, you've lost it.

It's helpful to know that the Hebrew word for "proud" is related to the Hebrew word for "high." In the Old Testament, it was used for high trees and high mountains. It was used to describe King Saul, who stood higher than anyone else in Israel. It was also used of God, who was said to be "on high" and whose thoughts are higher than the thoughts of man. We use the word in the same way when we say, "Get off your high horse, buster."

We live in a culture that puts a very low value on humility. They don't give out merit badges for humility. From the moment we enter the world we are urged to get ahead, to climb the ladder, to "look out for number one," to win through intimidation, and to prove our success by the car we drive, the home we buy, the clothes we wear, and the friends we keep.

Humility in this context simply means that you don't run the world, you don't have all the answers, you know your limits. That last one is a hard one for some people- the idea that you have limits. It's sort of a trendy, New Age-type idea to talk about unlimited potential and the untapped resources within. The truth is, our potential is very limited and the only untapped resources are the ones we discover when we come to the end and admit that we are limited but God is not.

What is humility? It's having a right view of yourself because you have a right view of God. Humility does not mean saying, "I'm a nothing, I'm a worm, I'm useless." That's not humility; that's self-pity, which is really another form of pride.

And what is pride? It's having too large a view of yourself because you have too small a view of God. When your God is big, you will be small and pride will be impossible.

This is humility: "God made me and I belong to Him. Every good thing I have in life is a gift from the Almighty. Some have more, some have less. It matters not to me. I thank God for what I have, and I'm going to do the best I can with what God has given me, and I'm going to leave the outcome with Him."

If we live that way, it will save us so much trouble. We won't have to get into a power game at work or live in the rat race or sell our convictions to get ahead. We won't get angry at the silly comments people make. Humility enables us to be who we are in Christ. And we won't have to worry about what others think.

Humble me, Lord, lest I should think more of myself than I ought and block Your power in my life. Amen.

Name three people you would call humble. What qualities do they have in common?

Why is self-pity just another form of pride?

MERCY

Proverbs 11:17a Doing unto Others As God Has Done unto You

A kind man benefits himself. Proverbs 11:17a

Whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Proverbs 14:31b

He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done. Proverbs 19:17

The principal Hebrew word for mercy is racham, which speaks of an emotional response to the needs of others. It means to feel the

pain of another person so deeply that you are compelled to do something about it. The ancients believed that the seat of the emotions was found in the intestinal area. That is why the King James Version uses the phrase "bowels of mercy." When we say, "I have a gut feeling" about something, we are using the same concept.

Mercy is an attribute of God's character. First Chronicles 21:13 tells us that "his mercy is very great." Nehemiah 9:31 speaks of "your great mercy." Luke 1:78 tells us that Christ came because of the "tender mercy" of our God. Romans 9:16 says that God's election springs from His mercy. Ephesians 2:4 says that God is "rich in mercy." And Hebrews 4:16 tells us that when we come to Jesus in prayer we are coming to a throne of grace where we can receive mercy and find grace. According to Titus 3:5, God saved us because of his mercy. James 5:11 declares that "the Lord is full of compassion and mercy."

The quality of mercy is not strained;

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.

These famous lines from William Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice are true in every way. Mercy always comes down. It starts with God and moves to man; it begins in heaven and ends on earth. You don't bargain for mercy, for to make a bargain you've got to have something to offer-and we have nothing to offer God. And mercy is indeed like the gentle rain that softens the hard soil of the human heart.

We need this because we are sinners worse than we know. Even the best Christian would have no hope of heaven without the shining mercy of God. If God did not forgive and keep on forgiving, if He did not continue to pour out His mercy like the "gentle rain from heaven," we would be utterly and completely lost.

Here's a simple definition of mercy: Doing unto others as God has done unto you. How has God treated you? Has God blessed you? Then bless others. Has God forgiven you? Then forgive others. Has God lifted you up when you were down? Then lift others up when they are down. Has God overlooked your faults? Then overlook the faults of others.

Mercy includes three elements:

"I see the need"-that's recognition.

"I am moved by the need"-that's motivation.

"I move to meet the need"-that's action.

Mercy is one of God's chief attributes. It is a fundamental part of His basic nature. When I show mercy, I am in the place of God in someone's life. I am doing to them what God would do. The world cannot see mercy in the abstract but only in the concrete. If you and I don't show mercy, where in the world will it be found?

Holy Father, as You have shown mercy to me, now enable me to show mercy to others. Amen.

How has God blessed you in the last year? How could you be a greater blessing to others?

Think of a time when someone showed mercy to you. Think of a time when you showed mercy to someone else. In retrospect, which time was more personally satisfying to you?

Proverbs 11:13 CONFIDENTIALITY How to Say Nothing Nicely

A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret. Proverbs 11:13

How good are you at keeping a secret? I don't mean a big, world-shaking secret, but the kind of secret you hear almost every day. Perhaps your best friend confides in you that he is thinking of changing jobs. Or your friend says that she and her husband are having marital problems. Or your boss confides in you that the company is about to relocate to another state. What do you do with that kind of information?

Let's face it-everyone loves a secret. We love to hear them and, unfortunately, we love to tell them. When someone says, "Let me tell you a secret," the world stops to listen.

Turn it around. What do you do when someone says, "I'm sorry. I promised I wouldn't tell." Be honest. It drives most of us up the wall, doesn't it? We can't stand to be left out. So we badger the person; we keep asking questions ("Don't tell me the whole thing, just tell me part of it"); we hound them until finally they give in.

We all know people who can't keep a secret. Some people love to share their tidbits of inside information to one person at a time. Others won't tell the whole secret, but will drop hints so you can figure it out on your own. Occasionally Christians reveal secrets by calling them prayer requests.

Here's a simple rule: If you promise to keep a secret, then keep it. If you don't intend to keep the secret, don't make the promise. If someone objects that a person must sometimes tell a secret for the good of everyone involved, the answer is yes, sometimes that happens, but not as often as we think.

The ability to keep a secret is a mark of maturity; the compulsion to reveal a secret is a mark of immaturity. And it also is a mark of maturity to respect a person who says, "I'm sorry. I can't tell you."

How about you? What is the level of your maturity? Are you the kind of person who can be trusted not to reveal confidential information? When a friend comes to you confessing serious personal problems, do you phone someone else so they can "pray about it?" Or are you strong enough to keep it to yourself?

These are searching questions. One reason hurting Christians often drift away from the church is that they simply cannot trust fellow believers to keep their struggles private. How many churches have split because someone began spreading rumors and revealing secrets! How many believers are defiled because we are too curious, too quick to pry, and too prone to repeat things in public that would be better dealt with in private?

God bless those believers who can keep a secret. They bear a heavy burden that only God knows.

During World War II it was said that "loose lips sink ships." They also destroy lives, break up marriages, split churches, and ruin reputations.

Remember, you don't have to tell everything you know. If you can't keep a secret, don't listen to it in the first place.

Lord Jesus, I pray to become the kind of person others can trust with their secrets. Amen.

Do you find it hard to keep a secret? How do you feel when others refuse to tell the secrets they know?

In what sense do those who keep a secret bear a heavy burden?

What happens when people tell their secrets indiscriminately?

Proverbs 11:25 GENEROSITY What Size Is Your Shovel?

A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. Proverbs 11:25

The blessings of generosity are mentioned several times in the book of Proverbs. Those who honor the Lord with their wealth will find their barns filled to overflowing (3:9-10), and the generous will be blessed (22:9), especially those who give to the poor (19:17). In essence, God is saying, "If you give to the poor (who can't return the favor), it's as if you gave it to Me personally, and I will see that you are repaid."

Generous giving is not difficult when we understand that everything we have comes from God. This is the basic truth that animates all Christian giving. All that we are and all that we have comes from God. Everything is a gift. Nothing is earned; everything is given.

You own nothing. Everything you have is on loan from God. He gives it to you for a little while and says, "Take care of it." We hold on tight because we think it all belongs to us. Sooner or later we'll understand that it doesn't belong to us-and it never did.

What do you do when you're running short on money but see a need and you want to get involved? I think the answer is clear. You give whatever you can and trust God to take care of you. It may not be a lot. Indeed, it may be very small. The amount doesn't matter. What matters is the attitude of the heart.

God specifically promises to take care of generous givers. And He promises to give back to you in accordance with the measure of generosity you use in your giving in the first place. Jesus specifically made that promise in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." My friend Howard Harvey calls this the Shovel Principle: "I shovel it out and God shovels it in, and He's got a bigger shovel than I do."

I like that because it perfectly catches the spirit of Jesus' words. Generous givers are not the people with a large bank account, but

the people with a large view of God. We often look at people who give generously and think, "They must be rich." But it is not so. Poor people are often very generous, and rich people can be very stingy. Generosity has nothing to do with how much money you have. But it has everything to do with your view of God.

If your God is big, you will be generous. If He is small, you will be stingy. If you struggle with your giving, it may be because your God is too small. The bigger your God, the easier it will be for you to give.

Someone has said that since we can't take it with us, the best thing we can do with our money is to give it away. I have a feeling that Solomon (who was an extremely rich man) would agree with that thought. God takes care of generous givers. You may not get rich by giving your money away, but you'll never know as long as you keep it all for yourself.

Lord God, open my eyes to see how much You have given me and how rich I already am. Amen.

How big is your God? How does your view of God impact your giving?

Do you really believe what Jesus says in Luke 6:38?

Proverbs 11:30 EVANGELISM He Who Wins Souls Is Wise

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise. Proverbs 11:30

The phrase "tree of life" takes us back to the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 2 tells us that God planted the "tree of life" in the center of the Garden of Eden. If Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of that tree, they would have lived forever (Genesis 3:22). The "tree of life" appears again in Revelation 22 in the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God's people throughout eternity. So the Bible begins and ends with the "tree of life."

But in between, every believer is called to be a "tree of life." The expression refers to the life-giving influence we can have on those around us. In the same way that we are to be salt and light in the midst of decay and darkness (Matthew 5:13-16), we are also called to be life-givers to those who are spiritually dead.

This is the greatest privilege any Christian can ever have—to lead another person to Jesus Christ. To use the terminology of Proverbs 11:30, you have "won" his soul for the Lord; you can truly be called a "soul-winner."

After preaching a sermon on prayer, I received the following message from a member of my congregation:

I wanted to share with you something interesting that happened a few days ago. Last Saturday afternoon my wife and I happened to park our car near the church before we went downtown. While we were walking back to our car, we happened to be discussing your sermon from last Sunday on prayer. I didn't even notice a man sitting on the bench by the sidewalk. As we were getting into our car, the man said that he overheard us talking about prayer and that he could use some prayer right now. So we sat down and talked with him. We spent about 30 minutes with him. He told us that he was down on his luck and that he felt like he needed prayer. So we prayed with him. We asked him if he knew Jesus and he said no. So we explained God's salvation plan and he prayed with us and accepted Jesus into his heart. I thought you might like to know that it was discussing your sermon on prayer that caused him to ask us to pray with him. It's great how God can work.

This wonderful story offers many good lessons. It reinforces the truth that there are hungry hearts all around us. There is no shortage of lost people in the world. All God needs is someone willing to spread the Word.

Sometimes we make evangelism more difficult than it really is. Let the image of the "tree of life" be a guide. Put your roots down deep in the soil of God's Word. As the fruit of a new life begins to appear, it will attract others. When they start asking questions, tell them about Jesus. If they are ready, lead them to Christ.

Solomon said, "He who wins souls is wise." This is why Jesus came—to seek and to save the lost. Will you join Him in this great work?

Lead me to some soul today. O teach me, Lord, just what to say. Make me a "tree of life," I pray. Amen.

Who were the "trees of life" God used to bring you to Jesus? Have you ever thanked them for their godly influence?

Who are three people you would like to see come to Christ? Stop right now and pray that God would make you a "tree of life" to them.

PROVERBS 12

Proverbs 12:11 HARD WORK The Reason We Get Out of Bed

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. Proverbs 12:11

Hard work yesterday does not guarantee tomorrow's success. Hard work yesterday has to be followed up with hard work today to guarantee tomorrow's prosperity.

Every day you face a choice of going one of two ways. You can go the easy way or the hard way. The easy way is the way of procrastination. It is the way of staying in bed when the alarm clock goes off. The easy way is the way of saying it doesn't matter whether I work today or not; it doesn't matter what time I show up; it doesn't matter if I check out a few minutes early-the boss isn't around, and, after all, it's good enough for government work. It is the way of no plans, no forethought, no enthusiasm, no diligence. The easy way says take it easy, slow down, back off, don't have a heart attack. It is the soft and cuddly way. It is the way of laziness, the way of the sluggard.

All of us are born on the easy way. A voice inside whispers, "Take a shortcut. Cheat if you have to. Cut some corners. Pull some strings. Take it easy. Don't work too hard. Where's the fire? Slow down, man."

The hard way means getting up early to have your daily devotions whether you feel like it or not. It involves preparation, long-range planning, goal setting, future orientation, diligence, forethought, showing up for work on time, giving eight hours of work for eight hours of pay, doing what you're told and then doing what needs to be done, even if you're not told. It means paying the price to cross racial lines for the sake of Jesus Christ. The man who takes the hard way doesn't send his children to church; he takes them with him. He sacrifices time out with his buddies so he can spend time with his wife. The hard way means putting God's kingdom ahead of your own interests, even at the expense of career advancement. If you decide to go the hard way, you're going to have to get in shape mentally, physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Here's an important insight that many men never discover: God is on the hard road. He's not sitting with the couch potatoes. The hard road looks difficult and daunting. All of us would rather be on the easy road. God is calling you to stop making excuses and get in the ball game.

Do you want to know the ironic thing about the easy road and the hard road? The easy road looks easy, but once you get on it, it turns into the hard road. And the hard road looks hard, but once you do the hard thing in life, it turns out to be the easy road. The easy road is deceptive. It is the way of destruction, poverty, starvation, and desperation. It is the way to wasted days, wasted weeks, wasted months, and wasted years. The hard road that appears to be so difficult is ultimately the road of blessing, fulfillment, and lasting spiritual growth. It is the road that leads you to the top. The easy road takes you down to the bottom. Smart people take the hard road and end up smiling, while the folks on the easy road can only dream of what might have been.

Lord God, give me the courage and the discipline to stay on the hard road today. Amen.

How do you spot a person on the "hard road"? the "easy road"?

What is the "hard road" for you personally, and what is your version of the "easy road"?

Which road are you traveling right now?

Proverbs 12:20 PEACEMAKING The Mark of the Children of God

There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace. Proverbs 12:20

A few years ago pollster George Gallup surveyed Americans on the top five questions they would most like to ask God. The list included the following question: "Will there ever be lasting world peace?"

It's a fitting question to ask as we near the end of the bloodiest century in world history. More people have died in this century because of warfare than in any other since the dawn of the human race. As President Eisenhower once said, we have become a race of intellectual giants and moral pygmies. Despite our great technological advances, we continue to devise more efficient means of killing each other.

In this bloody world, peace must be made. Peace never happens by chance. Someone has to drag the combatants to the table and give them a reason to put down their arms. Jesus never said, "Blessed are the peacemakers or the peacekeepers or the peacedreamers." But He did say, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9).

What is a peacemaker? Here's a working definition: A peacemaker is someone who is actively working to reconcile men to God and to one another. He (or she) is a "minister of reconciliation" who has been given the "message of reconciliation" (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

Please note that peacemaking is a spiral that begins close to home. It starts in your closest and most intimate relationships-between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. Then it moves out to your extended family-your close friends at church, on the job, and in the classroom. Only then does peacemaking move out to more remote relationships-in the village, the city, the state, the nation, and the world.

Peacemaking is not an easy business. It is costly, time-consuming, painful, and emotionally exhausting. Those who do it will often be misunderstood.

Our problem tends to be at the level of motivation. We know that peace is hard to make and even harder to keep. It's usually easier to walk away from a problem. Why get involved in someone else's difficulty? Or we try and are rebuffed or even attacked and criticized for our efforts. So we tend to despair and give up even before we get started.

But everyone can do something.

You've got a telephone. Make a call.

You've got paper. Write a letter.

You've got a kitchen. Make a meal.

You've got a billfold. Give some money.

You've got two hands. Put them to work for others.

You've got two feet. Go see a friend in pain.

You've got two ears. Listen to the cries of the wounded.

You've got two eyes. Lift them up to see the world as God sees it.

You've got two lips. Preach the gospel of peace.

There is so much war, so much strife, so much pain in the world. That means there is plenty of work for you to do. Every tiny step receives God's blessing.

How do you get involved in the world? Be a peacemaker!

What will you be called? A child of God!

Prince of Peace, make me an instrument of Your peace so that others will know that I am a child of God. Amen.

Why is peacemaking not a popular occupation? Name three situations where you could make a difference as a peacemaker. What hinders you from getting involved?

Proverbs 12:25 AFFIRMATION Finding Something Good to Say

An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up. Proverbs 12:25

Proverbs has much to say about the importance of affirmation. "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life" (15:4a). "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life" (10:11a). "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply-and how good is a timely word!" (15:23). "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (16:24).

For many years, Henrietta Mears was director of Christian education at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. God gave her a wonderful insight into human nature. These are her words: "Whenever I meet a new person, I imagine them wearing a sign across their chest

which reads, 'My name is_. Please help me feel important.'" Helping people feel important is what affirmation is all about.

But where should we begin? I have three suggestions:

First, make sure you begin each day by saying an encouraging word to each member of your family. Have you ever had one of those "uh-huh" breakfasts? That's what happens when you are too frazzled to talk intelligently to each other. So you grunt. "Would you like some coffee, sweetheart?" "Uh-huh." "Don't forget your lunch." "Uh-huh." "Where's my geometry book?" "Uh-huh." "Can I borrow a hundred dollars, Dad?" "Uh-huh." "Would you like a dead rat with your scrambled eggs?" "Uh-huh."

We've all had mornings like that. Just make sure it doesn't become a habit. Take time to encourage each other before you go out the door.

Second, before you say a word of criticism, say a prayer for the person you are criticizing. This is simply a practical piece of advice. If we criticize without praying, we run the risk of speaking in anger and saying things we regret later. But if we pray first, the venom is drained out of our words. We may even lose our anger completely and decide that the criticism is unwarranted.

Third, when you feel the slightest urge to encourage someone, go ahead and do it. Make a simple resolution that every time you feel like encouraging someone this week, you will go ahead and do it. Just put aside your work, get up from your desk, pick up the phone, write a note, pat someone on the back, and say a good word to lift someone's spirits. Try doing it for just one week. Who knows? It might become a permanent habit.

The story is told of a little second-grade boy who was trying out for a part in the school play. The day came for the auditions and his mother took him to school and waited for him to come out. She was nervous because she knew he couldn't sing, couldn't act, and couldn't memorize very well. So she was surprised when he came out after forty-five minutes with a big smile on his face. "How did it go, honey?" "It was great, Mom. Guess what? I've been chosen to clap and cheer."

In truth, that could be said about all of us. We have all been chosen by God to clap and cheer for our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. They need to hear it and we need to do it. Let the applause begin.

Father, make me a messenger of hope and encouragement to those I meet today. Amen.

Whom do you know who needs a word of encouragement right now?

Did you come from an encouraging family? How would you rate your own family in this area? What can you do to make things more positive?

PROVERBS 13

Proverbs 13:11 THRIFT How the Poor Become Rich

Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow. Proverbs 13:11

This verse might be labeled "How to make money the old-fashioned way." Anything that comes too easily won't be greatly valued. That's one danger of giving a young person an inheritance too early in life (20:21). There is also a danger of running after some get-rich-quick scheme-the kind usually advertised in a late-night infomercial (28:20). But let a person toil and sweat to earn a paycheck and he will think twice before blowing it on some frivolous expenditure.

"Dishonest money dwindles away." According to the Bible, there are three legitimate ways to get money. First, you can work for it (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Second, you can make money through wise investments (Luke 19:11-27). Third, you can receive a gift or an inheritance (2 Corinthians 12:14). There is no fourth category, such as gambling.

Gambling is not work, for the gambler hopes to make money without working at all. Gambling is not an investment, for the gambler creates an artificial risk, hoping to make easy money. Gambling is not a gift, for the money is won from the losers, not given as a gift.

Why, then, do people gamble? They gamble because they think that with just a little bit of luck, they will win. And it doesn't matter whether the prize is ten dollars or ten thousand dollars, the motivating force is still the same. Gambling offers a shortcut, a way to get ahead quickly, a way to make some easy money.

Contrast that with the biblical principle of contentment. Consider Philippians 4:11 b-13:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

That last verse is often lifted out of the immediate context and used as a kind of spiritual pep pill. But taken in connection with the preceding verses, the meaning is that the Christian can find contentment in every situation through the power of the indwelling Christ.

Please understand. Contentment does not mean passive acceptance of a bad situation. It does not mean that I shouldn't try to better myself. Contentment is not the opposite of ambition. But contentment does mean that if I find myself in a difficult position, I will thank God for the opportunity to trust Him, I will use every legitimate means to improve the situation, but I will not fall into the trap of trying to take shortcuts in order to find an easy way out.

For those wishing to build their net worth, Solomon's advice is simple but very effective: "He who gathers money little by little makes it grow." This applies equally to savings or to investing. Take time, start small, work hard, learn the principles of investing, seek wise counsel, and most of all, don't throw your money away, either through greed, gullibility, or gambling.

In the fable of the tortoise and the hare, the tortoise won because he just kept plodding along. Be a tortoise and watch your money grow.

Lord, make me a tortoise when I am tempted to be a hare. Amen.

Have you ever gambled with your own money? If so, what happened?

What practical steps could you take to develop a thriftier lifestyle?

By nature are you more like the tortoise or the hare?

DISCIPLINE Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him. Proverbs 13:24

Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul. Proverbs 29:17

Proverbs contains several verses that speak to the issue of corporal punishment. "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (Pr 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" (Pr 23:13-14). "The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother" (Pr 29:15).

Several observations are in order. First, corporal punishment is a mark of parental love. And more particularly, a refusal to administer such punishment may actually demonstrate a shameful lack of concern. Second, corporal punishment wisely administered has eternal benefits. It saves a soul from death-doubtless physical death is mainly in view, but it also extends to the spiritual realm. Third, the "rod of discipline" stands for more than the act of spanking. It represents the entire process of leading a child to moral and spiritual maturity. Fourth, any discipline exercised in uncontrolled anger can only breed further rebellion (see Colossians 3:21). Fifth, corporal punishment by itself can do little good. It must be accompanied by a wise master plan of teaching God's truth to your children. Sixth, parents who fail to discipline their children may end up disgraced and dishonored.

Certainly some parents go too far in the area of physical discipline. Some children have been scarred for life (literally and figuratively) by angry parents who took their frustrations out on unsuspecting boys and girls. It's important to understand that nothing in the Bible supports any kind of physical abuse-no matter what reason is given.

Solomon offers a number of wise guidelines. Discipline must spring from love and must be carefully done. Discipline is administered with a rod, not with a bare hand. Corporal punishment is only one small part of training up a child (Proverbs 22:6)-but it is an important part.

My junior high PE teacher had a wooden paddle with a taped handle that could be administered to an offender's rear end with incredible accuracy. The memory is vivid precisely because one day he caught me and a friend fooling around with some shuffleboard equipment. He didn't get mad; he didn't yell; he didn't lose his temper. He simply said the two most dreaded words in the English language: "Bend over." It was a mark of manhood not to cry, but the tears came squeezing out of my eyes nonetheless. The punishment had its intended effect. From that day till this, I've never messed with shuffle-board equipment again.

Let's keep a biblical balance in this area. Corporal punishment is not only allowed but encouraged for disobedient children. But it must be done carefully and thoughtfully, not in anger but in complete self-control. Properly administered, a spanking can be just as loving as a kiss.

Lord, give me the wisdom to discipline my children in the right way at the right time for the right reasons. Amen.

How did your parents discipline you when you were growing up? Do they offer a good model to follow?

What guidelines are appropriate in administering corporal punishment?

PROVERBS 14

Proverbs 14:4 PERSPECTIVE No Milk Without Manure

Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest. Proverbs 14:4

Every farmer understands this verse. If you want a clean stable, get rid of the oxen. But if you want cattle, you've got to put up with noise, trouble, clutter, and mess. Or as Dr. Ryrie succinctly puts it, "No milk without manure."

Wise parents know what this is about it. Raising children can be a messy business. I speak as the father of three very active teenage sons. When people ask me what it's like in our house, I usually reply with two words: "It's loud." Boys make noise. They also take up lots of space, eat lots of food, drape themselves over the chairs, camp out in front of the TV, and turn the trash can into a basketball goal. Every night they call their friends or their friends call them. When I ask how they are doing in school, it's always, "Don't worry, Dad. We're doing fine."

Recently Nicholas, our youngest son, spent hours putting together a model of a 1940 Ford Coupe. When he finished, there were bits of plastic, torn decals, and globs of glue spread across the basement floor. "Dad, look at the engine," he said triumphantly. "It has fifteen different parts"-which he proceeded to point out to me one by one. As I study the model two months later, it sits in a place of honor on his desk, next to his portable calculator and under his Chicago Bulls banner, not far from the cage containing Sir John of Camelot, his pet hamster. There are plastic newspaper bags on the floor, left over from his weekly paper route. As I survey the scene, it seems to me that his room is a little messy. Not terrible, but it could use some straightening up. When I tell him that, he grins, rolls his eyes, and says, "Oh, Dad"-in a tone that tells me that I just don't understand his world at all.

It's true, I don't. But I have learned to have some long-range perspective, to understand that raising children requires a mix of love, humor, patience, persistence, honesty, clear guidelines, and a healthy dose of prayer. Even then, we all know that boys and girls grow up into young adults with minds of their own.

If you want a perfectly clean house all the time, don't have children. That should solve the problem. But if you have children, don't be surprised by the noise, clatter, clutter, commotion, action, energy, laughter, and music that children bring with them. It is no accident that life begins with a slap on the bottom and a loud cry. That's a harbinger of things to come.

Children are a heritage from the Lord. They are also a handful from the Lord. Your manger will never be quite the same again. But years from now you will have no regrets when the Lord brings in the harvest.

Lord, when I am frazzled, help me to see beyond the moment to better things yet to come. Amen.

In what areas of your life do you need long-range perspective right now? Why is that perspective especially important when raising children?

If you have children, what kind of "harvest" are you praying for in their lives?

Proverbs 14:17 SELF-CONTROL Learn This or Else!

A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated. Proverbs 14:17

The Bible offers many examples of men who failed because they lacked this essential element of self-control. But no one sticks in

my mind like Samson, the undisputed heavyweight champion of ancient Israel. His story is found in Judges 13-16 (that's in the "White Pages" section of your Bible, the part you don't read very often). But we ought to read about Samson more often than we do, for his life is filled with lessons, examples, and applications.

In one sense, Samson is one of the best-known heroes in all the Bible. Generations of children have marveled at the story of Samson defeating the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Many teenagers know about Samson's long hair and how Delilah tricked the secret of his strength from him. Most of us know that he had his eyes poked out, and that he died pushing the pillars of the Philistine temple apart, collapsing the building, taking with him to their death thousands of Philistines. If you go to church at all, you know Samson. His is a story both heroic and tragic.

When we read Samson's story, we tend to think that his problems were all in the sexual area. But that ignores the deeper reality that time and again Samson made foolish decisions because his emotions got the best of him. Sometimes he lost his temper; other times he took unreasonable chances in order to get even; often he seemed irresistibly attracted to Philistine women.

First he is filled with lust and then he is filled with anger. Then he's full of lust again, then anger again, and then lust and anger again. He's riding an emotional roller coaster, from the peak to the valley and around a sharp corner, and then he does it all over again. One moment he's worshiping God; the next, he's flirting with the Philistine women. On one occasion he leads the army of Israel to a stunning military victory by the power of the Holy Spirit. Later he sleeps with a Philistine prostitute. Not long after that he meets Delilah, who tricks him into revealing the secret of his power, which leads to his imprisonment and death.

Samson never learned to control his emotions, and so they controlled him completely. Proverbs 16:32 could have been written about Samson: "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." In his day, Samson had taken more than one city. But he never learned to control his temper. He never learned how to rule his spirit. He never knew the first thing about self-control. In the end, his runaway emotions ran away with him.

The same thing can happen to any of us. Self-control is impossible without the Holy Spirit. You can have the Holy Spirit in control, or your emotions can take control. There is no third option and no middle ground.

There's a little Samson in all of us. Learn this lesson well. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, we're all doomed to follow in the same path of self-destruction.

Holy Spirit, I'm ready for You to take control of my life. Please fill me with Your power so that I might become a truly different person. Amen.

Why is self-control such a valuable character trait? What are the marks of a person without self-control?

In what areas of your life do you most need to develop this character quality?

Proverbs 14:30 ENVY The Green-Eyed Monster

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Proverbs 14:30

Envy rots the bones. The Hebrew literally means "envy makes the bones disintegrate." Once again, Solomon is telling us that there is a strong connection between the spiritual and the physical. The attitude of the heart has a direct impact on your physical well-being or lack thereof. If your heart is at peace, it gives life to the body. Envy causes the bones of the body to disintegrate.

King Saul is Exhibit A of a man whose life was destroyed by envy. You'll remember the little ditty that made Saul so angry when he realized that David had become more popular than he. As the women welcomed their returning heroes, they sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). When Saul heard that, his anger burned within him. Jealousy drove him to attempt to murder David. Envy ate away at his insides until it finally destroyed him and his whole family.

If you read 1 Samuel 10-26, you will discover some amazing things about Saul.

He was in many respects a gifted man.

He was tall and handsome.

He was a natural leader of men.

He was skillful in battle.

He was chosen by God to be the first king of Israel.

In many ways he had all the natural attributes for success-plus he had the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. Yet we remember him as a failure because of the way his life ended. There were many contributing factors, but in the end his anger destroyed his life. After it became clear that David would replace him as king, Saul's heart was so blinded by rage that he could think of only one thing-killing David. So he hunted David as he would a wild animal, chasing him into the Judean desert, tracking him to a cave by the Dead Sea, a place called En Gedi. There David cut off a corner of Saul's robe when he actually could have killed him. David meant it as a sign of mercy, but Saul continued to hunt him down. Even though Saul knew that David would be the next king, his hatred so consumed him that he tried to kill him anyway. In the end, Saul and his sons were killed by the Philistines on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. The Philistines cut off his head, put his armor in a pagan temple, and fastened his headless corpse to the wall of Beth Shan. It was an ignominious end for a man with the seeds of greatness in him. Saul had many flaws, but it was his envy that finally destroyed him.

There are people who suffer deeply, both physically and spiritually, because they will not forgive. Envy rots the bones. Anger rots the bones. Unforgiveness rots the bones. Bitterness rots the bones. Until you do something about your anger and bitterness, you're going to be sick, for the Bible says it will happen that way-it will literally rot your bones.

The lesson is clear: Don't let this happen to you!

Lord God, when I am tempted to envy, remind me that the only thing that matters is what You think of me. Amen.

Have you ever known anyone like Saul, whose life was destroyed by envy and jealousy?

Whom do you envy, if only just a tiny bit? Why? What does that teach you about yourself?

Proverbs 14:32 SECURITY Hope Beyond the Grave

When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge. Proverbs 14:32

Sometimes it is amazing how much you can learn from your children. Many years ago, when our oldest son was not quite four years old, my wife asked him how people get to heaven when they die. She thought he would say, "Jesus takes us there," or some reasonable facsimile.

Joshua, however, had other ideas. He said, "When we die, there's a ladder and we climb on it up to heaven." A few days later, Marlene asked again, "Joshua, how do people get to heaven when they die?" He stopped to think about it for a while. Then he smiled real big, the way you do when you know you've figured out the answer to a tough question. "I know. When we die, God lets down a vacuum and sucks us up to heaven." This answer sounded a little closer to the truth.

Several more days passed. We visited a shopping mall and Marlene asked once again, "Joshua, how do people get to heaven when they die?" This one is easy. "They ride up on an escalator." End of quiz.

Actually, there's something to be said for each answer. After all, the Bible speaks of Jacob's ladder, and a vacuum does sound something like the rapture. But an escalator? Maybe he had been watching one of those commercials where the two angels escort a man up to the clouds and on to heaven.

Later, I asked Joshua again. This time he said, "I don't know." Then he gave the best answer of all, "Let me ask Mom." So he did, and she just smiled at him.

There are many mysteries to the Christian faith, and one of them is how we get to heaven when we die. It's just as well that we don't know the answer. We probably couldn't understand it anyway.

I tried one last question. "Joshua, who do you have to believe in to go to heaven?" That one was easy. "Jesus!"

In the end, it will not be what we know but who we know that makes the difference. If we know Jesus, we shall go to heaven. If we do not know Him, how we get there will make no difference because we won't be making the trip

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, was fond of saying, "Our people die well." He meant that Christians face death with a confidence the world cannot understand. Put simply, we aren't afraid to die. While we may fear the circumstances of our death, we aren't worried about what happens afterward. We know that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

What does it all mean? The Bible says that we Christians sorrow, but not as those "who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Death will never be easy, but for those who believe in Jesus it is nothing to be feared. If Jesus has taken us this far, He will not abandon us when we need Him most.

Lord Jesus, thank You for taking the sting out of death and setting us free to live without fear. Amen.

How much longer do you expect to live?

Are you afraid to die? Are you ready to die? If you're not ready to die, what do you need to do to be prepared when the moment comes?

PROVERBS 15

Proverbs 15:1 GENTLENESS Power Under Control

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1

I have a friend who learned this verse the hard way. Whenever she said something in a harsh tone, her mother made her write this verse fifty times on a sheet of paper. It must have worked, for many years later she has no trouble recalling the verse.

But putting them into practice is a challenge for all of us. Many an argument has started because someone spoke the truth in an angry tone. With that in mind, here is a simple three-word definition of gentleness: Power under control.

A survey of the New Testament shows how important this virtue is. Galatians 5:22-23 lists gentleness as one of the fruits of the Spirit. Colossians 3:12 includes it as part of the "clothing" of the Christian. James 1:19-21 tells us that meekness is the opposite of anger and moral filth. It is the basic attitude we are to have toward all people (Philippians 4:5), especially those who oppose us (2 Timothy 2:24-26). By a gentle and quiet spirit a Christian wife may win her unbelieving husband (1 Peter 3:1-6).

That leads me to suggest an expanded definition of gentleness. Gentleness is self-control displayed in a calm spirit based on an unshakable confidence in God. It is self-control based on God's control. Thus, it is truly a supernatural virtue produced by the Holy Spirit.

Consider Jesus. He was the most powerful man who ever lived-and yet His power was always under His Father's control. He got angry when he chased the money changers out of the temple-but He never lost His temper. He rebuked the Pharisees-but ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. He welcomed children and spoke to large crowds-but felt the touch of a woman whose fingers brushed the hem of His garment.

This Jesus was no effeminate sissy. He could raise the dead, cast out demons, and calm a stormy sea. Yet the Bible says that "as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7, KJV). He didn't debate Pilate, He didn't curse Herod, and He didn't fight the soldiers. As the old gospel song says, He could have called ten thousand angels, but He died alone for you and me.

That's true gentleness. Ultimate power under God's control. He was the Son of God who made others feel welcome around Him. When people came to Him, they felt rested, not harassed or pressured. No wonder the common people loved Him.

Gentleness is that quality which is best demonstrated when you are dealing with unreasonable people. It is seen when you are under the gun, up against a deadline, surrounded by problems, hip deep in alligators and no way to drain the swamp, and you feel yourself getting frustrated. If you don't have it then, you just don't have it at all.

The gentle man does not fight for his own rights, does not insist upon personal vindication, does not always have to correct others, does not repay in kind, does not return insult for insult, and does not use force and intimidation to get his way.

No one can consistently live this way apart from the grace of God. The good news is, God has plenty of grace, even for the worst moments of life. All you have to do is ask Him for it.

Lord Jesus, teach me the strength of gentleness and the wisdom of kindness. Amen.

Are you a gentle person? How would your friends answer that question? If you don't know the answer, why not ask them yourself?

How do you personally balance gentleness with the need to be bold in the face of evil?

Proverbs 15:16-17 Thanksgiving 365

November 2012 – I am writing these words the day after Thanksgiving.

Yesterday Marlene and I traveled to Oxford, Mississippi to spend time with my brother Andy, his wife Betty, and their daughter Megan. My brother Alan and his wife Donna brought a fried turkey. Marlene had prepared several dishes for the grand celebration. We spent time eating, laughing, telling stories, eating some more, and some of us watched football.

When we got home in the evening, Josh and Leah did a video chat with us using FaceTime. As soon as we started, our two-year-old grandson Knox climbed up on the couch with a toy fire truck in one hand and a stuffed monkey in the other. When we asked him if he liked Thanksgiving, he thought for a second and then said, "Yes." So we asked what he had to eat. Another pause, then "Bananas." Anything else? I heard Leah whisper, "Muffins," which Knox repeated. Anything else? Another pause, and then something that sounded like "chicken pot pie."

So there you have Thanksgiving through the eyes of a two-year-old. Bananas, muffins, and something that sounded like chicken pot pie.

When I checked in on Facebook, I saw pictures of family gatherings from all across the country. There were good wishes, expressions of thanksgiving to God, and pictures of tables laden with food.

I saw this on one of those humorous ecards that pop up on Facebook from time to time:

Thanksgiving is all about getting your entire dysfunctional family under one roof and hoping the police don't get called!

We chuckle because it is all too true. Adrian Rogers highlighted this problem this way:

"We buy things we do not need, with money we do not have, to impress people we do not like."

You might call this the "other side" of Thanksgiving. Not every family gathering is a happy time. As I thought about that, I pondered the words of Proverbs 15:15,

"We buy things we do not need, with money we do not have, to impress people we do not like."

"All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast."

I love that last phrase. "The cheerful heart has a continual feast." People with a cheerful heart have Thanksgiving 365 days a year. What is the secret? In Proverbs 15:16-17 Solomon reveals two qualities that produce the cheerful heart that enjoys a continual feast. These attitudes of the heart are within the reach of all of us because they do not depend on income, position, reputation, education, the size of our bank account, or any sort of worldly attainment.

The least among us may have a "continual feast" wherever we go if we take these two verses to heart.

I. Fill Your Heart With Faith.

"Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil" (Pr 15:16)

Check out the first word: "Better."

Some things are better than others. Solomon (who was the richest man in the world) does not mean to exalt poverty as if it is to be preferred to wealth. Most poor people would like to be wealthy if given the chance, and many of them work long hours to try and get ahead.

So this is not a proverb in praise of living on the edge of financial disaster.

But from the beginning of time, there have always been more poor than rich. It's not as if the world's resources are evenly distributed. And no matter how the politicians may try to redistribute the wealth, there will always be more poor people. This is less a statement about the way things ought to be than a statement about the way things are. No doubt this is what Jesus meant when he said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11). Those words, which can seem callous, must be interpreted in the same light as our proverb. Jesus explains himself in the last part of that verse when he says, "But you will not always have me."

Some things matter more than other things.

If Jesus is among you, spend time with him while you can.

Then go and feed the poor.

Feed your spirit and then feed the hungry.

If Jesus is among you, spend time with him while you can.

The words of Solomon remind us that wealth is no panacea. Yes, it is true that money is the answer for everything (Ecclesiastes 10:19). Better to have some money than none at all. Yes, the rich have large houses, nice furnishings, excellent medical insurance, and protection against many troubles.

But death comes to the rich just as it does to the poor.

The rich get cancer and die.

The rich divorce.

The rich have problems with their children.

Wealth provides only a limited protection in this world. Wealth cannot compensate for the breakup of a marriage, for children in jail, or sudden death. I read about a wealthy man whose son died in a plane crash. Speaking of it later, he said, "Once you lose your son, you find out that there is no such thing as serious money. Life and death are serious, money is not."

Wealth cannot compensate for the breakup of a marriage.

If we have to choose between wealth and the fear of the Lord, let us choose the latter. In point of fact, most of us don't get the choice. The vast majority of the world will never be wealthy. But we can all fear the Lord.

Wealth is a Relative Term

There is another way to look at it. Wealth by definition is a relative term. As I write these words, I'm sitting in my office in my home. My wife and I live in a three-bedroom house with a large front yard and a fenced-in backyard so Dudley, our beloved basset hound, won't run away. We have one car that is parked at the moment in our attached garage. I can hear music playing in the living room as Marlene prepares a meal in the kitchen. We have one TV, two laptop computers, two iPhones, one iPad, and one Nook ereader. Since we plan to move soon, most of our belongings are packed in the garage. Two years ago I gave away 40 boxes of books to a local pastor. Now I'm down to three or four boxes of books. We have a king-size bed, some furniture, and our clothes plus some personal items. When the time comes to move, we won't need a huge truck. We moved here in a 26-foot rental truck back in 2005. I doubt we would need one that large now.

Life and death are serious, money is not.

After decades of accumulating things, we've been in a de-accumulation mode for a few years. I think most people go through something like that. You work and save and buy and invest and build and decorate and then you store the excess. But as life rolls on and the kids grow up and move away, you find that some of the things you couldn't do without don't seem to matter very much. While packing for our eventual move to Dallas, I find myself asking, "What do we have that we can do without?" I figure that if I haven't touched a book in 20 years, I probably won't touch it in the next 20 either so why take it with us?

I thought about that, and then my mind went to the trip Josh and I took to India in January. While we were in Mumbai, we passed by slums that defy all human imagination. There millions of men and women and boys and girls live in circumstances of such grinding poverty that it almost numbs the mind. My good friend Benny Mathews showed us places where people live in cardboard boxes under bridges. Not a few, but thousands and then millions, side by side. He said that ten men may share the same tiny space, sleeping in shifts while the others go to work.

The men and women who live like that hardly worry about what to take with them when they move. They own the clothes on their back and not much else. Compared to them, I am the wealthy man of verse 16.

It is "better" to live with a roof over your head and with money in the bank and with food on the table, but it is "better" yet to live with the fear of the Lord in your heart. One need not feel sorry for having more than someone else, but what a fool I am if I think that I somehow deserve what I have or that I am somehow "better" than someone who has less than I do.

I am the wealthy man of Pr 15:16.

What do I have that I did not receive?

It is all a gift from God.

That includes every meal, every drink of clean water, every bit of electricity that powers my computers, every book I read, every shirt I wear, and every bowl of soup put before me.

Solomon does not ask those who have more to feel guilty about what they have. After all, even in the slums some have more and some have less. Look around. Someone will always be ahead of you, someone will be behind you, and others will be right where you are.

But not everything is equal. Better to live in poverty and know the Lord than to be the richest man in the world and think you did it yourself. The rich man eventually discovers that his riches take wings and fly away. If he doesn't discover it in this life, he discovers it when he dies because all that he worked so hard for, he leaves behind.

In that respect, we all come in and go out the same way. The lesson is clear. Most of us will never be truly rich in this world's goods, but we can all be rich in faith and love and rich in the knowledge of our God.

We all come in and go out the same way.

J. I. Packer tells of an acquaintance whose career derailed because of his evangelical convictions. When asked if he harbored any ill feelings, he replied quite simply: "I've known God and they haven't." Packer goes on to note that most of us would not feel comfortable speaking in such straightforward terms. But the terms are entirely biblical. Knowing God does make a difference and is the defining characteristic of those who follow Jesus Christ. To know God deeply and intimately more than makes up for the things we lose because of our faith.

Writing 250 years ago, English pastor John Gill summarizes the blessings of the man who fears the Lord:

For such a man, though he has but little, which is the common portion of good men, yet he does not lack; he has enough, and is content; what he has he has with a blessing, and he enjoys it, and God in it, and has communion with him; and has also other bread to eat, the world knows nothing of: and particularly having the fear of God, the eye of God is upon him with pleasure; his heart is towards him, and sympathizes with him in all his troubles; his hand communicates unto him both temporal and spiritual meat, which is given to them that fear the Lord; his angels encamp about him, his power protects him; his secrets are with him, and inconceivable and inexpressible goodness is laid up for him.

Let this one sentence sink in: "What he has he has with a blessing, and he enjoys it, and God in it, and has communion with him." Can the world offer anything better than that?

II. Fill Your Home With Love.

"Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred" (Pr 15:17).

Here are a few other translations of this verse:

"Better a meal of greens with love than a plump calf with hate" (CEB).

The Contemporary English Version offers us this beautiful reading:

"A simple meal with love is better than a feast where there is hatred."

The ERV simplifies the meaning down to the bare essentials:

"It is better to eat a little where there is love than to eat a lot where there is hate."

Finally we have this from Eugene Peterson (The Message):

"Better a bread crust shared in love than a slab of prime rib served in hate."

All the versions come out at the same place. The most bountiful feast in the world may be ruined if the people at the table hate each other. Discord at the dinner table destroys a good meal, no matter how sumptuous the fare, whether it be prime rib or T-bone steaks or turkey and dressing with all the trimmings. Your cooking may equal what they offer on the Food Channel, but if your loved ones do not really love each other, what good is all that effort and all that time and all that money?

You might as well skip the meal altogether.

Some not-so-beautiful people have done amazingly dumb things too.

The word "vegetables" refers to the simple fare that a poor family might share. It might be spinach or collard greens or cabbage. This family is so poor that they are vegetarian by necessity, not by choice. When they come together, they share nothing but a

handful of stewed greens. It is not extravagant, but it tastes good because it is served with love.

Solomon doesn't mean to elevate poverty above wealth. He merely reminds us that money doesn't necessarily bring happiness. It certainly doesn't guarantee a happy family or a harmonious Thanksgiving dinner.

It's a Wonderful Life

The point is, we know these things. We don't need Solomon to tell us because deep down we know that faith and love matter far more than money or fame. That's one reason why *It's a Wonderful Life* remains one of the most beloved Christmas movies of all time. When George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) contemplates suicide on Christmas Eve, it takes the help of an angel named Clarence to help him see the difference his life has made. As it happens, three of the best lines in the movie come from the angel:

"Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

"You see George, you've really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to just throw it away?"

The third one isn't a spoken line. It's the inscription in a book left for George by the angel as the movie comes to its climax:

"Remember, George: no man is a failure who has friends."

No man is a failure who has friends.

So if we know these things, why does Solomon have to remind us? Because we need reminding, that's why. Because we all live under the spell of the big world with its flashing lights, alluring games, beautiful people, and all the promises of the "good life" on the other side of the street.

In recent days we've been asked to contemplate why powerful men will seemingly throw away all their common sense and after a lifetime of brilliant success have an affair that suddenly is splashed on TV, radio, and across the Internet. There really isn't one particular answer to that question, except to note that going back as far as King David, powerful men have been tempted by beautiful women who were available to them, and that led to all sorts of foolishness and ultimately to the sort of behavior that those same men and women would have sworn they would never have done. That's a long sentence written that way to emphasize what is left out, which is that these temptations apply not only to rich and beautiful people but to all the rest of us as well. Some not-so-beautiful people have done amazingly dumb things too. One can only hope that the finger pointing will lead us all to honest self-examination.

You don't have to be a four-star general to blow up your life, your career, and your family.

We know these things are true.

This may sound like I've changed the subject, but really I haven't because all of this is Solomon's subject. Remember the operative word is "better." It's better to enjoy a simple meal where love abounds than to feast at the finest restaurant in Paris, drink the finest wines, and be surrounded by people you can't stand. As the man on the midway says, "You pays your money and you takes your chances." Thousands of people will read Solomon, nod in agreement, and then go out and blow up their own family by a round of foolish choices.

The point is, we know these things are true.

Thanksgiving is a Choice

But you don't have to live this way. Choose today whom you will serve, the Bible says. "See, I have set before you today life and death. Choose life, that you may live." That's wonderful advice, first given by Moses to the children of Israel, but even after all that wandering in the desert, and after a whole generation died, they still made the same mistakes over and over again.

Lately I've been reading (and listening) to the psalms in my quiet time. When I came to Psalm 78 (which recounts the early history of Israel) I was struck by the emphasis on how Israel kept messing up and how God judged them and then forgave them, and then they would do it all over again.

You can read it for yourself. I'm not exaggerating at all. God ends up being the real hero of the story.

"How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the wasteland!

Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel" (vv. 40-41)

The people who knew what God had said either forgot or didn't care or thought they had a better idea or just decided to do things their own way. It never worked out. Then you come to a wonderful verse like this:

"But he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the wilderness" (v. 52).

That's us. We're God's sheep. Every time you turn around, we're going our own way (see Isaiah 53:6).

Left to ourselves, we'll get lost, or we'll wander back to Egypt, or we'll start fighting each other, or we'll end up as supper for the wolves. We're unruly and we don't like to be led and sometimes we're just plain dumb.

But God leads his sheep all the way through the wilderness. By his grace, eventually we make it to safety and rest and shelter.

As long as you have God, you have what you need.

There is a "better" way to live, but it depends on us believing that our Shepherd knows what he is doing even when we think we have a better idea. If we have faith and if we have love, then we have what we need at this very moment. I love how Matthew Henry puts it:

"It is therefore far better, and more desirable, to have but a little of the world and to have it with a good conscience, to keep up communion with God, and enjoy him in it, and live by faith, than to have the greatest plenty and live without God in the world."

Matthew Henry and Solomon agree. Some things are better than other things. If you have a lot or if you have a little, as long as you have God, you have what you need. Better to have God than to live without him in the world.

I leave you with the song made famous by George Beverly Shea. It seems to perfectly capture the deeper meaning of our text.

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;

I'd rather be His than have riches untold;

I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands;

I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand

Than to be the king of a vast domain

And be held in sin's dread sway;

I'd rather have Jesus than anything

This world affords today.

Perhaps we should all say those words out loud and let them be our application of this truth.

I'd rather have Jesus.

How about you?

Proverbs 15:22 COUNSEL God's Gift to Fools

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. Proverbs 15:22

This particular piece of advice is repeated several times in Proverbs. The wise man listens to advice from others (12:15), accepts instruction (19:20), and proactively seeks out wise counsel before embarking on a major project (20:18) because he understands that no plan can succeed without the Lord's blessing (21:30). Finally, he takes great joy in listening to the advice of his friends (27:9).

I have a few friends in my life who are like that. Every time they speak, they speak wisdom and knowledge. Some of them are people I have known for twenty or thirty years. Some of them are people I don't talk to very often. Some of them are people I may not talk to except once every ten years. But because they are people of wisdom and knowledge, I know that if I have not talked to them for ten years, I can go back to them and say, "What do you think about this?" Because their lips speak wisdom and knowledge, they can say, "I don't think you should do this; I don't think you should do that; have you thought about this?" Invariably, when I talk to people like that, my life is enriched because the lips of the righteous bring forth wisdom and knowledge. Blessed are you if you have a few people in your life who can speak wisdom and knowledge to you. You are doubly blessed if you have the ability to speak wisdom and knowledge to other people.

What is the difference between a wise man and a fool? The fool thinks he knows it all; the wise man knows he doesn't. The fool

refuses instruction because he's got his whole plan laid out in his mind and he doesn't want to be bothered with anyone else's opinion. The wise man knows that his plans aren't perfect, so he isn't embarrassed to ask for advice.

Seeking counsel has many benefits. It gives us another set of eyes and ears; it buys us time to think of alternatives. We may uncover an entirely new perspective or possibly a new set of facts to consider. Certainly wise counselors will produce in us a new sense of humility.

After we have received wise counsel, evaluated our plans, and adjusted them accordingly, we may move forward with new confidence because our plans have been tested even before we put them in place.

No one knows everything. No one has all the knowledge. But God gave each of us a little piece of the big picture. The more pieces we put together in advance, the greater our chances for success.

So before you make a big decision, pick up the phone and call a few friends. Ask for help. Let them take a free shot at your new idea. If it's a good one, it will stand the test. If it's not, you can change it or forget about it. Either way, you come out ahead.

Father, thank You for friends who care enough to give wise advice. Please give me an open heart to graciously receive what they say. Amen.

Who gives you counsel when you face a big decision? Who comes to you for counsel?

What principles do you use to sift out the good from the bad? Have you ever ignored the advice of your friends on a major issue? What happened?

Proverbs 15:27 BRIBERY A Fast Train to Destruction

A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live. Proverbs 15:27

Solomon had a lot to say about this subject, nearly all of it negative. For instance, an adulterer cannot bribe his way out of punishment (6:35). Bribery perverts the course of justice (17:23). A leader who seeks bribes destroys his own country (29:4). Bribery is a form of greed that eventually hurts a man and his family (15:27).

Two other verses must also be considered. "A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds" (17:8). "A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath" (21:14). Is Solomon contradicting himself? Not at all. These two verses simply state facts, not moral judgments. Bribery often works, which is why it happens so often. Many people have risen to high position by offering money or other favors in exchange for the help they need. In the second verse, the "gift given in secret" is not necessarily a bribe. It may simply be an attempt to turn away anger by the offering of a gift.

Why is bribery so destructive? Because it is based on a short-sighted view of the moral universe. When individuals feel they must take matters into their own hands, they are implicitly denying that God can take care of them. They break the rules because they doubt the goodness of God. For them, money (or power or position or some other reward) has become an idol that has displaced the Lord.

Proverbs 16:8 says, "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice." That is to say, it is better to do right and struggle than to do wrong and be rich. Better to follow the rules and go broke than to cheat and climb your way to what you think is the top of the ladder. It is better to struggle to make ends meet, knowing that you are righteous in the eyes of God, than to cheat other people to have it all.

Proverbs 15:16 adds: "Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil." Too many people have bought into the notion that money brings happiness. We think that if we only had another \$1,000 or \$5,000 or \$10,000 or \$50,000 or \$150,000, then, at last, we would be able to buy that thing we have been trying to buy, or we'd be able to move up to a newer house or better car or better part of the country. The Bible is not against wealth or prosperity, but it is very honest about it. Generally speaking, the people who have lots of money also have a lot of trouble.

It is precisely because men don't believe that sentence that they turn to bribery. We cheat because we don't trust God and because we have made worldly gain our goal in life.

Bribery is truly a fast train to destruction. Stay away from it. Don't take bribes. Don't offer bribes. Play by the rules. And let God take care of the results.

Lord, save me from the impatience of greed and the stupidity of breaking the rules to get ahead. Amen.

What is the essential difference between a sinful bribe and a legitimate gift?

How much money would it take to make you happy right now?

PROVERBS 16

Proverbs 16:3 SUCCESS It All Begins with God

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. Proverbs 16:3

The word commit basically means “to roll.” It was used of rolling large rocks over the mouth of a cave (Joshua 10:18), of garments rolled in blood (Isaiah 9:5), of the sky rolled up as a scroll (Isaiah 34:4), and of an army marching through a breach in the city wall (Job 30:14). To commit in this context means to proactively roll all our plans, our dreams, and our hopes over to the Lord. When you commit something to the Lord you are saying, “Lord, either I can take care of this or You can, and You’re much better qualified to handle it, so I’m turning the whole thing over to You.”

To put the matter that way brings us face-to-face with the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). C. S. Lewis said that there are two kinds of people in the world, and only two kinds: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says in the end, “Thy will be done.” God has a will, and you have a will. To pray “Your will be done” is actually to pray “Lord, let my own will not be done if it in any way conflicts with Your will.” Those are easy words to say in theory, but difficult to apply to your cherished dreams and well-laid plans.

A friend of mine once came to me with a sobering message: “Ray, you’re holding on too tightly. You’ve got to let go.” When she said it, I mumbled something spiritual but I didn’t believe her. It took me a year or more to see the truth.

My friend was right. I didn’t want to let go. The thing I was holding on to meant everything to me. It was my baby, my dream, my future. I held on to it because I was deathly afraid to let go.

God eventually had to take it away from me. But, oh, it was painful. I fought and argued and wept. God paid no attention to my anger. He slowly and carefully pried my fingers away one by one. When He got down to the thumb, I fought Him with all my strength but to no avail. In the end He took back that which had always belonged to Him.

Does God have the right to be God in your life? You say, “Of course He does.” Yes, but have you told Him so? Or do you feel the need to fight with God about His plans for you? Former Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson recounts a prayer he often heard Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision, pray: “Lord, I give you license to interfere in my life and plans at any time, in any way, at any cost.” What a great way to approach life. “Lord, You’re in charge. I’ve got my plans, my dreams, my personal agenda, but if You want to change things, go right ahead-and You don’t have to tell me in advance.”

That’s precisely what it means to “commit” your way to the Lord. When you give God the right to be God in your life, you will experience true success, the kind that only He can give.

Father, I give You the right to interfere with my own plans if that is necessary so that Your will might be done in my life. Amen.

What are your dreams, hopes, and plans for the future? Have you ever rolled them over onto the Lord?

Are you holding on to anything too tightly right now?

Proverbs 16:8 SIMPLICITY Learning to Live with Less

Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice. Proverbs 16:8

Most of us live on the opposite principle. We figure our contentment on the basis of how many of our needs are met. Unfortunately, it’s hard to reach a place where all our needs are constantly met. By that standard, it’s hard to ever really be content. If contentment is measured by how much of the world’s goods you possess, who can ever say, “I have enough”? Someone asked a multimillionaire when he was going to stop working. “When I make enough money,” he replied. “How much money is enough?” “Just one more

dollar.”

That’s the way most of us figure contentment. In our hearts we think, I would be happy if only I had a new car or a new job or a new dress or a new husband or a new wife. Since life is hardly ever that simple, we stay frustrated when we ought to be happy.

No wonder we are never satisfied. Instead of being weaned from the world, we are wedded to it. Or maybe I should say, welded to it. In any case, our soul is anything but quiet; our countenance, anything but peaceful.

How does God go about weaning us from our dependence on the things of the world? I ran across a three-part answer from a Bible commentator writing over a century ago. First, God makes the things of the world bitter to us. Second, He removes one by one the things on which we depend. Third, He gives us something better. In the end, we find that we no longer need the things we used to think we couldn’t do without. And our walk with God is stronger than ever before.

Most of us have made a list of our blessings-especially at Thanksgiving. When we make that list, we normally emphasize our material blessings. That’s good and proper but it doesn’t exhaust the subject.

Here’s a simple suggestion. Make a list of the things which, through suffering and hardship, God has taken away from you in the last twelve months. And now your faith is stronger and deeper. And now your walk with God means more than it ever did before.

I want you to list those things you used to think you couldn’t live without but now you know you can. It could be a dream you had for your life that consumed all your energy, but God has taken it from you and you have found, “Yes, I can live without that.” It might be a relationship or a job or a prized possession. What have you learned that you can do without and still be happy?

As the song says, “Count your many blessings- name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.” The surprise is not just in the outward material blessings of the last year. It is also in the times of pain and suffering that seemed to be for no good purpose but turned out to be blessings in disguise. That, too, is the goodness and grace of God.

Lord, I thank You for the things I no longer have to have in order to be happy. Amen.

Make a list of things you have discovered you can now live without. What does that list teach you about the Lord? Yourself?

What things/relationships do you still think you must have in order to be happy?

Proverbs 16:9 How Can I Discover God's Will For My Life ?

December 1997 – Have you ever wished you could sit down with God and have a good talk with him about your own life? Have you ever wished you could just look him in the eye say, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” All of us have moments when we want to hear God’s voice or receive some definite sign regarding a relationship, a business decision, a career choice, or a major expenditure.

Our decisions really do matter. We make our decisions and our decisions turn around and make us. We face so many questions:

- * Should I get married? If the answer is yes, should I marry Joe or Jake or Susan or Sally?
- * Should I go to college? If the answer is yes, should I go to Alabama or Penn State or UCLA?
- * I’ve been offered a new job. It’s a good job. But I’ve got a good job. Should I take the new job? Or should I hold onto what I have?
- * We have two children. We’re thinking about having a third. Should we have another one? Or should we think about adopting?
- * Is God calling me to the mission field? How can I be sure? Three mission boards are interested in me. How do I know which one to choose?

I know from personal experience that many of our high school seniors are wrestling with the big question-“What do I do when I graduate next June?” Over the past few weeks I’ve written recommendation forms for various Christian colleges and state universities. That by the way is one of the favorite parts of my job. I enjoy talking with our students about their career choices and I am always glad to help them take that all-important next step.

Most of our seniors have already turned in their applications. Now it’s nail-biting time. Which colleges will accept me? Which ones will say no? What if three say yes, but my personal favorite says no? What if they say yes, but I can’t afford it? What do you do then? Is there any way to be 100% certain about God’s will when you are choosing a college?

I think it would be lot easier if you could simply open the door one evening and be greeted by a chorus of angels chanting, "Georgia Tech! Georgia Tech! Georgia Tech!" Or if you got a special delivery letter from heaven that said, "Dear Beth, go to Wheaton. Love, God." That would make it easy. But it doesn't often happen that way. Most of the time we research, study, narrow the options, talk it over with trusted friends, pray about it, wait on the Lord, turn in our applications, and then in the end, we make our choice and hope for the best.

It's God's Problem, Not Ours

That, I think, raises the central issue for most people regarding God's will. We would like someone else to make the decision for us. If God would only tell us what he wanted in a given situation, we would do it. But most of the time we're left with something less than 100% certainty.

I'm going to tell you right up front that I don't believe there is any way for you to get 100% certainty before you sign on the dotted line. I think you can get 95% probability sometimes, but that's about as good as most of us will ever do in the decisions of life.

That leads me to share an important principle with you. With all my heart I believe the following statement is true: God wants you to know his will more than you want to know it, therefore he takes personal responsibility to see that you discover it. Knowing God's will is ultimately God's problem, not yours. Let that last thought sink into your mind for a moment. You've probably never heard it put that way before.

Let me suggest what this really means:

He can put you exactly where he wants you to be.

He can arrange all the details years in advance.

He can open doors that seem shut tight.

He can remove any obstacle that stands in your way.

He can take your choices and fit them into his plan so that you end up at the right place at just the right time.

He can even take your mistakes and bring good out of them.

He can take tragedy and use it for your good and his glory.

All he needs-in fact the only thing he requires-is a willing heart. He just needs you to cooperate with him. This doesn't mean that you won't have to make decisions. But it does take the pressure off, because it means that you can trust God to take your decisions and use them to accomplish his will in your life.

Four Verses to Think About ...

Recently I've been struck with the strong emphasis in the book of Proverbs on the sovereignty of God over our personal decisions. Let's take a quick look at four verses that help us see how God works in, with, through, and sometimes in spite of our decisions to accomplish his will in us.

Proverbs 16:9- "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps." I'd like you to underline the word determines. It doesn't say that God "directs" his steps (although that is true-see Proverbs 3:6), but rather that God determines his steps. It's a very strong word that speaks of God's control of every detail in the universe. Perhaps you've heard it said that "Man proposes, but God disposes." You can make all your plans, in fact you can have your life mapped out step by step, but in the end, God determines every step you take.

Proverbs 16:33-"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Most of us don't understand the concept of "casting lots." In the Old Testament, the Jews often used this method to determine God's will. It sometimes involved using different colored balls or rocks, mixing them together, and then seeing which one fell out of the bag first. In that sense casting lots is like rolling dice. It appears to be a random act of chance. But God is behind those colored stones. He determines which one falls out of the bag first. This means that there are no "accidents" in life, no "random" events, and no such thing as "luck." Even seemingly meaningless things fit into his plan.

Proverbs 19:21-"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." Let me give you a paraphrase of this verse: "You can make all the plans you like, but God gets the last word." His purpose always prevails. Some translations say that God's purpose shall stand. Most of our plans don't stand. They are like the leaves that blow away in the autumn wind. But when God determines to do something, it's gonna happen. You can write it down and take it to the bank. You can make all the speeches you

want and announce your long-range plans, your ten-year goals, and your personal objectives, but just remember this. When you are finished, God always gets the last word.

Proverbs 20:24—"A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" There is something hidden in the Hebrew text that you wouldn't know simply from reading the English translation. The word translated "man's" in the first phrase comes from the Hebrew word *gibor*, which refers to a mighty warrior, a ruler, or a potentate. Solomon means to say that even the steps of a mighty man are ordained by God. The word "anyone" in the second phrase comes from the Hebrew word *adam*, which is the generic word for mankind. The meaning is, "If God directs the steps of the mighty, how then can an ordinary man understand his own way?" The answer is, he can't! That's the whole point of the verse. We're like a man stumbling around in the darkness, bumping into things, tripping over ourselves, trying to find our way forward. We can't say for sure where we've come from, where we are right now, or where we're going to be tomorrow. Only God can see the big picture of life.

The First Rule of the Spiritual Life: He's God and we're not!

Those four verses lead me directly to the first rule of the spiritual life. Understand this and you'll be OK, forget this and you will walk in continual confusion. This is where all spiritual understanding must begin.

When we forget that rule, we think that we're in control of our own life and that everything depends on us. So we obsess, we hyperventilate, we try to control everything and everyone around us, we worry over all our decisions, and we spend hours fussing over the minutiae of life.

"I'm going to be up all night anyway."

What a relief to realize that God is God and you're not. Now you can rip that big "G" off your sweatshirt. You don't have to play God anymore and you don't have to try to control everything around you. You can sleep well when you realize that God is God and you are not. Corrie Ten Boom was having trouble going to sleep one night because she was so worried about the affairs of her life. She tried praying but it didn't help. Finally, the Lord said to her, "Go to sleep, Corrie. I'm going to be up all night anyway."

Let me wrap up this message by sharing four simple principles that can help you as you seek to do God's will.

Principle #1: Use all your intelligence to make wise decisions.

Sometimes people talk as if you shouldn't use your brain at all but should wait for some mystical sign from God. I know the Bible says, "lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5), but that doesn't mean to throw your brain away either. It simply means that after doing all your research on a given decision, submit it to God and ask for his help. If you need to make a major decision, don't wait for the angels to knock on your door. Use your head, study the situation, gather the facts, talk to your friends, seek godly counsel, and then submit it all to the Lord.

Principle #2: Since you can't know the future, you'll rarely have 100% certainty about most decisions.

I've already mentioned that this is perhaps our greatest stumbling block because we want 100% certainty, but in a fallen world that's hard to come by. Many people believe they must be 100% certain of God's will before they make a decision. I can understand their thinking. After all, if you are facing a life-changing decision—a potential marriage, a cross-country move, a new career, which college to attend, whether or not to begin chemotherapy—you'd like to know in advance beyond any doubt that you are doing what God wants you to do. All too often that leaves us paralyzed by an inability to make up our minds. Some decisions are so important they can't be left to chance. As the popular saying goes, "When in doubt, don't." If you aren't sure about the new job, don't take it, don't make the move, don't say yes, don't make any decision with less than total certainty.

But is that good advice? Is it realistic? Is that the way God normally works?

Did Noah know all about the flood? No, but he built the ark anyway.

Did Abraham have a road map? No, but he left Ur of the Chaldees anyway.

Did Moses understand what it meant to lead God's people out of Egypt? No, but he said yes when the Lord called him.

Did Joshua know how the walls were going to come tumbling down? No, but he marched around Jericho anyway.

Did Gideon fully grasp God's plan to defeat the Midianites? No, he doubted it from the beginning, but God delivered his people anyway.

Did young David have a clue of what was to come when Samuel said to Jesse, "This is the one"? No, but the Spirit of the Lord came upon him anyway.

Did Jehoshaphat know how God was going to defeat the Ammonites? No, but he put the singers at the front of the army and sent them out to battle anyway.

We could add a hundred other examples from the Bible! Did the three Hebrew children know how they would be delivered? Was Daniel totally sure the lions would welcome him dropping in on them? Did Peter know he could walk on water? Did Paul know what would happen when he finally got to Rome?

The answer is always no. The life of faith means living with uncertainty even in the midst of doing God's will. That's the whole point of Hebrews 11. Those great men and women didn't know the future, but they trusted God anyway, sometimes in the face of great personal suffering. And because they kept on believing when circumstances turned against them, they received a great reward.

Too many people want what God has never promised—100% certainty before they will act. So they wait and wait and they dilly and they dally and they stop and they hesitate and they ruminate. They refuse to go forward because they are waiting for 100% certainty. That leads me to this important observation: It is rarely God's will to give you 100% certainty before you make an important decision.

Principle #3: God wants guidable people who will trust him with the details of life.

Guidable people look to God and not to themselves. That is, they understand that after they have done all they can, it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. Like young Samuel, they say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth." Like Isaiah they cry out, "Here am I, Lord, send me." Like the Lord Jesus they pray, "Not my will but thine be done."

Let me share a secret with you. Guidable people always receive guidance from God. Always. Why? Because God always speaks loud enough for a willing ear to hear.

Are you a guidable Christian? Or do you still feel like you have to be in the driver's seat of life. Have you ever said, "Lord, let your will be done even if it means that my will is not done?"

Principle #4: When the time comes, make the best decision you can and leave the results with God.

This follows from everything else I've shared in this message. When the time to decide comes, when you've thought about it, prayed about it, talked it over, sought godly counsel, researched your options, looked at the circumstances, searched the Scriptures, and waited on the Lord, when you've done everything you know how to do and the moment of truth comes, take a deep breath, close your eyes if you need to, and then just go ahead and make the best decision you can make.

When you've done that, there's one other thing to do—leave the results with God. Remember he's God and you're not. His purposes will stand.

I've already said that he wants you to know his will more than you want to know it. Knowing God's will is his problem, not yours. If you truly want to do God's will, you will do it.

My friend Robert Burdett gave me this quote from Jerry Sittser, "God has enough trouble getting us to do his will, without making it hard to find." If you are willing to be guided by God, you will discover that he will lead you step by step by step. In the end you will be what he wants you to be, you will go where he wants you to go, and you will do what he wants you to do. This is God's promise to guidable Christians who are willing to do his will.

Dan Hoeksema's Daily Prayer

Just before Thanksgiving Marlene and I had lunch with Dan and Linda Hoeksema. Dan and Linda attended Calvary for many years but moved to Memphis several years ago where Dan has established an electrical contracting company. As we sat down to eat, the thought passed through my mind that Dan looked more relaxed than I had seen him in a long time. Before long, I discovered the reason for his calm demeanor. He told me that in July he was listening to Dr. Charles Stanley preach on his television program. At one point Dr. Stanley suggested a simple prayer to be prayed at the beginning of each new day. He challenged all his listeners to pray this prayer for 21 days straight. Dan said that he had tried it and that the prayer had made a profound difference in his life. At that point Linda chimed in to say that she had noticed a drastic difference in him as well. Before he started praying the prayer, he often came home tense over things that had happened to him during the day. But now he comes home relaxed and in a good mood. As I listened, I wondered to myself what kind of magic prayer could make that kind of difference. Then Dan said that for him the key is to pray the prayer the moment he wakes up—even before he gets out of bed. He even said that he had awakened that morning at 4:30 so he prayed the prayer and then went back to sleep.

The prayer itself is the essence of simplicity. It goes like this: "Heavenly Father, you are in charge of everything that is going to happen to me today—whether it be good or bad, positive or negative. Please make me thankful for everything that happens to me

today. Amen.”

That’s simple, isn’t it? When Dan told me the story, he emphasized that this prayer is so powerful because it doesn’t change anything outside of me, but it does change everything inside of me. My circumstances don’t change, but my attitude does. And that’s why he looked so relaxed when we ate lunch.

Today is December 7. I know many of us feel enormous stress during this time of year, and the load only increases as we move closer to Christmas. I’d like to issue a 21-Day Challenge to each of you today. Take that simple prayer and pray it first thing in the morning for the next 21 days and see if something good doesn’t happen in your own life.

Will of God - How Can I Discover God's Will For My Life? - Sermon 3 of 4 from the Knowing God's Will series - For sermon 4 of 4 from Knowing God's Will series see Matthew 6:10 The Hardest Prayer You Will Ever Pray

October 2007 – Have you ever wished you could have lunch with Jesus? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you got a phone call from heaven saying that the Lord Jesus Christ would like to meet you for lunch next Thursday? Suppose that happened. What would you talk to Jesus about? I imagine that your first impulse would be to fall on your face at his feet and worship him. But suppose the Lord of heaven said, “Rise, my child. Let’s share a meal together.” What would you say then? Most of us somewhere along the way would say something like this. “Lord Jesus, I love you and more than anything else, I want to please you. Lord, am I doing what you want me to do? Is there anything else you want me to do because if there is, if you want to change my direction, please let me know.”

All of us have moments when we want to hear God’s voice or receive some definite sign regarding a relationship, a business decision, a career choice, or a major expenditure.

Our decisions really do matter. We make our decisions and our decisions turn around and make us. We face so many questions:

- * Should I get married? If the answer is yes, should I marry Joe or Jake or Susan or Sally?
- * Should I go to college? If the answer is yes, should I go to Alabama or Penn State or UCLA?
- * I’ve been offered a new job. It’s a good job. But I’ve got a good job. Should I take the new job? Or should I hold onto what I have?
- * We have two children. We’re thinking about having a third. Should we have another one? Or should we think about adopting?
- * Is God calling me to the mission field? How can I be sure? Three mission boards are interested in me. How do I know which one to choose?

When I was a pastor, I would meet with high school seniors asking me to fill out recommendation forms for them. That by the way was one of the favorite parts of my job. I enjoyed talking with students about their career choices and I was always glad to help them take that all-important next step.

Once you’ve turned in your applications, it’s nail-biting time. Which colleges will accept me? Which ones will say no? What if three say yes, but my personal favorite says no? What if they say yes, but I can’t afford it? What do you do then? Is there any way to be 100% certain about God’s will when you are choosing a college?

I think it would be lot easier if you could simply open the door one evening and be greeted by a chorus of angels chanting, “Georgia Tech! Georgia Tech! Georgia Tech!” Or if you got a special delivery letter from heaven that said, “Dear Beth, go to Wheaton. Love, God.” That would make it easy. But it doesn’t often happen that way. Most of the time we research, study, narrow the options, talk it over with trusted friends, pray about it, wait on the Lord, turn in our applications, and then in the end, we make our choice and hope for the best.

It’s God’s Problem, Not Ours

That, I think, raises the central issue for most people regarding God’s will. We would like someone else to make the decision for us. If God would only tell us what he wanted in a given situation, we would do it. But most of the time we’re left with something less than 100% certainty.

I’m going to tell you right up front that I don’t believe there is any way for you to get 100% certainty before you sign on the dotted line. I think you can get 95% probability sometimes, but that’s about as good as most of us will ever do in the decisions of life.

That leads me to share an important principle with you. With all my heart I believe the following statement is true: God wants you to know his will more than you want to know it, therefore he takes personal responsibility to see that you discover it. Knowing God’s will is ultimately God’s problem, not yours. Let that last thought sink into your mind for a moment. You’ve probably never heard it put that way before.

Let me suggest what this really means:

He can put you exactly where he wants you to be.

He can arrange all the details years in advance.

He can open doors that seem shut tight.

He can remove any obstacle that stands in your way.

He can take your choices and fit them into his plan so that you end up at the right place at just the right time.

He can even take your mistakes and bring good out of them.

He can take tragedy and use it for your good and his glory.

All he needs—in fact the only thing he requires—is a willing heart. He just needs you to cooperate with him. This doesn't mean that you won't have to make decisions. But it does take the pressure off, because it means that you can trust God to take your decisions and use them to accomplish his will in your life.

Four Verses to Think About ...

While reading through Proverbs, I was struck with the strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God over our personal decisions. Let's take a quick look at four verses that help us see how God works in, with, through, and sometimes in spite of our decisions to accomplish his will in us.

Proverbs 16:9—"In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps." I'd like you to underline the word determines. It doesn't say that God "directs" his steps (although that is true—see Proverbs 3:6), but rather that God determines his steps. It's a very strong word that speaks of God's control of every detail in the universe. Perhaps you've heard it said that "Man proposes, but God disposes." You can make all your plans, in fact you can have your life mapped out step by step, but in the end, God determines every step you take.

Proverbs 16:33—"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Most of us don't understand the concept of "casting lots." In the Old Testament, the Jews often used this method to determine God's will. It sometimes involved using different colored balls or rocks, mixing them together, and then seeing which one fell out of the bag first. In that sense casting lots is like rolling dice. It appears to be a random act of chance. But God is behind those colored stones. He determines which one falls out of the bag first. This means that there are no "accidents" in life, no "random" events, and no such thing as "luck." Even seemingly meaningless things fit into his plan. To paraphrase Forest Gump, "Life is like a roll of the dice, but God is in charge of how the numbers come up."

Proverbs 19:21—"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." Let me give you a paraphrase of this verse: "You can make all the plans you like, but God gets the last word." His purpose always prevails. Some translations say that God's purpose shall stand. Most of our plans don't stand. They are like the leaves that blow away in the autumn wind. But when God determines to do something, it's gonna happen. You can write it down and take it to the bank. You can make all the speeches you want and announce your long-range plans, your ten-year goals, and your personal objectives, but just remember this. When you are finished, God always gets the last word.

Proverbs 20:24—"A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" There is something hidden in the Hebrew text that you wouldn't know simply from reading the English translation. The word translated "man's" in the first phrase comes from the Hebrew word gibor, which refers to a mighty warrior, a ruler, or a potentate. Solomon means to say that even the steps of a mighty man are ordained by God. The word "anyone" in the second phrase comes from the Hebrew word adam, which is the generic word for mankind. The meaning is, "If God directs the steps of the mighty, how then can an ordinary man understand his own way?" The answer is, he can't! That's the whole point of the verse. We're like a man stumbling around in the darkness, bumping into things, tripping over ourselves, trying to find our way forward. We can't say for sure where we've come from, where we are right now, or where we're going to be tomorrow. Only God can see the big picture of life.

The First Rule of the Spiritual Life: He's God and we're not!

Those four verses lead me directly to the first rule of the spiritual life. Understand this and you'll be OK, forget this and you will walk in continual confusion. This is where all spiritual understanding must begin.

When we forget that rule, we think that we're in control of our own life and that everything depends on us. So we obsess, we hyperventilate, we try to control everything and everyone around us, we worry over all our decisions, and we spend hours fussing

over the minutiae of life.

What a relief to realize that God is God and you're not. Now you can rip that big "G" off your sweatshirt. You don't have to play God anymore and you don't have to try to control everything around you. You can sleep well when you realize that God is God and you are not. Corrie Ten Boom was having trouble going to sleep one night because she was so worried about the affairs of her life. She tried praying but it didn't help. Finally, the Lord said to her, "Go to sleep, Corrie. I'm going to be up all night anyway."

Let me wrap up this message by sharing four simple principles that can help you as you seek to do God's will.

Principle #1: Use all your intelligence to make wise decisions.

Sometimes people talk as if you shouldn't use your brain at all but should wait for some mystical sign from God. I know the Bible says, "lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5), but that doesn't mean to throw your brain away either. It simply means that after doing all your research on a given decision, submit it to God and ask for his help. If you need to make a major decision, don't wait for the angels to knock on your door. Use your head, study the situation, gather the facts, talk to your friends, seek godly counsel, and then submit it all to the Lord.

Principle #2: Since you can't know the future, you'll rarely have 100% certainty about most decisions.

I've already mentioned that this is perhaps our greatest stumbling block because we want 100% certainty, but in a fallen world that's hard to come by. Many people believe they must be 100% certain of God's will before they make a decision. I can understand their thinking. After all, if you are facing a life-changing decision—a potential marriage, a cross-country move, a new career, which college to attend, whether or not to begin chemotherapy—you'd like to know in advance beyond any doubt that you are doing what God wants you to do. All too often that leaves us paralyzed by an inability to make up our minds. Some decisions are so important they can't be left to chance. As the popular saying goes, "When in doubt, don't." If you aren't sure about the new job, don't take it, don't make the move, don't say yes, don't make any decision with less than total certainty.

But is that good advice? Is it realistic? Is that the way God normally works?

Did Noah know all about the flood? No, but he built the ark anyway.

Did Abraham have a road map? No, but he left Ur of the Chaldees anyway.

Did Moses understand what it meant to lead God's people out of Egypt? No, but he said yes when the Lord called him.

Did Joshua know how the walls were going to come tumbling down? No, but he marched around Jericho anyway.

Did Gideon fully grasp God's plan to defeat the Midianites? No, he doubted it from the beginning, but God delivered his people anyway.

Did young David have a clue of what was to come when Samuel said to Jesse, "This is the one"? No, but the Spirit of the Lord came upon him anyway.

Did Jehoshaphat know how God was going to defeat the Ammonites? No, but he put the singers at the front of the army and sent them out to battle anyway.

We could add a hundred other examples from the Bible! Did the three Hebrew children know how they would be delivered? Was Daniel totally sure the lions would welcome him dropping in on them? Did Peter know he could walk on water? Did Paul know what would happen when he finally got to Rome?

The answer is always no. The life of faith means living with uncertainty even in the midst of doing God's will. That's the whole point of Hebrews 11. Those great men and women didn't know the future, but they trusted God anyway, sometimes in the face of great personal suffering. And because they kept on believing when circumstances turned against them, they received a great reward.

Too many people want what God has never promised—100% certainty before they will act. So they wait and wait and they dilly and they dally and they stop and they hesitate and they ruminate. They refuse to go forward because they are waiting for 100% certainty. That leads me to this important observation: It is rarely God's will to give you 100% certainty before you make an important decision.

Principle #3: God wants guidable people who will trust him with the details of life.

Guidable people look to God and not to themselves. That is, they understand that after they have done all they can, it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. Like young Samuel, they say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth." Like Isaiah they cry out, "Here am I, Lord, send me." Like the Lord Jesus they pray, "Not my will but thine be done."

Let me share a secret with you. Guidable people always receive guidance from God. Always. Why? Because God always speaks loud enough for a willing ear to hear.

Are you a guidable Christian? Or do you still feel like you have to be in the driver's seat of life. If you are struggling with this, let me suggest these two simple prayers:

1) "Lord, let your will be done even if it means that my will is not done."

2) "Lord, right now I'm not sure I want to do your will. But I am willing to be made willing. Do whatever is necessary to change my heart. Amen."

Principle #4: When the time comes, make the best decision you can and leave the results with God.

This follows from everything else I've shared in this message. When the time to decide comes, when you've thought about it, prayed about it, talked it over, sought godly counsel, researched your options, looked at the circumstances, searched the Scriptures, and waited on the Lord, when you've done everything you know how to do and the moment of truth comes, take a deep breath, close your eyes if you need to, and then just go ahead and make the best decision you can make.

When you've done that, there's one other thing to do—leave the results with God. Remember he's God and you're not. His purposes will stand.

I've already said that he wants you to know his will more than you want to know it. Knowing God's will is his problem, not yours. If you truly want to do God's will, you will do it.

My friend Robert Burdett gave me this quote from Jerry Sittser, "God has enough trouble getting us to do his will, without making it hard to find." If you are willing to be guided by God, you will discover that he will lead you step by step by step. In the end you will be what he wants you to be, you will go where he wants you to go, and you will do what he wants you to do. This is God's promise to guidable Christians who are willing to do his will.

What Dallas Willard Told My Friend

I know a pastor who attended a conference where noted author Dallas Willard was speaking. This pastor met Dallas Willard and they chatted for a while. After the conference was over, he decided to write and thank him for his messages. To his surprise, he got back a nice letter of thanks. And that led to an occasional correspondence between the two of them. Not a lot of letters—just now and then staying in touch.

There came a time when the pastor was going through great difficulty in his ministry. People were unhappy about this or that, they were talking and sniping at each other, and everything the pastor tried to do seemed to be stymied by the criticism of people inside the church. At length he decided to go away for a personal retreat. While he was on the retreat, he resolved to write Dallas Willard and ask for his advice. So he started to write the letter. Evidently he really got into it because he wrote page after page, just pouring out his heart, sharing the details about all the problems of the church. He explained it thoroughly so that Dallas Willard could understand it in depth. As the pastor told the story to me, he said, "I knew I was writing too much, but I just couldn't stop." He wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally his epistle was finished.

The moment he dropped his letter into the mailbox, he had doubts. And in fact he thought about trying to get his letter back but he knew he couldn't. He hoped he hadn't offended the great man whom he held in such high esteem by writing at such great length.

Days passed. Then a week. Then another week. And the pastor beat himself up mentally. "Stupid! I was stupid to write such a long letter. I'll never hear from Dallas Willard again." More time passed. A month came and went. Finally the pastor forgot all about it.

Then one day he got a letter in the mail from Dallas Willard. It came in a very thin envelope. When he opened it, there was only one page inside. And the letter itself contained only two sentences. It read like this:

Dear Friend,

Thank you for writing. I think you should get up every day and do whatever you believe God wants you to do and not worry so much about what other people think.

In Christ,

Dallas Willard

The pastor smiled when he told me the story because that short answer told him everything he needed to know. It is a great advance spiritually to come to the place where you can do what you believe God wants you to do without worrying about what other people

think.

Sometimes we just need to take the next step and let God take care of everything else.

Life is a mysterious journey, full of unexpected twists and turns. The path ahead is a mystery to us all. No one can say for sure what is around the next bend. It may be a smooth road through a lovely valley or we may discover that the bridge is washed out and we have to find a way to cross a deep river. Often the road will seem to disappear or it may suddenly seem to go in three different directions and we won't know which way to go. But there is One who knows the way because the past, present, and future are all the same to Him and the darkness is as the light of day. He knows the way we should go. He promised to direct your path and He will do it. You can count on it.

Will of God - Marching Off the Map – How to Know the Will of God

(See also sermon on Will of God indexed at Mt 6:10) Ray Pritchard - 03/01/1996 -

Perhaps you've heard the story about the emperor who ordered his favorite general to embark on a dangerous mission to conquer new land. Because that meant entering unknown territory, the maps stopped at the frontier of previous exploration. Many months later, after completing his mission, the general sent a message back to the emperor: "What do we do now? We have just marched off the map."

Something like happens sooner or later to every Christian. We all have a "map" of our life on which we mark off our family, our job, our career, our relationships, and our dreams for tomorrow.

But life never fits neatly into the pages of our daily planner. Trouble comes, or sickness, or tragedy, or perhaps an unexpected turn of events, and suddenly we find ourselves marching off the map of life.

What do you do then? The Bible contains many stories of men and women who suddenly found themselves in uncharted territory. One of the best examples comes from the often-overlooked story of Esther. Here is a woman who suddenly found herself in a dangerous predicament. A series of unforeseen events catapulted her from a life of luxury into an agonizing moral crisis.

From her story we discover four transferable principles for doing God's will while marching off the map.

Principle # 1: God's will is most often discovered in the outworking of the ordinary events of life.

Esther's story begins with an ancient beauty pageant. "Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (Esther 2:17). Xerxes was king of Persia. He had deposed his wife Vashti and was looking for someone to take her place. At the suggestion of his attendants, the king sponsored an nationwide search for a suitable candidate among the young women of his realm.

A Jewish girl named Esther was one of those women. We are told that she was young, beautiful, and a virgin. It has been well said that beauty is both a privilege and a burden. Beauty is a gift God bestows on only a few people. Like any other gift, it must be used for God's glory.

Esther was a very unlikely person to become the Queen of Persia and later the savior of her nation. She entered the beauty contest because she had to, not because she wanted to. Yet this unlikely person comes to an unlikely place at exactly the right moment in history.

Would you like to discover God's will for your life? Here is one part of the answer: God's will is most often revealed in the outworking of the ordinary affairs of life. Be faithful to the work God has given you today because through that faithfulness he will reveal his will for you tomorrow.

Principle # 2: God often reveals His will by first putting us in an uncomfortable position.

Five years pass after Esther becomes the queen. These are years of peace, prosperity and luxury. When Esther was raised up as the queen over the Persian empire, she had no idea what God had in store for her. Haman's plot was an unrevealed mystery. She didn't know that the fate of her people would soon rest on her shoulders. As far as she knew, pure "luck" had lifted her to such a high position.

The same is true for you and me. When we are promoted, we rarely have a clear idea of what God has in store for us either. We make the move, we take the new job, we enter into a marriage relationship, we transfer to a new department, enroll in a different college, and move from one state to another. In all of our shifting around, we seldom understand the big picture of what God wants us to do.

When Esther became queen, she had five years to simply enjoy herself. Meanwhile behind the scenes God was preparing her for the greatest crisis of her life.

Esther's Dilemma

Haman was jealous because the Mordecai the Jew would not kneel down before him. So he hatched a plot to kill all the Jews in Persia. He even managed to get the king's approval for his wicked scheme. But Haman overlooked one important fact: Mordecai was Esther's cousin and had raised her himself. Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes and began to mourn in the city streets. When Esther heard about this, she sent a messenger to find out what was the matter. He came back with a full explanation of the plot and the request that Esther personally appeal to the king. That leads to a major complication, because Xerxes loved Esther, but he didn't know that she was Jewish.

So Mordecai says, "Esther, you have got to go in and speak for your people." This is her reply, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death." (4:11) The king did not like to be surprised. No one could come into his presence without his permission. Not even the queen could come in uninvited. The only exception would be if the king let down his scepter. Then you could touch the king's scepter, which meant that even though you were unannounced, the king had welcomed you. But if he didn't lower his scepter, you weren't going to live to see another day.

"It's Not Easy Being a Missionary"

Not long ago I traveled to Belize to spend some time teaching at a mission station. As I talked with our missionary there, she told us about some of the difficulties she faced on the field. "It's not easy being a missionary," she said. How true. In the lobby of our church one whole wall is reserved for pictures of our missionaries. Those pictures can be deceiving because they make it look easy. But it's not. dishes, you had to put it under a microscope to find it.

The things most of us take for granted—going to a store, hopping in the car to go to a movie, picking up a phone and calling somebody, having electricity 24 hours a day—they simply aren't there on the mission field. Going grocery shopping can take an entire day if you can find some food to buy. "The people back home don't understand what we go through." My friend was not complaining, simply stating the facts. We don't understand.

When you read Esther's story, please don't think badly of her. She is not saying, "I'm not going to do it." She is just counting the cost of going in to see the king. That's actually a mark of wisdom because doing the will of God will cost you something. And when God gets ready to reveal his will for you, He often does it by putting you first in a very uncomfortable position.

Principle # 3: God arranges the circumstances of life so that when the right moment comes, we will be in exactly the right place to do His will.

Mordecai then replies to Esther in what has become the most famous passage in the whole book. "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13-14)

It's as if he is saying, "Esther, how do you think you got where you are? Do you think it was your beauty? You weren't the only beautiful girl. Do you think it was your smile? There were others that could smile, too. God placed you here so that at this very moment you can deliver your people."

That is what God does. He arranges the tiniest circumstances of life. Sometimes he takes months and years to do it. He does it so that at the right moment you will be where you need to be in order to do the will of God.

Turning Right—Not Left!

On Wednesday afternoon during our trip to Belize I didn't have anything to do so I borrowed a car to go sight-seeing in Belmopan, the capital city.

After a few minutes we came to a stop sign. I said, "Let's turn right." The road led to the local hospital. As we approached the main building, my wife spotted one of the missionaries from the base. She was standing there with her young son waiting to be picked up.

We drove them to the pharmacy so she could get the prescription filled for her son. Then she said, "We'd better go back to the hospital. Maybe somebody is waiting to pick us up."

She was right. When we drove back to the hospital, we found one of the other missionaries looking for them. As we pulled up, a smile came across his face. "I can't believe God brought you here. We needed to switch my van for your car because I have to go to another city. When I saw you a few minutes ago I prayed, 'Lord, please bring them back to the hospital.' And now here you are."

I confess that I am not used to thinking in those terms. But it is wonderful to realize that God is involved in something as small as turning right or left at a stop sign. When you are turning right, you are not doing it by chance though it seems like chance to you. But you are coming to the right place at exactly the right time so that the right people who have prayed for you can meet you so you can switch your vehicles. Who knows but you turned right instead of left for such a time as this?

Principle # 4: God brings us again and again to face one basic question: "Am I willing to do God's will without regard to the consequences?"

Now we come to the climax of the story. Mordecai has made his appeal. Esther answers with these stirring words: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (4:16)

"If I perish, I perish." This is faith acting in spite of doubt. Was she sure? No, she wasn't sure. Were there any guarantees? None whatsoever. But she was going to go see the king anyway.

This teaches us that God's will is revealed to those who choose to do it. Normally God will not show you his will in order for you to consider it. We say, "Lord, if you show me the big picture, then I will be willing to do it." And God says, "No, you must be willing first, and then I will show you what you need to know."

Flying Through the Fog

On our way back from Belize our plane was delayed for three hours in Miami because of bad weather in Chicago. During the last thirty minutes of our flight the plane was completely enshrouded in fog. We couldn't even see the tips of the wings. We might have been 50 feet off the ground or 25,000. We could have been over the ocean or flying across a desert. The fog destroyed all sense of bearing.

That's a frightening experience because your mind begins to play tricks on you. As long as you can see the ground below and the stars above, you feel like you are in control. But when those things vanish, you realize how helpless you really are. All you can do is hope and pray that the instruments are working and that the captain is in contact with the control tower.

Many times in life the fog rolls in and all the familiar landmarks disappear. Your friends are gone, your family is far away, your money has vanished, your health is gone, your career is over, your future uncertain, your marriage failed, and your plans in tatters. Suddenly the things you trusted in fade away and you find yourself flying through the fog. In the midst of confusing and uncertain circumstances, all you can do is take the next step and trust that the Divine Captain of our souls will bring you safely in for a landing.

In those moments it helps to remember that God is still in control of your life. He wants to bring you to the place where you will say, "Lord, I am willing to do your will without regard to the consequences." When you can say that even while marching off the map of life, then you will know God's will and you will do it.

Will of God - Sense and Nonsense About God's Will - - Sermon 2 of 4 from the Knowing God's Will series (See also sermon on Will of God indexed at Mt 6:10)

October 2007 – "What Happened, Lord?"

It's a common question, isn't it? You set out to get a new job, you work hard for it, you go through the interview process, you do your very best, and in your heart you believe this is the job God wants you to have. Then someone else gets the job. And you say, "Lord, I thought I was doing Your will." Or perhaps you get the job, and you say, "Thank You, Lord." But six months later you're fired and you say, "What happened, Lord?" Or you think, "If only we could move to Florida, we would be happy." So you move to Florida, believing it to be the will of God. When you get there, you still are not happy. And you say, "Lord, did we make a mistake?" Deep in our hearts we know God has a plan for us. We don't debate that; it's not a theological issue with us. We know that we weren't put on the earth to grope blindly through the darkness. Nevertheless, that's the way life feels sometimes.

Not long ago I listened as my college-age youngest son and one of his friends sat on the couch in our living room talking about this and that. The conversation eventually turned to girls, more particularly to one girl who is dating a mutual friend. I listened long enough to discover that they seem to think that he should be dating someone else, though the reasons involved seemed obscure to

me. After some more discussion, the boys concluded that the relationship would probably end soon anyway. At that point, my wife chimed in with the helpful insight that the boy might end it by telling the girl, "I think it's God's will that we break up." She smiled when she said it, and I knew what she was thinking because that's exactly what I said to her when we broke up at the start of our senior year in college. At that time we had been dating for over a year. She worked at Christian camp that summer while I took courses at a university several hundred miles away. I hadn't seen her since May, but over the summer months had decided we needed to break up. I knew we were falling in love and that marriage was a real possibility if we continued to date, and like most men, that thought terrified me. I was only 20 years old and fairly well convinced that I would probably get married someday, but to me that "someday" was a few years away. When I returned to the Christian college we both attended, I decided to do the manly thing and tell her with as much kindness as I could muster that we needed to break up. The scene is etched in my mind. We took a walk one night and ended up in the music building on campus. After a few minutes of awkward conversation (she had no idea what was coming), I told her that I had prayed about it and that I thought it was God's will that we should break up. Though shocked, she took the news gracefully and we parted on friendly terms. I walked back to my dorm feeling like I had handled a difficult situation pretty well, even though I had some nagging doubts about whether it was really the right thing to do.

"Wake Up, Ray!"

Here's the rest of the story. We did not stay broken up very long. After a week or so, I had one of those "light-bulb" moments where everything suddenly became clear to me. While driving down a country road, I heard a voice say (well, it seemed like I heard a voice. Maybe it was just my mind talking to me, trying to get my attention), "Wake up, Ray. You're in love with Marlene." It happened just like that—and it was true. So a few days later I asked to see her again, we got back together, that spring we were engaged, the next August we got married, and we will soon celebrate our 30th anniversary.

Looking back I'm not sure how much I meditated on the theological implications of saying it was God's will that we should break up. Since we were both attending a Christian college, it wasn't unusual for a guy (or a girl) to give that reason for ending a relationship. In a sense, it's the "ultimate" excuse. It's almost like saying, "I'd like to keep dating you, but God won't let me." Who can argue with that? As I think back, I wonder, "Did I really believe it was God's will for us to break up?" But that's putting too much pressure on a nervous college kid who didn't know what to do. Perhaps it truly was God's will for us to break up so that I could realize that I had fallen in love with Marlene. Maybe that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't broken up. So maybe I had to say, "It's God will for us to break up" because it was really God's will for us to get back together, get married, and still be together (and happy!) after all these years. As I write those words, it hits me that they express what I truly believe. God's will was done in the end.

That little drama, though hardly earthshaking, illustrates a key truth we often overlook. Knowing God's will is a journey, not a destination, and along the way we will sometimes be quite confused. And sometimes we will be flat wrong about what God really wants for us. The bottom line is not being "right" or "wrong" about God's will, but truly seeking what God's will in the first place.

If you are willing to follow him, he will lead you exactly where he wants you to go. There is nothing controversial about that statement. All Christians would agree with it. The problem comes at the next level—the level of practical application. We know God guides His children, but how does that divine guidance work out in the nitty-gritty details? At precisely this point we need to be very clear in our thinking. There is so much misinformation, so much bad teaching, so much faulty theology when we come to the "how-to" of God's guidance. As a result many Christians continually make wrong turns, go down dead-end streets, and end up in spiritual cul-de-sacs because they don't understand what God has said about the way he guides His children.

In order to help us understand the biblical perspective, I'm going to share four wrong ideas about God's guidance and a biblical answer for each one. Each of these myths, though popular, can be devastating to believers.

Myth #1: God wants you to know the future

This myth is listed first because it is the biggest mistake that Christians make with regard to the will of God. It is the mistake of assuming the end from the beginning. Because God has led us one step in a particular direction, we assume that the end result must be guaranteed. We start down a road, and because we are going a certain direction we think the destination is certain. Let's be clear on this one point. It is rarely God's will for you to know your personal future. Psalm 119:105 paints a clear picture of how we discover the will of God: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." The picture here is not of a blazing light that illuminates an entire room. It is a picture of a man in total darkness walking along a dangerous trail. There is no moon in the sky. Darkness clings to him. His only light comes from the lantern in his hand. As he holds the lantern, it illuminates the step right in front of him. When he takes that step, what happens to the light? It goes forward one more step. The light is not bright enough to illuminate even ten yards ahead.

Let's face the truth—we want to know the future. At least we think we do. We want to know what is going to happen next year, so we can be ready in advance. But God won't play that game with us.

The Bible says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Does he know what will happen tomorrow? Yes, he does; but he’s not telling anyone else about it. Or to put it in familiar terms, does God have a blueprint for your life? Yes, he does; but I don’t know any way you can get a copy.

Suppose God were to offer you a folder with the details of your life (and for your loved ones also) for the next 10 years. Would you take it? Your first impulse might be to say yes. But suppose I add this provision. You can’t change anything you find in that folder. Would you still take it? I can tell you that I would run the other way. Life is much better lived one day at a time. Is there a heavenly blueprint that shows what you are supposed to do on May 23, 2018? The answer to that question is yes. But the only part of it you can see arrives each morning in the form of twenty-four brand-new hours, freshly delivered by United Angel Service Overnight Express. Please don’t miss this point: God wants to teach us to trust him step by step. He reveals His will one step at a time, so we will trust him moment by moment.

Myth #2: God wants you to have 100 percent certainty before you make a decision

Many people believe they must be 100 percent certain of God’s will before they make a decision. I can understand their thinking. After all, if you are facing a life-changing decision—a potential marriage, a cross-country move, a new career, which college to attend, whether or not to begin chemotherapy—you’d like to know in advance beyond any doubt that you are doing what God wants you to do. There are two problems with this point of view. First, sometimes we think we know God’s will with 100 percent certainty only to find out later that we were mistaken. The other problem—which is more common for most believers—is that in our search for certainty about God’s will, we end up paralyzed by an inability to make up our minds. Some decisions are so important they can’t be left to chance. As the popular saying goes, “When in doubt, don’t.” If you aren’t sure about the new job, don’t take it; don’t make the move, don’t say yes, don’t make any decision with less than total certainty.

We see this principle vividly illustrated in Acts 16. When the Apostle Paul and his team left Troas, they sailed across the Aegean Sea in response to a vision of a man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). When they got there, they found a woman named Lydia. But what about “the man”? He was nowhere to be found. Later on Paul and Silas were arrested, stripped, flogged, and thrown in jail. That night during an earthquake, they led their jailer to Christ, then baptized him and his whole family. The next morning Paul and Silas were released and escorted out of the city by the town leaders, who were glad to see them go. It’s a strange story. In many ways it appears that Paul failed in Philippi. After all, he was in trouble almost from the moment he arrived. Where is the great church he came to establish? But from God’s point of view Paul did exactly what he should have done. He followed God’s leading—God gave more light—Paul took another step and waited for further developments. Step by step, through twists and turns and unexpected means, Paul did what God wanted him to do, even though it wasn’t what he expected to do when he arrived in town.

Trouble in Paradise

After sharing these insights in a sermon, I received a letter from a close friend who lived down the street from us. After much planning and prayer and after many frustrating delays, she and her husband moved into an older house only to discover that it was in much worse shape than they had expected, costing them many thousands of dollars to restore. They also had a long series of unpleasant encounters with a cantankerous neighbor. Looking back on all the difficulties, my friend penned these words:

Seeking God’s will has never caused me much difficulty in the past (partly because I didn’t always!), but when we were in the throes of trying to decide about buying this house, we both prayed long and hard that we would have a clear sense of direction and guidance from the Lord or at least a sense of peace about a decision if it were the right one. Because of the many troubles we’ve had while living here, I had convinced myself that we made the wrong decision and were paying for it in a big way.

Resentment started to taint my relationship with God. Why would He allow us to make such a terrible mistake (expensive one too!) when we spent so much time asking Him for his guidance? Only in the last few weeks have I felt that God does indeed want us here. Our difficulties in getting in here were not God slamming the door shut, but rather him holding it open just wide enough for us to squeeze through. Our difficulties in buying the house now seem like good training for the battles while we’re in it. Your example from Acts reinforced in my mind this idea and the wrong thinking that was giving me the resentment: that the outcome does not retroactively affect whether it was God’s will!

That final sentence is crucial. “The outcome does not retroactively affect whether it was God’s will.” That’s exactly right. Doing God’s will means taking the next step—whatever it is—without a definite promise about the end result. Many times you won’t have 100 percent certainty; but when the moment comes to decide, you must make the best decision you can, trusting God for the results. Sometimes you’ll know more, sometimes less; but living by faith means taking the next step anyway.

Myth #3: God’s highest goal is my personal happiness

Millions of people buy into this false idea. They believe that their happiness is God’s supreme goal for them. That sounds good,

doesn't it? "God wants me to be happy." "God wants me to be fulfilled." "God wants me to be successful." That thinking has been used to justify all kinds of bizarre and even evil behavior. Some Christian men have said, "It is God's will that I should divorce my wife and marry another woman because we are in love, and God wants us to be happy." The correct theological term for that is, "Baloney."

If your personal happiness is not God's highest goal for you, then what is God's will for your life? It is God's will for you to be holy. It is God's will for you to be like Jesus Christ. It is God's will for you to be in a place of maximum usefulness for the kingdom of God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 states this plainly: "It is God's will that you should be holy" [some translations say, "sanctified"]. To be "sanctified" means to be made holy. It refers to the life-long process whereby God shapes you, through a myriad of experiences both positive and negative, into the image of Jesus Christ. Here's the clincher: He uses the very worst things that happen to us in order to accomplish his divine purposes in us.

Romans 8:29 says, "Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." That is the will of God for your life. He wants you to become like Jesus Christ. Whatever makes you like Jesus is good. Whatever doesn't make you like Jesus is bad. And God is fully committed to shaping your life day by day into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you recognize the name Corrie Ten Boom? During World War II she was taken from her home in Holland to a prison camp and later to the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in Germany. There she and her sister, Betsie, were held, and Betsie eventually died. Corrie Ten Boom was released—by a Nazi clerical mistake—just before the end of the war. In her book *Tramp for the Lord*—written near the end of her life—she reflects on God's leading:

Looking back across the years of my life, I can see the working of a divine pattern which is the way of God with His children. When I was in a prison camp in Holland during the war, I often prayed, "Lord, never let the enemy put me in a German concentration camp." God answered no to that prayer. Yet in the German camp, with all its horror, I found many prisoners who had never heard of Jesus Christ. If God had not used my sister Betsie and me to bring them to Him, they would never have heard of Him. Many died, or were killed, but many died with the name of Jesus on their lips. They were well worth all our suffering. Faith is like the radar which sees through the fog—the reality of things at a distance that the human eye cannot see.

How can going to a prison camp be the will of God? It can't be if God's will is that you should always be happy and comfortable. Yet going to a prison camp can be the will of God for you if it makes you more like Jesus Christ and gives you opportunities to share the love of Christ to people that would never hear it otherwise. That's the biblical perspective.

Will God's plan for you and me always bring immediate worldly wealth and success? No, but God's plan will always bring peace and joy and fulfillment. Our duty is to follow the Lord wherever he leads us. And when we do that, we find a deep joy in him. The path of duty leads to a joy the world cannot match.

With that, we come to the final myth.

Myth #4: God makes His will hard to find

Many people struggle unnecessarily in this area. Perhaps they are seeking 100 percent certainty, or maybe they are seeking some kind of message from God—a postcard that reads, "Dear Jack, Buy the red Pontiac. Signed, God." Or they fear that one night, while they are watching Monday Night Football, God will reveal his will, and they will somehow miss it. Or they worry that they have sinned too much and have blown their only chance to do God's will.

To all these things God says, "Trust Me." God wants you to know his will more than you want to know it. God is more committed to showing you his will than you are to discovering it. He takes full responsibility for getting you from here to there step by step. He has said, "Never will I leave you" (Hebrews 13:5). And he won't. He also said, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go" (Psalm 32:8). And he will. He also promised, "Surely I will be with you always" (Matthew 28:20). And he is.

We think that God's will is hard to find. The biblical perspective is quite different. God will reveal his will to anyone who is willing to do it. That leads me to one final thought: God ordinarily will not show you his will in order for you to consider it. He won't show you his will so you can say, "Maybe I will ... maybe I won't. How about Plan B, Lord?" He will show you his will when he knows you are willing to do it.

Not long ago a young man asked, "If you had one piece of advice to give to someone entering the ministry, what would it be?" Questions like that can be difficult because you don't know what the person wants to hear. My policy is to say whatever pops into my head first. And so I did.

"Get to know the character of God."

I mentioned an old hymn that I've never actually sung called *Workman of God, Do Not Lose Heart*. The opening line goes like this:

“Workman of God! O lose not heart, but learn what God is like.” Nothing will sustain the servants of the Lord in hard times like knowing God’s character. And as the hymn (and life itself) makes clear, you don’t “learn what God is like” by going to seminary and memorizing the attributes of God. You learn what God is like in the darkness of the night, when you feel overwhelmed and burdened and full of fear and uncertainty. Ironically you learn that when you feel most alone, God is nearest to you. So study the character of God.

Learn his holiness.

Exult in his mercy.

Ponder his patience.

Consider his ways.

Meditate on his goodness.

Remind yourself of his justice.

Rest on his faithfulness.

Linger at the foot of the cross.

Memorize his promises.

Pray the psalms back to him.

Testify to his kindness.

Declare his glory.

Defend his honor.

Be silent before his judgments.

Get to know the Lord. Nothing matters more than this. You might even say that the whole purpose of our earthly journey is for us to get to know what God is like.

As I ponder our own personal future, I see some things clearly while other things are a mystery to me. Then I remember what Job said. “He knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold” (Job 23:10).

He knows the way that I take even when I don’t.

He knows the way that I take even when I can’t see clearly.

He knows the way that I take even when I get lost.

Looking back, we find it easy to count our blessings and to see the hand of the Lord moving on our behalf. So much has happened that we did not expect, but as they say on the street, “It’s all good.”

Walking with Jesus is a journey whose destination lies somewhere beyond the horizon. Even when we think we’ve arrived, we haven’t. Even when we think, “Aha! I’ve made it at last,” life suddenly changes and we take a sharp bend in the road.

But the journey itself ought to be enjoyed.

And we should use it to learn what God is like.

The 21-Day Challenge

My wife and I had lunch some friends who were visiting from a distant city. As we began our meal the thought passed through my mind that the husband looked more relaxed than I had seen him in a long time. I soon discovered the reason for his calm demeanor. He told me about a simple prayer he had been praying at the beginning of each new day. He heard a noted Christian leader suggest using this prayer for 21 days. My friend said that he had tried it and that the prayer had made a profound difference in his life. At that point his wife chimed in to say that she had noticed a drastic difference in him as well. Before he started praying the prayer, he often came home tense over things that had happened to him during the day. But now he comes home relaxed and in a good mood. As I listened, I wondered to myself what kind of magic prayer could make that kind of difference. My friend said that for him the key is to pray the prayer the moment he wakes up—even before he gets out of bed. He even said that he had awakened that morning at 4:30

AM so he prayed the prayer and then went back to sleep.

The prayer itself is the essence of simplicity. It goes like this: “Heavenly Father, you are in charge of everything that will happen to me today—whether it be good or bad, positive or negative. Please make me thankful for everything that happens to me today. Amen.”

This prayer is powerful because it doesn’t change anything outside of me, but it does change everything inside of me. My circumstances don’t change, but my attitude does. And that’s why my friend looked so relaxed when we ate lunch.

Perhaps you need to take the 21-day challenge. Take that simple prayer and pray it first thing in the morning for the next 21 days and see what happens in your heart.

Proverbs 16:18 Pride PRIDE The First Deadly Sin

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18

There are several difficulties in talking about pride, one of the most obvious being that it is hard to define but easy to spot. We all know a prideful person when we see one. But what exactly is pride? As you think about the definition, a second problem pops up. Pride is not altogether bad. There is, after all, justifiable pride in a job well done, in a well-kept garden, in a project completed, in the accomplishments of those you love. When we say “I’m proud of you” to our grandchildren, are we committing a sin?

The answer, of course, is no. But even to ask the question shows how tricky pride is. Proverbs 8:13 associates pride with arrogance while 13:10 tell us that pride breeds quarrels. Proverbs 21:24 adds that when a man is both proud and arrogant, “Mocker’ is his name.” It also helps to remember that pride was the sin that caused Satan to fall from heaven (see Isaiah 14:12-15; 1 Timothy 3:6). Five times he said “I will,” setting the pattern of self-exaltation for all who follow him.

But what is the particular lesson of Proverbs 16:18? It serves as a warning to anyone who rises to a position of leadership or prominence. The higher you rise, the greater the possibility of a shocking fall. In the last few years we have seen the same scenario played out as notable political and religious leaders have toppled from their high positions, their individual sins many, their root sin always the same—pride, which led to overconfidence, which caused them to be careless about the details of life, which eventually led to a serious breach of ethics, which caused them to fall hard and fast.

Acts 12 offers one of the most shocking examples of this pattern. When Herod Agrippa I sat on his throne delivering a message to his people, they shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man” (v. 22). Evidently the thought pleased him, for he did not stop their idolatrous praise. Verse 23 tells the story with straightforward simplicity: “Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.” Think about that for a moment. Is there a worse way to die than to be eaten by worms?

We may take several important lessons from all this. First, you’re not as hot as you think you are. When Louis XIV died, he decreed that a candle be lit by his coffin, showing that he was the light of France. A priest entered the room, blew out the candle, and declared, “Only God is great.” There is no room for pride when you realize that every good thing you possess was given to you by God. Second, it helps to have a few good friends who can prick your balloon when you start getting too full of hot air. Third, you can either humble yourself or be humbled by God. The first is infinitely preferable. Just ask a man named Herod.

Lord, when I am tempted to think that I am someone special, remind me that without You I wouldn’t even be able to pray this prayer. Amen.

What is the difference between pride in a job well done and the sinful pride God hates?

Name the friends who can prick your balloon when you are full of hot air.

Proverbs 16:32 Self-Control: The Fine Art of Keeping Your Cool

January 1995 – Prosecutor Christopher Darden set the tone in his opening statement in the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Everyone knows about O.J. the athlete and O.J. the celebrity. And by now most of us know far more about his personal life than we care to know. But Mr. Darden was not speaking to us, but to the twelve men and women who must render a verdict in the “trial of the century.” He must convince them that O.J. Simpson is guilty of a ghastly crime.

It is not an easy thing to do for many reasons, not the least of which is O.J.’s incredible popularity. Before Nicole Brown Simpson

and Ronald Goldman were murdered, he was one of the most popular athletes in America. He belonged in that upper echelon reserved only for the superstars—for people like Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Arnold Palmer, and Mickey Mantle. These are men who have become symbols for entire generations of fans who grew up knowing them, watching them, loving them.

Such men are not perfect, but despite their feet of clay, it is hard for us to imagine our heroes ever committing murder. We love them so much that we don't—or can't—or won't—see their faults. Rather than believe our superstars are fallen men like us, it is easier to turn our faces away than to face the hard truth.

His Other Face

To that end, Mr. Darden said these words last Tuesday morning? "It is not the actor who is on trial here today, ladies and gentlemen. It is not that public face. It is his other face." What a chilling phrase—"His other face." The face we never see running through airports and driving rental cars. The face that never appears in the movies or on the talk shows.

It is, Mr. Darden said, the face he wore behind the walls at Rockingham, his Brentwood home. It is, he said, the face of a batterer, a wife beater, an abuser, a controller.

We do not know for the moment whether those words are true. But we do know this much—there is such a thing as the "other face" of O.J. Simpson. We know it's true because we all have the same "other face." There is within the human heart an enormous capacity for evil. The Bible says in Romans 3:23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Is it possible that a man who seems to be friendly, positive, up-beat, genuinely good-hearted could commit a cold-blooded murder? That answer of course is no. He could not commit cold-blooded murder. But he could commit hot-blooded murder. That's the whole case against O.J. Simpson—that in a moment of violent rage he attacked his ex-wife and her friend, brutally murdering both of them.

Could a man do that? The answer is yes, because in a moment of anger, all of us are capable of horrible deeds that we would never commit otherwise. We might think of murder, but would we ever do it? In a fit of anger, we might do anything.

The Superstars of Israel

The sermon this morning is not about O.J. He's just the example, a contemporary illustration of an eternal truth. This sermon is really about you and me and about what uncontrolled anger can do to us. Our text is one verse from Proverbs? "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32). In the ancient world, warriors were the greatest heroes. They were the superstars of Israel. When men came back from battle, the women wrote songs in their honor. You'll remember the little ditty that made Saul so angry when he realized that David had become more popular than he. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (I Samuel 18:7). When Saul heard that, his anger burned within him. Jealousy drove him to attempt to murder David. Envy ate away at his insides until it finally destroyed him and his whole family.

Anger Can Be Useful

We all know that anger is a powerful emotion which can be used for good or for evil. Anger isn't always wrong. We know, for instance, that anger is one of the attributes of God. Did you know that the Bible speaks over a hundred times of the anger of the Lord? We know that God never sins, yet the Bible speaks repeatedly of his anger toward sin and disobedience. We know also that there are times when anger is justified and even righteous. Ephesians 4:26 even says, "In your anger do not sin."

When we see people hurting other people, when we watch the wholesale slaughter of the unborn, when we see children being lured into drugs and prostitution, when we see families torn apart by sin, that ought to make us angry. If we sit idly by while the world goes to hell, if we don't get angry, if we don't weep, if we don't care, then something is wrong deep inside us.

Anger Can Get Out Of Hand

So then, anger can be a very useful and even Christian emotion. However, righteous anger can quickly lead us in the wrong direction. The same verse that says, "In your anger do not sin," adds this phrase, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." That is, don't go to bed angry. Even if your anger is justified, don't go to sleep that way. Deal with it, talk it out, pray it out, walk it out, but don't try to sleep it out. That won't work.

(By the way, this is an important word for newly-married couples. Don't go to bed angry at each other. It will only get worse in the morning. Young husbands sometimes think that their wives will "get over it" with a good night's sleep. Take it from one who knows? It doesn't work. If you don't solve your problems, neither one of you will sleep well and you'll still have a bad morning when you do wake up.)

What happens when you don't deal with your anger? It settles deep in your heart, it hardens like concrete, it distorts your

personality, it squeezes out your joy, it oozes the smelly black gunk of unhappiness over every part of your life. That's why the very next verse in Ephesians offers this warning: "Do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:27).

All rock climbers understand that verse. In order to get up the side of the mountain, you've got to get a firm foothold. That's what Satan wants to do in your life—he wants to use your anger (even your legitimate anger) to get a foothold in your heart.

Destroyed By Anger

I mentioned Saul just a moment ago. He offers a particularly good case study because in many ways this is what happened to him. If you read I Samuel 10-26, you discover some amazing things about this man.

*He was in many respects a gifted man.

*He was tall and handsome.

*He was a natural leader of men.

*He was skillful in battle.

*He was chosen by God to be the first king of Israel.

In many ways he had all the natural attributes for success—plus he had the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. Yet we remember him as a failure because of the way his life ended. There were many contributing factors, but in the end his anger destroyed his life. After it became clear that David would replace him as king, Saul's heart was so blinded by rage that he could think of only one thing—killing David. So he hunted David like he was a wild animal, chased him into the Judean desert, tracking him to a cave by the Dead Sea, a place called En Gadi. There David cut off a corner of his robe when he actually could have killed him. He meant it as a sign of mercy, but Saul continued to hunt him down. Even though Saul knew that David would be the next king, his hatred so consumed him that he tried to kill him anyway. In the end, Saul and his sons were killed by the Philistines on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. The Philistines cut off his head, put his armor in a pagan temple, and fastened his headless corpse to the wall of Beth Shan. It was an ignominious end for a man with the seeds of greatness in him. Saul had many flaws, but it was his anger that finally destroyed him.

A Nuisance ... and Then a Threat

There is another man in the Bible who had every right to be angry at the way he was treated. He was a good man, a teacher of God's law, a man who helped those in need, and got angry only when he saw injustice in the world. He never had a great education. He never held public office. He never wrote a book. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where he was born. His own family thought he was a bit strange. They never really understood why he did what he did or why he said what he said.

When he started his ministry, the powers that be at first found him a nuisance and later a threat. They sent their best people to try and trip him up on technicalities, but it never worked. He was too smart to be fooled by slick questions. But every time he made them look foolish, it just made them madder. Eventually, they decided that he must be killed. But because he was popular with the common people, they couldn't arrest him haphazardly. They had to find a reason, a plausible excuse, something that would give them a cover for their dirty deeds.

The day came when he traveled to the capital city for a public celebration. Thousands of people were there that week. Multitudes lined the narrow streets as he rode on a donkey into the city. "God save us!" they cried, "God save us!" For almost a week he taught publicly, answering questions, debating his opponents, preparing his followers for what was to come.

Finally, the leaders decided to make their move. They had found a man among his followers—his treasurer, no less—who was willing to sell him out in exchange for a handful of money. The deal was struck, the time set, the plan made. It all went like clockwork and the good man was arrested.

Dirty Justice

Fives times he was tried before four different judges. The charges weren't really clear, but it was something about blasphemy and then something about treason. At one hearing, the witnesses openly contradicted one another. But it didn't matter. So great was their hatred, so deep their anger, so fierce their rage that truth didn't count. "This man must die!" they said. Let justice be damned!

He was cruelly beaten. Ridiculed. Spat upon. Mocked. Humiliated. Tortured until his flesh hung in ribbons. Beaten until he was barely conscious. Stripped naked. Condemned to die. Forced to carry the instrument of his own death.

Outside the city walls, near a limestone quarry with the strange face of a skull outlined on the side of a cliff, the good man was put to death. The Bible says that the passersby stopped when they saw him, then they joined the jeering crowd gone mad with blood-lust. It was an awful scene, proof that the human mind is capable of the very worst atrocities.

You were there. So was I. So was everyone who ever walked on this sin-cursed planet. All of us were there that day. Not to help, but to hurt. To join the rabble crying, "Crucify him? Crucify him!" We were all there watching the good man die, doing nothing to save him, nothing to ease his pain.

We were there. And he saw us. He saw you. And he saw me. He knew you by name. And he knew me, too. All of us joined in that terrible moment. All of us cheered when the nails drove through the flesh. All of us laughed when he screamed in agony.

The whole human race was there, laughing as the Son of God died.

Father, Forgive Them!

He didn't say much that day, only about seven or eight sentences. But, oh, what words they were. What power? What truth he spoke?

Do you remember the first words he said from the cross? How could you ever forget them? He looked down, his chest heaving, the sun beating down on his fevered, bleeding brow, his face a mass of blood and tears, his hands and feet dripping blood from the nail holes. He saw the laughter, heard the jeers, and he knew that they were laughing at him.

He had done nothing wrong. Nothing to deserve this.

He closed his eyes, as if in prayer. Then he looked again at the howling, wild mob. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Forgive them? But they were guilty of the greatest crime in all history.

Forgive them? But he was innocent ... and they knew it.

Forgive them! But they had twisted the truth, made up lies, slandered his name, bribed his treasurer, rigged the trial, and guaranteed his death. It was murder pure and simple. They meant to kill him... and they did.

Forgive them? How could it be?

But that's what he said. "Father, forgive them." He was a good man, the best man the world has ever seen. He came to show us how to live and he came to show us how to die. He came to save us while we were yet sinners. He even came to save those who put him to death.

"Father, forgive them." I'm so glad Jesus said that, because it shows us that forgiveness is always possible. If he could forgive, then anything is possible. If the Son of God could rise above anger and hatred, if he could find a way to forgive his enemies, then so can we.

Four Steps to Freedom

I wonder how many of us have gotten in trouble because we gave in to our anger. I wonder how many of us have said things in a moment of tension that we later lived to regret. I wonder how many marriages have been broken, how many friendships have ended, how many jobs have been lost because we have lost our temper and said and done things we later regretted.

Is there a better way? How do you handle your anger so that it doesn't destroy you? Let me end my message with four suggestions.

1. Have the courage to face your anger. It all begins here. Until you can admit to the "other face" that no one ever sees, you will never get better. So many of us have a public face that looks good and a private face that we keep behind locked gates and stone walls, a face of anger and hatred.

Let me say that I have learned from hard personal experience the truth of what I am talking about. I know what it is to lose your temper in a critical moment and say things you regret later. I also know that years later things can never be as they once were. For me, the healing didn't begin until I could say, "I got angry and lost my temper. The rest doesn't matter. I have to own up to my own problems."

2. Share your struggles with a friend. As the evidence has started to come out, it seems like many of his friends knew that O.J. Simpson had a strong temper and that he was prone to violent behavior. The police knew it. But no one confronted him with the ugly truth. No one cared enough? What if he had said, "I need some help. I've got some anger in me that I'm not handling very well." Would things be different today?

Men especially seem to struggle in this area. We harbor these deep feelings and don't know what to do with them. What's worse, we're afraid to tell anyone because we think that sharing our struggles is a sign of weakness. How wrong we are. The weak cover

up; only the strong have the courage to admit they need help.

3. Do a relationship inventory based on Ephesians 4:30-32. That passage reads like this:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

These words are incredibly specific. Check your life for any signs of bitterness, anger, rage, slander, brawling, and malice. If you find even a trace of those things, get rid of them? They are like a virus in your spiritual bloodstream.

Anger kills!

Bitterness kills!

Slander kills!

Rage kills!

Resentment kills!

It doesn't just kill other people. It kills you too!

4. Yield control of your life to the Holy Spirit. The title of this sermon is "Self-Control," but it's really about Holy Spirit control. Ephesians 4:30 warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit by harboring bitterness in our hearts.

You can have the Holy Spirit in control, or your anger can take control. There is no third option and no middle ground.

Jesus has shown us the way. You don't have to live in anger and bitterness over the way people treat you. Through the power of the Holy Spirit your life can be different. God's Spirit can set you free from the chains that bind you to the past.

The price is simple, but it's not cheap. You've got to give up your anger, let go of your bitterness, say farewell to your hurtful memories. Then and only then will the Holy Spirit be free to take control of your life.

I'd like to lead us in a prayer for the Holy Spirit to take over your life. I'm going to say it slowly, sentence by sentence. If this is the prayer of your heart, say it out loud after me:

Father, for too long I have tried to solve my own problems. I thought I could handle things on my own and it didn't work. I've made a mess of my own life. I've tried and tried and now I'm tired of trying.

Lord Jesus, thank you for showing us how to live. Thank you for showing us how to die. Thank you for taking all my sin away when you died on the cross. Thank you for showing us how to forgive the people who have hurt us the most.

Holy Spirit, I'm ready for you to come into my life. Here and now I yield control to you. From this day forward I want you to run my life. Please fill me with your power so that I might become a truly different person. With all my heart, and all my soul, with everything that is in me, I want you to take control.

Lord Jesus, you're in charge now. Lead on, and I will follow you from this day forward. Amen.

May God grant you new life through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. And may you experience the freedom of forgiveness and the joy that comes from letting him take control.

PROVERBS 17

Proverbs 17:1 Contentment: A "Better" Way to Live

November 1994 – It didn't start out that way. When Scott and Janet put the kids in the mini-van and took off for Milwaukee, they had no idea. It was just another trip and six of their kids were with them. Scott Willis said, "I barely had time. I saw the metal fly off the truck, and the mini-van rolled over it and it punctured the gas tank, exploding." Five of the children were burned to death within seconds. The sixth, Ben, 13 years old, lasted one more day before he died. It is hard even to speak of this. This is what the Chicago Tribune said after Pastor Scott Willis, his wife Janet, hands bandaged, their faces bearing the marks of the flames, gave the press

conference this week, "There are only two possible responses to the kind of loss that Duane and Janet suffered last week. Utter despair or unquestioning faith. For the Willises, despair was never an option. 'I know God has purposes and God has reasons,' said Duane Scott Willis, explaining how he and his wife had been able to cope with the death of six of their nine children in a freak accident earlier this month on a Milwaukee freeway. 'God has demonstrated his love to us and our family. There is no question in our minds that God is good, and we praise him in all things.' His wife, Janet, said, 'He's the giver and taker of life, and he sustains us.' Pastor Willis serves at the Parkwood Baptist Church in the Mt. Greenwood section of South Chicago. In the accident, six of their children died: Ben, 13; Joe, 11; Sam, 9; Hank, 7; Elizabeth, 3; and little Peter, just six weeks old."

What would you say? This is what Pastor Willis said, "There is no question in our minds that God is good, and we praise him in all things." I tell you, the most incomprehensible part of that statement is the phrase "there is no question." No question at all after six children are burned to death? "Utter despair," the newspaper said, "or unquestioning faith." "There is no question in our minds that God is good and we praise him in all things."

It is Thanksgiving once again, and across the country millions of people are getting ready for a week of great celebration. Some of you are planning, like me, on being on the road. Later this week you will go to a plane or bus or car, and fly, ride or drive somewhere. You are looking forward to a big Thanksgiving week. The cooks are already hard at work, baking, basting, putting together casseroles, stocking up on soft drinks, trying to get enough food to feed a hungry horde. Around America this Thursday, millions of people will stop to give thanks, believers and unbelievers, Christians and non-Christians alike; for one day the nation stops and we give thanks to God. It is entirely right that we should do so. After all, the Bible itself says, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Philippians 4:6 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything let your requests be made known to God with thanksgiving." Psalm 100:4 says, "Enter his gates with praise and come into his courts with thanksgiving. Give thanks to him and bless his name."

I know a family in South Chicago where there will be six empty chairs around the table this Thursday. It is hard even to think about that. Pastor Willis, what is it you said? "God has demonstrated his love to our family. There is no question in our minds that God is good, and we praise him in all things." Either that man has lost his mind, or he has found his faith. I'll be honest, I don't know what I would say if it were my three boys taken in a fiery death. I suppose in that moment, God gives grace for what you have to bear, and whatever strength you have to have.

"There is no question in our minds that God is good and we praise him for all things."

The year was 1620. The Pilgrims had just landed. It is a well-known fact that the Pilgrims came because of their Christian faith. They came to America because they loved God, because they believed that God was leading them. They were not deists. They were biblical Christians who believed that Almighty God had brought them to the shores of this nation. William Bradford, in his book *Of Plymouth Plantation* tells the reaction of the Pilgrims when they landed at Cape Code. "Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element. And no marvel if they were thus joyful." Peter Marshall, commenting on that, says, "They had begun their long journey by kneeling on the dock at Bellshaven to ask God's blessing. They ended it on the sands of Cape Cod, kneeling to thank Him for that blessing."

What is the secret of thanksgiving? Why is it that some people approach this holiday with rejoicing and others with trepidation? Some people are not looking forward to the holiday. Some of you know that for you Thanksgiving will mean either a day of loneliness, or a day of busyness, or just another day of work, or perhaps a day of family strife that is pushed just below the surface. Some of us look over the past 12 months, and say, "I don't really have that much to be thankful for. If you add up the pluses and minuses of the past year, it may seem to you that the minuses are greater than the pluses. And as you face Thanksgiving, you are just another Ebenezer Scrooge: BA-HUMBUG on the whole thing. I don't have anything to be grateful for.

I am going to give you the secret. It is just one word. It is the word contentment. Not prosperity. It is in that passage I read just a moment ago, when the Apostle Paul said, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Would you like to know the definition of contentment? Contentment is realizing how much you already have, how much God has already given you, how rich you already are. The problem with many of us is we approach Thanksgiving focused on the circumstances of life. Far too many of us take our happiness and our joy and contentment by how things are going on the outside. The Bible says it is not like that. Contentment is not a matter of outward circumstances. Contentment is a matter of understanding how much you already have.

That brings me to the book of Proverbs. I want to give you seven verses from Proverbs that all begin with the word "better." Each one of these verses gives us a comparison, usually between something that is good and something better, something that the world thinks is important versus something God says is important. These seven verses explain the concept of contentment.

Proverbs 12:9 says, “Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.” That verse always cheers me up when I read it. Better to have no reputation and be thought of as a nothing and yet have your needs met, than to be some hot-aired big shot and yet starve to death in your own home.

Proverbs 15:16 says, “Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil.” Too many of us have bought into the notion that money brings happiness. We think that if we only had another \$1,000 or \$5,000 or \$10,000 or \$50,000 or \$150,000 then, at last, we would be able to buy that thing we have been trying to buy, we’d be able to move up to a newer house or better car, or better part of the country. Too many of us have bought into the notion that money brings happiness. The Bible is not against wealth or prosperity, but it is very honest about it. Generally speaking, the people who have a lot of money also have a lot of trouble. You know why that is? If you have a lot of money, everybody you know wants some of it. The more you have, the more people want. Did you ever read the book *Hang Time* by Bob Green about Michael Jordan? The saddest part about the story of his life is that basically, he can never for one day live a normal life. He cannot go to the drugstore, he cannot go to McDonald’s, to the mall, he cannot walk down the street. He can never have anything unless he is surrounded by security guards and sealed off from the rest of the public. You may think, “Well, give me his \$65,000,000 and I’ll take that too.” I don’t think you really would. There is a man who is so rich that he is imprisoned by his riches. So it is with the multimillionaires and multibillionaires of this world. The more money you have, the more problems you have. It is better to have just a little and fear God than to have a great bottom line bank account and turmoil.

Proverbs 15:17 says, “Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.” Translated, it means it is better to eat cold lima beans where people love you than to have a t-bone steak where they can’t stand to look at your face. There is a reason why people get depressed at Thanksgiving and Christmas time, why they hate to go back home. It is because you know that when you go back home, and you see all those relatives you haven’t seen for a while, especially when some of them get a little tanked up with the holiday spirit, all those old hurts and old things start coming out. And what ought to be a joyful, happy time, becomes an unbearable struggle. You just pray to God to survive until the time when you can go home. Better, the Bible says, to eat lima beans in a family where they love you than to have the richest food in the greatest hotel in Chicago, where hatred and strife and turmoil is.

Proverbs 16:8 says, “Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.” That is to say, it is better to do right and struggle, than to do wrong and be rich. Better to follow the rules and go broke, than to cheat and climb your way to what you think is the top of the ladder. It is better to struggle to make ends meet, but know that you are righteous in the eyes of God, than to cheat other people to have it all.

Proverbs 16:19 says, “Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.”

Proverbs 17:1 says, “Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.” That is what Thanksgiving and Christmas are for too many people—a house full of feasting with strife.

Proverbs 28:6 says, “Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse.”

What is contentment? Contentment is realizing you are better off the way you are right now. If you are dreaming of more money and bigger material possessions, contentment is realizing how much God has blessed you and how much you have right now. In reality, most of us truly are better off the way we are right now.

I want to share with you a little mathematical equation. It is not too difficult. I want to give you four steps to the equation for a happy Thanksgiving. If you follow these four steps, you will be happy come Thanksgiving Day. This is an interactive sermon. That is a very 90s statement, a high-tech sermon. You can’t just sit there. Take out a piece of paper and do this right now, in part because I don’t totally trust you to do it later.

Where does a happy Thanksgiving begin? You have to add something, subtract something, multiply something and divide something.

1. Add your blessings.

In Deuteronomy the Lord says the following to the people of Israel as they are poised on the bank of the Jordan River, frightened to death to go in and conquer Jericho, scared to death of the Canaanites. You may say to yourself, “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” Do not be afraid of them. Remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and Egypt. Remember the Red Sea. Remember the Exodus. Remember. You saw with your own eyes the great miraculous signs and wonders, the mighty hand and outstretched arm with which the Lord your God brought you out.

The first step to having a happy Thanksgiving is to have a good memory of God’s blessings. Take a moment to remember at least three blessings God has sent into your life in the past twelve months.

2. Subtract your losses.

The Bible says, "My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts." Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." What are your losses, your difficulties, defeats, failures, humiliations, times in the last year when it didn't work out the way you thought it was going to? When you look at your life, those things come into the debit column. Subtract them right now. Maybe it's a bitterness, a resentment, a broken relationship.

3. Multiply your promises.

1 Peter 1 talks about exceeding great and precious promises of God. The Bible is a book filled with the promises of God. This is what I want you to do. Think about the promises that God has made to you or about you or for you, promises that you are hanging onto right now, the promises that as a Christian, are sustaining your life right now. Write down at least three.

Are you memorizing Scripture? God gave it to you. He gave you the promises. In Hebrews 13:6 the Lord says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Psalm 91:1 says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Psalm 1:5 says, "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." Job 23:10 says, "He knows the way that I take. When he has tried me, I will come forth as gold."

4. Divide your burdens.

Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." You divide your burden by taking on somebody else's burden. When you help somebody else with their burden, your burden grows lighter. When you reach out a helping hand to somebody else, the Lord makes the way easier for you. So many of us are a little too inward-focused, a little too myopic, looking at ourselves. Write down the names of at least three people who have a burden that you could help this week. Maybe you could give them a call, write a letter, give some money, give a hug, go see them, help them with a project, bake some cookies or food, spend some time with them. Instead of focusing on your own problem, think about dividing your burden. Ask the Lord to show you who you could help this week.

What is contentment? Contentment is realizing how much you already have. You are better off than you think you are. If you aren't content, you ought to be. You have more than you think you do. God has given you more than you realize, and people all around you need you more than you know. If you have any doubts about it, consider this: "There is no question in our minds that God is good and we praise him in all things." Could you say that? Do you think your heart is heavy this morning? Do you think you have burdens? You read something like this and it reminds you of the old saying: I complained about having no shoes, until I met a man with no feet. "There is no question in our minds that God is good and we praise him in all things."

Here is my project. Take this little thing that we have gone over, go home and do it with your family and friends. Sit down, do a little adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing this week.

Oh God, give us eyes to see your blessings. Oh God, give us hands ready to reach out and help those in need. Oh Lord, give us hearts to rejoice in you and lips to sing your praise. Help us to understand that whether we see it or not, whether we know it or not, whether we feel it or not, God is good all the time.

May this week for you be what every day should be—a day of true thanksgiving to God, who is good all the time. Amen.

Proverbs 17:22 Cheerfulness: The Healing Power of a Merry Heart – Proverbs 17:22

November 1994 – I am a little more exhausted than usual because I'm coming off a week and a half that has been a personally draining time for me and my family. About 10 days ago, Marlene went in to see the doctor, who found something she didn't like. On Friday, Marlene had three hours of surgery and is up at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. She is doing fine. The surgery was successful, but there was some worry going into it that they might find some cancer. They didn't and she received a clean bill of health. I am personally weary and a little worn out. I was thinking that it is ironic that many weeks ago when I set up this sermon series on Proverbs, I set this particular Sunday as the day to preach on cheerfulness. I have been trying to think all week long what I would have to say on this subject that would be remotely cheerful. What I feel is that I need a good nap.

I have been meditating in the last few days. I've spent a lot of time at the hospital, which gives you plenty of time to think, because hospital days don't last 24 hours, they last 72 hours. You look at the clock thinking it has been five minutes and it has only been thirty seconds. Twenty minutes later it has only been three more minutes. This gives you plenty of time to think. I was pondering that age-old question: are you an optimist or a pessimist? When you see the glass of water, is it half full or half empty? When you personally go through one of those weeks that we all go through eventually (and some of us go through regularly), are you basically positive at the end, or are you basically negative?

Someone has said it this way: between the optimist and the pessimist, the difference is droll; the optimist sees the doughnut, the pessimist sees the hole. It has been well said that the optimist is the person who invented the airplane and the pessimist the person who invented the parachute. You need them both. You need the positive aspect of life as well as that aspect of life that looks on the problem and says, "Well, life isn't just a bowl of cherries. There are pits in there, too." You need to be both optimistic and pessimistic. You have to come to a place of biblical realism.

I have been thinking this week as our family has gone through what I would say was a crisis. When you have major surgery of a loved one, it is a crisis. Even if it is a good result, you don't know how it will turn out going in. As I thought about all of that, I have been thinking about my subject of cheerfulness.

I want to share with you today a little about biblical realism, not optimism or pessimism. In order to do that and get our thoughts clearly focused, let's go to the book of Proverbs. Let's read a number of verses.

Proverbs 12:25 says, "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up." This is mostly observation. Kind words cheer up those who are discouraged.

Proverbs 14:10 says, "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy." The first part of that is certainly true. There are those of us who have secret sorrows. There are those of us who though we may look good and may be well dressed and have a smile on our face, behind that smile there is a story of sorrow and heartache that we don't share with anyone else.

Proverbs 14:13 says, "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief." How true it is that even when we are laughing and putting on a brave face for the crowd, even when we're going through the motions and trying to be very positive, on the inside there may be turmoil, heartache, discouragement and even despair. Just because you see somebody laughing and smiling, it doesn't mean that everything is completely O.K. Underneath that laughter there may be something you know nothing about.

Proverbs 14:30 says, "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." This is a life verse. Envy rots the bones. In the Hebrew it literally means envy makes the bones disintegrate. This is an important verse. This verse is telling us that there is some kind of connection between the spiritual and the physical. There is some kind of connection between the heart and the body, between what goes on inside and what happens outside. The attitude of the heart has a direct impact on the physical well-being or lack thereof. If your heart is at peace, it gives life to the body. Envy causes the bones of the body to disintegrate.

Proverbs 15:13 says, "A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit."

Proverbs 15:15 says, "All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast." The cheerful heart eats a feast at the table of the Lord.

Now turn to the theme verse for this sermon. It is found in Proverbs 17:22, which says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." This is one of those places where I believe the King James version is a better translation. The King James says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." That is a better translation of the Hebrew. You should put a star by this verse. It is suggesting something to us. It tells us that there is a relationship between the condition of the heart and the condition of the body. There is a relationship between physical and spiritual health. "A crushed spirit dries up the bones," literally means it sucks out the marrow of life from the bones.

Proverbs 18:1 says, "A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" We all know people who struggle with sickness and weakness, yet when you go to see them, they cheer you up—people who are down and out physically, but when you go to see them, they actually make you feel better because they are strong in spirit even though their body is wasting away. On the other hand, we all know people who are sick and yet their spirit is crushed. When you go to see them, you feel worse when you leave than when you came, because they have sucked all the life out of you as well.

These verses are telling us that there is a basic relationship between your mental attitude and your physical well-being. Said another way, what you are in your heart has a direct bearing on your physical health. What is on the inside eventually manifests itself physically on the outside. Having said that, I want to ask and answer two questions:

1. Why is it that a merry heart is so important?

a. Because of the truth of Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God work for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It is a difficult world out there, a world filled with sin, sickness, heartache and despair. Thank God, sin is not the final word in this world. There is a word beyond sin, beyond the fall, beyond degradation, and that word is Jesus. Because Jesus Christ has come into the world, there is now healing, salvation, forgiveness and deliverance. What does Romans 8:28 mean by "all things"? How inclusive is it? It is utterly inclusive. It includes all that can happen in the life of a child of God. It includes the good and the bad, health and sickness, wealth and poverty, the sunlight and the shadow, high noon and midnight, life and death. It is all that can happen in the will of God to a child of God. That means that Romans 8:28 is still true, just as true in the

hospital as in the sanctuary. It means that when you are in the waiting room and that clock will not move and you know your loved one is in the hands of a surgeon, that no matter the outcome, whether life or death or cancer or no cancer, whether you see her again or not, you know that moment is in God's hands. It is part of the "all things" that work together for good. There is nothing that can happen to the child of God that is outside of the "all things" of Romans 8:28.

This week I have been meditating a little on President Reagan and the letter he wrote on Saturday to the American people. At the age of 83, he wrote that letter in which he said he has just been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's. I commented on that in my last sermon, but at that time I had not read the letter. I read it this week; it was printed in the Chicago Tribune. I encourage any of you who haven't, to read it. It is a wonderful statement of faith. The people who know President Reagan say that he is truly a born again Christian man. He wrote this letter from what I would consider the standpoint of the Christian faith. He said in that letter, "I write because I do not want to keep a secret from the American people. My wife had breast cancer and we told you; they tried to assassinate me, and we told you; and now I have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and I want to tell you. I want you to know this so that you will know about us and so that I can encourage other people whose families may be going through this disease. There is some stigma in some places attached to Alzheimer's. As for me, I feel very good right now, and as long as I am able, I will continue to do all the things I have been doing. I now begin the journey that will carry me into the sunset of life." That is a beautiful phrase. It is picturesque and in the deepest sense it is also a biblical phrase. At the end of his letter he said, "Until the Lord calls me home, I intend to do what I have always done—to help people in whatever way I can." Here is a man, whether he knows it or not, who understands that all things work together for good. Here is a man who can look at a disease that will suck the life away from him, and say, "I still believe in God. I still believe the Lord has a plan for me."

A merry heart is important because God is saying to us, "My children, some times you will face things that you can't understand. Sometimes you are going to face heartache and pain and difficulty that goes far beyond anything you thought you could endure. Sometimes you will be in the waiting room of life for weeks and months and years, but I want you to know that even there I am with you and am working out my plan in your life." What we are to do at those moments is to stand back and over those unexplainable things of life we are to erect a sign that says, "Shhh. Quiet. God at work." Romans 8:28 tells us that God is at work whether we see it or not, whether we feel it or not, whether we understand it or not, whether we believe it or not. So our attitude makes all the difference at that moment. The question is not, "Do we have the answers?" because I can assure you that at that moment you will not have the answer. The question is, "Do you believe there is a God who is at work in this situation?" The Christian answer is YES. That is how you can have a merry heart even in the darkest moment of life. You can have a cheerful spirit if you believe there is a God in heaven who loves you, who is at work in ways that you can't see, believe or understand.

b. Because of Proverbs 17:22. Read it again. "A merry heart doeth good like medicine." The Hebrew language has a number of tenses in it. One of the tenses is called the causative tense. You put a verb in the causative tense when you want to say that one thing causes another to happen. That's what you have in the Hebrew in Proverbs 17:22. A literal translation would be, "A cheerful heart causes good healing." What the Bible is telling us here is that your attitude, the way you approach the problems and trials of life, actually brings about good healing. That is amazing.

I have told you before the story of Dr. Norman Cousins, who for a number of years was on the medical staff at the UCLA School of Medicine. About 25 years ago, Dr. Cousins was diagnosed with having a strange, rare kind of disease that destroys the connective tissue of the body. The doctors gave him the battery of expensive tests and said, "Sorry, there is really nothing we can do. It is degenerative and you are going to die." Dr. Cousins said, "Well, I didn't want to just give up." So he set himself on a regimen of exercise, high doses of Vitamin C, and then he added an unusual thing. He rented a projector and rented Marx Brothers and Three Stooges movies and all the cartoons he could find. For hours each day, he would take his Vitamin C and watch the Marx Brothers and Three Stooges and would laugh his head off. What he discovered was that ten minutes of hearty laughter gave him a whole hour free from pain. So he would watch those movies over and over and over again. He discovered, as he did this, that he began to get better. The day came when he went back to the doctors and they said, "We don't know what happened, because this was an incurable disease; but as far as we know, you are completely cured." He lived about another 20 years after that and wrote a book called Anatomy of an Illness, in which he made the point that your mental attitude, the cheerfulness or lack thereof, has a great deal to do with whether you get sick, how bad you get sick, whether you get well, and how quickly you get well. All I want to say is that what he discovered is nothing more than what Solomon told us 3000 years ago, which is that a merry heart causes good healing.

Several years ago, when I wanted to research this out, I called a couple of the doctors in our church. I asked them to corroborate this from their own medical research. We have all wondered what the mental frame of mind has to do with the healing process from a physician's point of view. The answer they gave me was the same. At first they would be very cautious and say research was unsure about it. Then I would ask them about their own experience, and that was where it got interesting. All the doctors I talked to said the same thing. They told story after story of people who had come to them, deathly sick, yet who got better amazingly fast because they went in with a positive spirit and were surrounded by positive people. The doctors also told me stories about people who should have gotten better, but who got much worse, were sick a long time, and in some cases died, evidently because they had such a negative, hostile, hopeless spirit about them. Then I asked one other question, "Do you notice any difference in your practice

between Christians and non-Christians?" The immediate answer was, "Yes, we see every day, a big difference when we treat somebody who knows Jesus Christ and somebody who doesn't. We see a tremendous difference in the healing process, in the attitude of those who know the Lord, versus those who do not." Why should that surprise us? Why should it surprise us to read about Norman Cousins? All of that is nothing more than what was written in the Bible 3000 years ago. Solomon said it and modern medical science is just now catching up with it.

So then, I want to finish this sermon by giving you some suggestions as to how we can cultivate a merry heart. Would you like a merry heart?

1. Cultivate your relationship with God.

Make sure that you spend time with the Lord. Don't just seek peace with God, but remember we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1.

2. Cultivate a forgiving spirit.

Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted and gentle, forgiving one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." There are people who are suffering physically because they are angry, bitter and refuse to forgive.

There was a story in the Chicago Tribune yesterday. The headline reads, "Pastor Forms a Bond With Son's Killer." This is a pastor in Connecticut whose son was murdered. He became friends with the man who killed his son. The Reverend Walter Everett has forgiven the man who killed his son seven years ago. He also helped get him out of prison early, and on Saturday he will officiate at the man's wedding. There is a quote from the pastor. "I had known people whose loved ones had been murdered and years afterward they still seemed consumed by the anger and hatred. I didn't want that to happen to me." Then they talk about the man who killed his son, a man by the name of Carlucci. The article says Carlucci feels redeemed by Walter Everett's compassion, but like others, he can't fully understand how the pastor could forgive him. "I have a thirteen year old daughter, and if anybody hurt her, I'd probably feel like I would have to hurt him." Then it quotes a moment in the jail when the pastor forgave the man who killed his son. "He told me he had forgiven me for the love of God. Tears were coming down my face. It made me feel like I wanted to live, whereas before I didn't care."

The only problem with a story like that is it seems so unbelievable as to be unbelievable, and yet it's true. There are people who suffer deeply, physically, because they will not forgive. Envy rots the bones. Anger rots the bones. Unforgiveness rots the bones. Bitterness rots the bones. Maybe if you wonder why you're not doing well, and why you can't sleep at night, and why you have stomach aches and headaches and backaches, and why you are messed up all the time and just don't feel good, why don't you look in the mirror and what you'll see is an angry person. Until you do something about your anger and bitterness, you're going to be sick, because the Bible says it will happen that way—it will literally rot your bones.

3. Dwell on unseen realities.

Think about the things that you know to be true but you can't see. Things like heaven, like eternity, like Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Colossians 3:1-3 says, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

4. Keep the long view of life.

That is the secret of Proverbs 15:15, which says, "The cheerful heart has a continual feast." Does that mean you will ha-ha-ha your way through life? No! What it means is that if you take the long view of life, if you stand back and understand that God is involved in every part of life, not just the good part but the bad, if you look at the whole thing, you truly can have a continual feast.

5. Associate with cheerful people.

I have been hitting this in some of my sermons lately. Some of us are messed up because we are hanging around messed-up people. We're angry because we're hanging around angry people. We're bitter because we're hanging around bitter people. We're mad because the people we're around are mad and critical and angry all the time. Find some cheerful people to make you cheerful.

6. Be a load lifter, not a burden maker.

Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Don't be one of those people who makes life harder for other people; be a load lifter.

7. Listen to good music.

God gave music as a means of lifting sad hearts. This week before the surgery, when I was down and discouraged, with some fear and worry in my heart, I had a little cassette player in my office. I put a cassette in by the Bill Gaither Trio. They have a version of Blessed Assurance, sung by Danny Gaither. It is the most beautiful rendition of Blessed Assurance that I have ever heard. That song came on when I was down and discouraged, and just those words, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine, oh what a foretaste of glory divine" lifted my heart this week. God gave us good music and told us to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to lift the heart.

8. Live a life of active love.

I ran across this sentence this week: a selfish man can never be cheerful. He can be happy, but never cheerful. Only a giver can be cheerful. Only a lover, somebody who invests in the lives of other people, only that kind of person can really be cheerful and positive about life. Get involved in the lives of other people and you will have a cheerful heart.

It was Friday morning and the surgery which was originally to take about an hour stretched into three hours. That is so exhausting. Your mind plays tricks on you. You don't know, you worry, you fear the worst, the unspeakable things of life. About an hour and a half into the surgery, Greg Kirschner came in to see me. Greg's wife, Carolyn, was doing the surgery. Greg came by to say hello. We chatted for a while and he cheered me up, told me a few stories. Then he told me a sad story about a man in his practice that he is seeing right now who has some kind of cancer. He is very old. Greg was trying to help him deal with the situation and said to him, "Don't you have any children you could talk to?" "No." "A wife?" "No." "Parents?" "No." "Brothers and sisters?" "No." "Don't you have any friends you could talk to about this?" "No." "Don't you go to church somewhere?" "No, I gave that up years ago." "Well, who's going to help you with what you have to go through?" The man looked at Greg and said, "Well, I guess nobody. You're the only person I have to talk to about this." Greg told me that man is going to die all alone. It is a horrible thing. Life is hard enough if you know Jesus. How does anybody do it without him? How does anybody live even one day without the Lord? What do they do in the waiting room if they don't know Jesus? Where do you go, if not to the Lord, when it's your family, when it's life and death?

Thank God for Jesus. Thank God he is alive. He said, "Lo, I am with you always. I will never leave you." I can testify that I felt his presence with me on Friday morning. Even there his hand was helping me. If you don't know Jesus, my heart goes out to you and I invite you, I urge you, turn away from whatever is keeping you away, and run to Jesus. Some day you will really need him. While you are healthy, run to Jesus; you'll never regret it.

Brothers and sisters, it has been a hard week, but Jesus carried me through. He is a wonderful Savior. Be encouraged, people of God! Be encouraged, lift up your heads and rejoice, for the Son of God who has brought us this far will be with us to the end. And no matter what happens to us this week, the Lord Jesus Christ will be with us. Amen.

Proverbs 17:28 Silence: A Fool's Best Friend

June 2002 – SILENCE: A FOOL'S BEST FRIEND by Ray Pritchard "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue." Proverbs 17:28 This certainly is one of the most encouraging proverbs. It offers hope for all of us who basically make our living with words. Here are a few other verses on this same subject: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (10:19). "A man of understanding holds his tongue" (11:12b). "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (13:3). "He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity" (21:23). Truth-telling begins with silence. Speak less and you will speak more truthfully. The more you say, the more likely you are to exaggerate, to slander, to mislead and to stretch the truth. A few years ago I heard a man say, "Feel free to have no opinion on that." What a novel thought—"Feel free to have no opinion." I think that struck me because in my younger, brasher days I felt like I should be ready to discourse intelligently on any subject. Ask a question and I was ready with an answer, an opinion, or an argument. I now understand that there are many areas about which I know nothing. For instance, if you ask a question about the history of China, I don't know enough to make a useful contribution. Maybe someday I'll know more about China than I do right now, but for the moment, I'm better off not opening my mouth. It's okay not to know all the answers. It's also okay not to offer an opinion on every passing fad. You don't have to dominate every conversation or try to be an expert on everything. You can't, you aren't, everyone knows it, and if you try to fake it, eventually you'll be exposed by someone who really does know what he's talking about. I think it was Calvin Coolidge who declared that he never got in trouble for something he didn't say. While I wouldn't care to press that to the extreme (after all, there are times when silence is wrong), his point is still well taken. Say less, but make your words count. Creative silence means listening more, saying less, and praying instead of interrupting. Pray for wisdom! Pray for God's guidance! Pray for understanding! Pray for God's love to be manifested in your speech! Say what you need to say and then stop talking. It's those "extra" words that usually get us into trouble. And remember, just because you're thinking something doesn't mean you have to say it out loud. The Bible is clear on this point. The more we speak, the less truth we tell. If we want to become more truthful, the first step is to stop talking.

Proverbs 17:1 CONTENTMENT Learning to Love Lima Beans

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife. Proverbs 17:1

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred. Proverbs 15:17

Many people are confused about contentment, thinking that it means having what you want. Nothing could be further from the truth. Contentment is not having what you want, but wanting what you already have. Far too many of us measure our happiness by how things are going on the outside. The Bible says it is not like that. Contentment is a matter of understanding how much you already have.

These two verses teach us that it is better to eat cold lima beans where people love you than to have a T-bone steak where they can't stand to look at your face. This is why people get depressed at Thanksgiving and Christmastime, is why they hate to go back home. When they go back home, all the old hurts and bad feelings start coming out. What ought to be a joyful, happy time becomes an unbearable struggle.

What is contentment? Contentment is realizing that you are better off the way you are right now. If you are dreaming of more money and bigger material possessions, contentment is realizing how much God has blessed you and how much you have right now.

One man journeyed with a cough that wouldn't go away and unusual weariness, so he went to the doctor for a checkup. Cancer. The diagnosis was ominous-something about a large-cell tumor on the thymus. Treatable, but not a moment to lose because this kind of cancer spreads rapidly.

First there was surgery to remove the tumor, followed by massive chemotherapy. How was it? Terrible. His hair fell out, he lost weight, he felt sicker than he had ever felt in his life, and at the end the nurses cheerily told him, "You're doing just great. Most people get really sick." The man replied that if there were something worse called "really sick," he didn't care to experience it. Finally, there was radiation where the tumor had been-a final attack to destroy any stray cancer cells.

Six years have passed and the cancer has not returned. His wife offered this comment on their ordeal: "When something like this happens, it puts all of life in a new perspective. You learn to live one day at a time. You start to enjoy the things you used to take for granted.

"As hard as this has been, we feel grateful that it happened. I never thought I'd say that, but it's true. Fighting cancer brought our family together and made us appreciate what we have. God has been so good to us," she said.

It is a timely lesson for all of us. Even the bad times can be an occasion to experience the goodness of God, especially if we learn to appreciate what we already have.

Lord Jesus, do what is necessary so that we will learn to be happy with what we have, instead of dreaming of what we don't have. Amen.

How happy are you right now? What would need to change in order for you to be happy?

Why is it that we often don't learn contentment until we go through hard times?

Proverbs 17:3 TRIALS From Ashes to Gold

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart. Proverbs 17:3

More than once lately I have had the opportunity to ponder why God allows some people to undergo prolonged disappointment. In one case, it is a prayer for a loved one that God has not answered, although the prayer has been offered again and again. In another case, it is a dream that seemed so close and then at the last second was snatched away. In another case, it is a broken friendship that cannot be repaired. In yet another case, it is a man in search of a job he cannot seem to find. In addition I have a good friend who has just been diagnosed with inoperable cancer.

What is the common thread? Why do the people of God suffer so many setbacks and difficulties? What lessons are we to learn from the disappointments we so often face?

Years ago I ran across a passage from the Old Testament that sheds light on this crucial question. Exodus 23 takes place at Mount

Sinai just after God has given the Ten Commandments. Verses 27-28 describe what will happen as the Jews travel to the Promised Land: "I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way." That sounds good to me. If I'm an Israelite and I hear the Lord talking like that, I'm ready to march because it sounds like the trip to the Promised Land is going to be a piece of cake.

But that's not the whole story. Here are the next two verses: "But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land" (Exodus 23:29-30). Did you get that? God is promising ultimate victory, but He is also promising that it won't come quickly. Why? Because if victory comes quickly, the Israelites wouldn't be ready to handle it. Instead, He promises to work "little by little"-an inch here, a yard there, day by day leading His people and building their confidence in Him. Over time-and through many small battles-they will become strong enough to win the final victory.

That explains so much that happens to us. God works "little by little" to develop spiritual strength in us. If all our prayers were immediately answered, we'd soon take prayer for granted. We pray more, and we pray more fervently during a time of crisis because we know that if God doesn't help us, we're sunk.

When disappointment comes your way, keep four truths fixed in your mind: (1) Today's disappointment is meant to prepare you for tomorrow's victory. (2) Tomorrow's victory will be sweeter because you had to fight harder to win it. (3) The Lord allows disappointment so that we will stay humble; He gives victory so that we will have hope. (4) He gives us just enough of each so that we might remember that, without His help, the Hivites would have wiped us out a long time ago.

Heavenly Father, in hard times I often do not know how to pray. May my trials lead me back to Your throne where I can find grace to help in the nick of time. Amen.

Name several occasions when God used disappointment to lead you to a deeper relationship with Him.

Could that be happening in some area of your life right now? Are you willing to trust God to finish His work at the right time and in the right way?

Proverbs 17:22 Cheerfulness: The Healing Power of a Merry Heart

I am a little more exhausted than usual because I'm coming off a week and a half that has been a personally draining time for me and my family. About 10 days ago, Marlene went in to see the doctor, who found something she didn't like. On Friday, Marlene had three hours of surgery and is up at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. She is doing fine. The surgery was successful, but there was some worry going into it that they might find some cancer. They didn't and she received a clean bill of health. I am personally weary and a little worn out. I was thinking that it is ironic that many weeks ago when I set up this sermon series on Proverbs, I set this particular Sunday as the day to preach on cheerfulness. I have been trying to think all week long what I would have to say on this subject that would be remotely cheerful. What I feel is that I need a good nap.

I have been meditating in the last few days. I've spent a lot of time at the hospital, which gives you plenty of time to think, because hospital days don't last 24 hours, they last 72 hours. You look at the clock thinking it has been five minutes and it has only been thirty seconds. Twenty minutes later it has only been three more minutes. This gives you plenty of time to think. I was pondering that age-old question: are you an optimist or a pessimist? When you see the glass of water, is it half full or half empty? When you personally go through one of those weeks that we all go through eventually (and some of us go through regularly), are you basically positive at the end, or are you basically negative?

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Someone has said it this way: between the optimist and the pessimist, the difference is droll; the optimist sees the doughnut, the pessimist sees the hole. It has been well said that the optimist is the person who invented the airplane and the pessimist the person who invented the parachute. You need them both. You need the positive aspect of life as well as that aspect of life that looks on the problem and says, "Well, life isn't just a bowl of cherries. There are pits in there, too." You need to be both optimistic and pessimistic. You have to come to a place of biblical realism.

I have been thinking this week as our family has gone through what I would say was a crisis. When you have major surgery of a loved one, it is a crisis. Even if it is a good result, you don't know how it will turn out going in. As I thought about all of that, I have been thinking about my subject of cheerfulness.

I want to share with you today a little about biblical realism, not optimism or pessimism. In order to do that and get our thoughts clearly focused, let's go to the book of Proverbs. Let's read a number of verses.

"An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up." Proverbs 12:25

This is mostly observation. Kind words cheer up those who are discouraged.

"Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy." Proverbs 14:10

The first part of that is certainly true. There are those of us who have secret sorrows. There are those of us who though we may look good and may be well dressed and have a smile on our face, behind that smile there is a story of sorrow and heartache that we don't share with anyone else.

"Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief." Proverbs 14:13

How true it is that even when we are laughing and putting on a brave face for the crowd, even when we're going through the motions and trying to be very positive, on the inside there may be turmoil, heartache, discouragement and even despair. Just because you see somebody laughing and smiling, it doesn't mean that everything is completely O.K. Underneath that laughter there may be something you know nothing about.

"A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." Proverbs 14:30

This is a life verse. Envy rots the bones. In the Hebrew it literally means envy makes the bones disintegrate. This is an important verse. This verse is telling us that there is some kind of connection between the spiritual and the physical. There is some kind of connection between the heart and the body, between what goes on inside and what happens outside. The attitude of the heart has a direct impact on the physical well-being or lack thereof. If your heart is at peace, it gives life to the body. Envy causes the bones of the body to disintegrate.

"A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit." Proverbs 15:13

"All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast." Proverbs 15:15

The cheerful heart eats a feast at the table of the Lord.

Now turn to the theme verse for this sermon. It is found in Proverbs 17:22, which says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." This is one of those places where I believe the King James version is a better translation. The King James says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." That is a better translation of the Hebrew. You should put a star by this verse. It is suggesting something to us. It tells us that there is a relationship between the condition of the heart and the condition of the body. There is a relationship between physical and spiritual health. "A crushed spirit dries up the bones," literally means it sucks out the marrow of life from the bones.

There is a relationship between the condition of the heart and the condition of the body.

Proverbs 18:1 says, "A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" We all know people who struggle with sickness and weakness, yet when you go to see them, they cheer you up—people who are down and out physically, but when you go to see them, they actually make you feel better because they are strong in spirit even though their body is wasting away. On the other hand, we all know people who are sick and yet their spirit is crushed. When you go to see them, you feel worse when you leave than when you came, because they have sucked all the life out of you as well.

These verses are telling us that there is a basic relationship between your mental attitude and your physical well-being. Said another way, what you are in your heart has a direct bearing on your physical health. What is on the inside eventually manifests itself physically on the outside. Having said that, I want to ask and answer two questions:

1. Why is it that a merry heart is so important?

A. Because of the truth of Romans 8:28.

"And we know that in all things God work for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

It is a difficult world out there, a world filled with sin, sickness, heartache and despair. Thank God, sin is not the final word in this world. There is a word beyond sin, beyond the fall, beyond degradation, and that word is Jesus. Because Jesus Christ has come into the world, there is now healing, salvation, forgiveness and deliverance. What does Romans 8:28 mean by "all things"? How inclusive is it? It is utterly inclusive. It includes all that can happen in the life of a child of God. It includes the good and the bad, health and sickness, wealth and poverty, the sunlight and the shadow, high noon and midnight, life and death. It is all that can happen in the will

of God to a child of God. That means that Romans 8:28 is still true, just as true in the hospital as in the sanctuary. It means that when you are in the waiting room and that clock will not move and you know your loved one is in the hands of a surgeon, that no matter the outcome, whether life or death or cancer or no cancer, whether you see her again or not, you know that moment is in God's hands. It is part of the "all things" that work together for good.

There is nothing that can happen to the child of God that is outside of the "all things" of Romans 8:28.

This week I have been meditating a little on President Reagan and the letter he wrote on Saturday to the American people. At the age of 83, he wrote that letter in which he said he has just been diagnosed as having Alzheimer's. I commented on that in my last sermon, but at that time I had not read the letter. I read it this week; it was printed in the Chicago Tribune. I encourage any of you who haven't, to read it. It is a wonderful statement of faith. The people who know President Reagan say that he is truly a born again Christian man. He wrote this letter from what I would consider the standpoint of the Christian faith. He said in that letter,

"I write because I do not want to keep a secret from the American people. My wife had breast cancer and we told you; they tried to assassinate me, and we told you; and now I have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and I want to tell you. I want you to know this so that you will know about us and so that I can encourage other people whose families may be going through this disease. There is some stigma in some places attached to Alzheimer's. As for me, I feel very good right now, and as long as I am able, I will continue to do all the things I have been doing. I now begin the journey that will carry me into the sunset of life."

That is a beautiful phrase. It is picturesque and in the deepest sense it is also a biblical phrase. At the end of his letter he said, "Until the Lord calls me home, I intend to do what I have always done—to help people in whatever way I can." Here is a man, whether he knows it or not, who understands that all things work together for good. Here is a man who can look at a disease that will suck the life away from him, and say, "I still believe in God. I still believe the Lord has a plan for me."

A merry heart is important because God is saying to us, "My children, some times you will face things that you can't understand. Sometimes you are going to face heartache and pain and difficulty that goes far beyond anything you thought you could endure. Sometimes you will be in the waiting room of life for weeks and months and years, but I want you to know that even there I am with you and am working out my plan in your life."

How can you have a merry heart even in the darkest moments of life?

What we are to do at those moments is to stand back and over those unexplainable things of life we are to erect a sign that says, "Shhh. Quiet. God at work." Romans 8:28 tells us that God is at work whether we see it or not, whether we feel it or not, whether we understand it or not, whether we believe it or not. So our attitude makes all the difference at that moment. The question is not, "Do we have the answers?" because I can assure you that at that moment you will not have the answer. The question is, "Do you believe there is a God who is at work in this situation?" The Christian answer is YES. That is how you can have a merry heart even in the darkest moment of life. You can have a cheerful spirit if you believe there is a God in heaven who loves you, who is at work in ways that you can't see, believe or understand.

B. Because of Proverbs 17:22. Read it again.

"A merry heart doeth good like medicine."

The Hebrew language has a number of tenses in it. One of the tenses is called the causative tense. You put a verb in the causative tense when you want to say that one thing causes another to happen. That's what you have in the Hebrew in Proverbs 17:22. A literal translation would be, "A cheerful heart causes good healing." What the Bible is telling us here is that your attitude, the way you approach the problems and trials of life, actually brings about good healing. That is amazing.

Your attitude, the way you approach the problems and trials of life, brings about good healing.

I have told you before the story of Dr. Norman Cousins, who for a number of years was on the medical staff at the UCLA School of Medicine. About 25 years ago, Dr. Cousins was diagnosed with having a strange, rare kind of disease that destroys the connective tissue of the body. The doctors gave him the battery of expensive tests and said, "Sorry, there is really nothing we can do. It is degenerative and you are going to die." Dr. Cousins said, "Well, I didn't want to just give up." So he set himself on a regimen of exercise, high doses of Vitamin C, and then he added an unusual thing. He rented a projector and rented Marx Brothers and Three Stooges movies and all the cartoons he could find. For hours each day, he would take his Vitamin C and watch the Marx Brothers and Three Stooges and would laugh his head off. What he discovered was that ten minutes of hearty laughter gave him a whole hour free from pain. So he would watch those movies over and over and over again. He discovered, as he did this, that he began to get better. The day came when he went back to the doctors and they said, "We don't know what happened, because this was an incurable disease; but as far as we know, you are completely cured." He lived about another 20 years after that and wrote a book called Anatomy of an Illness, in which he made the point that your mental attitude, the cheerfulness or lack thereof, has a great deal

to do with whether you get sick, how bad you get sick, whether you get well, and how quickly you get well. All I want to say is that what he discovered is nothing more than what Solomon told us 3000 years ago, which is that a merry heart causes good healing.

Several years ago, when I wanted to research this out, I called a couple of the doctors in our church. I asked them to corroborate this from their own medical research. We have all wondered what the mental frame of mind has to do with the healing process from a physician's point of view. The answer they gave me was the same. At first they would be very cautious and say research was unsure about it. Then I would ask them about their own experience, and that was where it got interesting. All the doctors I talked to said the same thing. They told story after story of people who had come to them, deathly sick, yet who got better amazingly fast because they went in with a positive spirit and were surrounded by positive people. The doctors also told me stories about people who should have gotten better, but who got much worse, were sick a long time, and in some cases died, evidently because they had such a negative, hostile, hopeless spirit about them. Then I asked one other question, "Do you notice any difference in your practice between Christians and non-Christians?" The immediate answer was, "Yes, we see every day, a big difference when we treat somebody who knows Jesus Christ and somebody who doesn't. We see a tremendous difference in the healing process, in the attitude of those who know the Lord, versus those who do not." Why should that surprise us? Why should it surprise us to read about Norman Cousins? All of that is nothing more than what was written in the Bible 3000 years ago. Solomon said it and modern medical science is just now catching up with it.

So then, I want to finish this sermon by giving you some suggestions as to how we can cultivate a merry heart. Would you like a merry heart?

1. Cultivate your relationship with God.

Make sure that you spend time with the Lord. Don't just seek peace with God, but remember we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1.

2. Cultivate a forgiving spirit.

Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted and gentle, forgiving one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." There are people who are suffering physically because they are angry, bitter and refuse to forgive.

There was a story in the Chicago Tribune yesterday. The headline reads, "Pastor Forms a Bond With Son's Killer." This is a pastor in Connecticut whose son was murdered. He became friends with the man who killed his son. The Reverend Walter Everett has forgiven the man who killed his son seven years ago. He also helped get him out of prison early, and on Saturday he will officiate at the man's wedding. There is a quote from the pastor. "I had known people whose loved ones had been murdered and years afterward they still seemed consumed by the anger and hatred. I didn't want that to happen to me." Then they talk about the man who killed his son, a man by the name of Carlucci. The article says Carlucci feels redeemed by Walter Everett's compassion, but like others, he can't fully understand how the pastor could forgive him. "I have a thirteen year old daughter, and if anybody hurt her, I'd probably feel like I would have to hurt him." Then it quotes a moment in the jail when the pastor forgave the man who killed his son. "He told me he had forgiven me for the love of God. Tears were coming down my face. It made me feel like I wanted to live, whereas before I didn't care."

The only problem with a story like that is it seems so unbelievable, and yet it's true. There are people who suffer deeply, physically, because they will not forgive. Envy rots the bones. Anger rots the bones. Unforgiveness rots the bones. Bitterness rots the bones. Maybe if you wonder why you're not doing well, and why you can't sleep at night, and why you have stomach aches and headaches and backaches, and why you are messed up all the time and just don't feel good, why don't you look in the mirror and what you'll see is an angry person. Until you do something about your anger and bitterness, you're going to be sick, because the Bible says it will happen that way—it will literally rot your bones.

3. Dwell on unseen realities.

Think about the things that you know to be true but you can't see. Things like heaven, like eternity, like Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Colossians 3:1-3 says, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

4. Keep the long view of life.

That is the secret of Proverbs 15:15, which says, "The cheerful heart has a continual feast." Does that mean you will ha-ha-ha your way through life? No! What it means is that if you take the long view of life, if you stand back and understand that God is involved in every part of life, not just the good part but the bad, if you look at the whole thing, you truly can have a continual feast.

5. Associate with cheerful people.

I have been hitting this in some of my sermons lately. Some of us are messed up because we are hanging around messed-up people. We're angry because we're hanging around angry people. We're bitter because we're hanging around bitter people. We're mad because the people we're around are mad and critical and angry all the time. Find some cheerful people to make you cheerful.

6. Be a load lifter, not a burden maker.

Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Don't be one of those people who makes life harder for other people; be a load lifter.

7. Listen to good music.

God gave music as a means of lifting sad hearts. This week before the surgery, when I was down and discouraged, with some fear and worry in my heart, I had a little cassette player in my office. I put a cassette in by the Bill Gaither Trio. They have a version of Blessed Assurance, sung by Danny Gaither. It is the most beautiful rendition of Blessed Assurance that I have ever heard. That song came on when I was down and discouraged, and just those words, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine, oh what a foretaste of glory divine" lifted my heart this week. God gave us good music and told us to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to lift the heart.

8. Live a life of active love.

I ran across this sentence this week: a selfish man can never be cheerful. He can be happy, but never cheerful. Only a giver can be cheerful. Only a lover, somebody who invests in the lives of other people, only that kind of person can really be cheerful and positive about life. Get involved in the lives of other people and you will have a cheerful heart.

It was Friday morning and the surgery which was originally to take about an hour stretched into three hours. That is so exhausting. Your mind plays tricks on you. You don't know, you worry, you fear the worst, the unspeakable things of life. About an hour and a half into the surgery, Greg Kirschner came in to see me. Greg's wife, Carolyn, was doing the surgery. Greg came by to say hello. We chatted for a while and he cheered me up, told me a few stories. Then he told me a sad story about a man in his practice that he is seeing right now who has some kind of cancer. He is very old. Greg was trying to help him deal with the situation and said to him, "Don't you have any children you could talk to?" "No." "A wife?" "No." "Parents?" "No." "Brothers and sisters?" "No." "Don't you have any friends you could talk to about this?" "No." "Don't you go to church somewhere?" "No, I gave that up years ago." "Well, who's going to help you with what you have to go through?" The man looked at Greg and said, "Well, I guess nobody. You're the only person I have to talk to about this." Greg told me that man is going to die all alone. It is a horrible thing. Life is hard enough if you know Jesus. How does anybody do it without him? How does anybody live even one day without the Lord? What do they do in the waiting room if they don't know Jesus? Where do you go, if not to the Lord, when it's your family, when it's life and death?

Thank God for Jesus. Thank God he is alive. He said, "Lo, I am with you always. I will never leave you." I can testify that I felt his presence with me on Friday morning. Even there his hand was helping me. If you don't know Jesus, my heart goes out to you and I invite you, I urge you, turn away from whatever is keeping you away, and run to Jesus. Some day you will really need him. While you are healthy, run to Jesus; you'll never regret it.

Brothers and sisters, it has been a hard week, but Jesus carried me through. He is a wonderful Savior. Be encouraged, people of God! Be encouraged, lift up your heads and rejoice, for the Son of God who has brought us this far will be with us to the end. And no matter what happens to us this week, the Lord Jesus Christ will be with us. Amen.

Proverbs 17:24 DISCERNMENT When You're in a Hole, Stop Digging

A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth. Proverbs 17:24

The particular Hebrew word translated "discerning" in this verse is very common in the Old Testament. It has the idea of considering a situation carefully, studying all the options, pondering possible courses of action, and then choosing the best course. By contrast, a fool pays no attention to anything around him but blithely lets his mind wander, and so stumbles from one predicament to another.

A father was talking with his son about sound financial principles when the question arose: What do you do when you are already in debt? The answer is not hard to find: Get out of debt as quickly as possible. The father coined a pithy aphorism he called the First Rule of Holes: "When you're in a hole, stop digging."

It makes sense, doesn't it? When you find yourself in a financial hole, stop digging! You're already in a hole. Don't make matters worse by using your credit cards. If you want to get out of the hole, your first step is to make sure you're not digging yourself in

deeper.

The same principle applies across the board. What's the first step in losing weight? Stop digging! You're already in a hole and it's a tight fit because your waistline has expanded. Lay off the fat, forget about sweets for a while, and stock up on alfalfa sprouts.

Not long ago someone asked me a very pointed question. This person had been involved in a pattern of sinful behavior. In all seriousness, he wanted to know why he should stop, since he had been doing it for such a long time. My answer was simple: If I were talking to a thief, I would tell him to stop stealing. If I were speaking to a murderer, I would say, "Stop killing." If a student has been cheating on final exams, I would say, "Stop cheating." The first step in changing your behavior is to stop the destructive actions that have gotten you in the mess you are in.

When Jesus met the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), He didn't condemn her, but He didn't condone her behavior, either. After routing her accusers He told her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin" (v. 11). Was this woman forgiven by Jesus? I believe she was. Did she have a new life? Yes, she did. But in point of fact, she had suddenly come from immorality into a relationship with Jesus Christ. He would not condemn her, for she had condemned herself by her sin. But now that new life must be evidenced by a radical change in behavior: "Go and sin no more."

Are you suffering from anger and bitterness? Do you feel trapped by repeated failure? Would you like to see true change in your life? Are you in trouble—morally, spiritually, financially, emotionally, or relationally? There are many things that you can do to help yourself. But none of them will do any good until you remember the First Rule of Holes: When you're in a hole, stop digging.

Lord, I need Your help to stop doing the things that are hurting me so that I can begin to do the things that will make me better. Amen.

What "holes" are in you right now? Have you stopped digging yet?

In what areas of your life do you need discernment?

Proverbs 17:28 SILENCE A Fool's Best Friend

Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. Proverbs 17:28

This certainly is one of the most encouraging proverbs. It offers hope for all of us who basically make our living with words. Here are a few other verses on this same subject: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (10:19). "A man of understanding holds his tongue" (11:12b). "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (13:3). "He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity" (21:23).

Truth-telling begins with silence. Speak less and you will speak more truthfully. The more you say, the more likely you are to exaggerate, slander, mislead, and stretch the truth.

A few years ago I heard a man say, "Feel free to have no opinion on that." What a novel thought—"Feel free to have no opinion." I think that struck me because in my younger, brasher days I felt like I should be ready to discourse intelligently on any subject. Ask a question and I was ready with an answer, an opinion, or an argument. With the passing of a few years and my entrance into mid-life, I now understand that there are many areas about which I know nothing. For instance, if you ask a question about the history of China, I don't know enough to make a useful contribution. Maybe someday I'll know more about China than I do right now, but for the moment, I'm better off not opening my mouth.

Here's a liberating thought. It's OK not to know all the answers. It's also OK not to offer an opinion on every passing fad. You don't have to dominate every conversation or try to be an expert on everything. You can't, you aren't, and everyone knows it; and if you try to fake it, eventually you'll be caught up short by someone who really does know what they're talking about.

I think it was Calvin Coolidge who declared that he never got into trouble for something he didn't say. While I wouldn't care to press that to the extreme (after all, there are times when silence is wrong), his point is still well taken. Say less, but make your words count.

For those who talk for a living (and for the rest of us as well), why not try "creative listening"? It means praying while you are listening. Most of us don't listen very well anyway. When someone else is talking, we're busy trying to figure out what we're going to say next. No wonder we don't communicate!

Creative silence means listening more, saying less, and praying instead of interrupting.

Pray for wisdom!

Pray for God's guidance!

Pray for understanding!

Pray for God's love to be manifested in your speech!

The Bible is clear on this point. The more we speak, the less truth we tell. If we want to become more truthful, the first step is to speak less.

Father, make me like Jesus, who spoke for the ages and never wasted a word. Amen.

Do you talk too much? How would your friends answer that question?

Name three things in life you've decided to have no opinion about. Why is this important?

Can you think of a situation recently where you would have been better off if you had talked less?

PROVERBS 18

Proverbs 18:8 Gossip: Feathers in the Wind

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts." Proverbs 18:8

Here are a few verses to ponder: "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool" (10:18). "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends" (16:28). "A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much" (20:19).

Once upon a time a man said something about his neighbor that was untrue. The word spread around the village as one person told another. But soon the truth came out—what could the man do? He went to see the village priest and the priest gave him some strange instructions.

"Take a bag full of feathers and place one feather on the doorstep of each person who heard the untrue story you told. Then go back a day later, pick up the feather, and bring the bag back to me."

So the man did as the priest said. But when he went back to pick up the feathers nearly all of them were gone. When he went back to the priest he said, "Father, I did as you said but when I went back the wind had blown the feathers away and I could not get them back." And the priest replied, "So it is with careless words, my son. Once they are spoken, they cannot be taken back. You may ask forgiveness for what you said but you cannot take your words back. The damage has already been done."

So it is with gossip. "Hey, did you hear about what Tom did?" "Let me tell you what Phil just told me." "I just heard Susan and George are separating. Can you believe it?" "Jay is about to lose his job—he's been goofing off again." "Ethel finally talked Lloyd into buying a new car. And you know how Lloyd is about money." And on and on it goes.

It's not just that we play fast and loose with the truth. Sometimes we tell 80% of the truth and conveniently forget part of the story. Sometimes we tell all the truth we know, but the part we don't know changes the whole picture. Sometimes we tell the truth but in such a way as to make someone look stupid. Sometimes we just plain lie.

Anyway you slice it ... it's gossip. And it's hurtful. And it's wrong. And God hates it. And we should, too.

There is an easy cure. But it takes tremendous discipline. Keep your mouth shut. It works every time.

If you must share what you know, use three questions as a guide before telling what you know to someone else.

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

There wouldn't be any gossip if we used those three questions before speaking.

Spirit of Truth, Holiness and Love, fill us with your divine presence that our words may reflect the character of Jesus. Amen.

Going Deeper

How do you define gossip? How often are you guilty of spreading gossip?

What changes do you need to make in this area of your life?

Proverbs 18:17 OPEN-MINDEDNESS Take Time to Hear Both Sides

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. Proverbs 18:17

Here is a piece of wisdom that could have been coined by Ben Franklin. There are two sides to every story—at least two and maybe more. This is the third warning in Proverbs 18 about the danger of forming hasty opinions. Verse 2 says that “a fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.” Verse 13 adds that “he who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.” Taken together, these three verses remind us that, in order to find the truth, we must first stop talking (v. 2), start listening (v. 13), and make sure we hear both sides before making up our minds (v. 17).

“The first to present his case seems right.” Certainly we all feel this way about ourselves. We all learn to make excuses early on—the dog ate our homework, we “accidentally” told a lie, we meant to return the phone call but then we forgot. If we are in a dispute with a friend or a coworker, we naturally bend the facts in our own direction, subtly shading the truth to make our case look stronger than it really is. We are not intentionally lying, which would unquestionably be sinful. No, what we are doing is harder to detect, though no less wrong. We are presenting the facts to make ourselves appear in the most favorable light possible. Most of us do this so instinctively that we don’t even realize it. We are all by nature biased in our own favor.

“Till another comes forward and questions him.” Suddenly our explanation doesn’t seem so strong and our excuses look like . . . excuses. What seemed to be an adequate defense now seems small and selfish and perhaps even deceitful.

For most of us, there is huge room for improvement in this area, both in how we present ourselves and how we evaluate others. On the one hand, we ought to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about our own words and deeds. If we would do that, no surprise witness could ever impeach us. On the other hand, this proverb urges us to be slow to evaluate the facts of a given case. Here is a word of warning for teachers, principals, bosses, managers, department heads, and all those in authority. Don’t be taken in by the first person you hear. Take time to hear both sides. Ask hard questions. Make sure you get the facts.

Better to delay a decision than to wish you had. Better to be thought too cautious than to be, in fact, too hasty.

It was said of Christ that He was a man without guile. That means He had nothing hidden because He had nothing to hide. He never exaggerated because He was Truth personified. He never tried to fool anyone, and He was never fooled by anyone. That’s the standard for us to follow.

Lord Jesus, help me have the grace to tell the truth and wisdom to discern the truth today. Amen.

Do you agree that by nature we all shade the truth in our own favor? Name an area of your life where you need to stop making excuses and start telling the truth.

Can you think of a situation facing you right now where you need wisdom to determine the true facts of the case?

Proverbs 18:21 THE TONGUE Life and Death Are in Your Mouth!

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. Proverbs 18:21

Proverbs has a lot to say about what we say. In fact, the subject of the tongue and how we use our words is one of the major themes of this book. Over 150 times Proverbs refers to our lips, our mouth, and our tongue.

Words are important. After all, God created the universe with words. He spoke and it was so. Our Lord Jesus was called the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1, 14).

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Whether you know it or not, there is the power of life and there is the power of death within you. Everything you have said this week has either been life-giving or death-dealing, and there is nothing in between. The tongue has the power to kill, destroy, hurt, maim, and assassinate.

I read of a study released recently that states it takes eight to ten positive comments to offset one negative comment. In other words, eight to ten loving, caring, kind words are needed to eliminate the effects of just one hurtful word. Sometimes words that are spoken carelessly and viciously can never be erased from the blackboard of the mind.

The problem with words is that they can never be retrieved once they escape the mouth. The Bible describes the tongue as a world full of evil. From the tongue comes gossip, slander, hostility, cursing, and put-downs. We have all had times of regret or remorse when hurtful words have slipped out. Perhaps we spoke hastily to a co-worker, a neighbor, a classmate, a friend, a spouse, a parent, or a child. All of us have been eyewitnesses to the extreme damage the tongue can do.

One of my seminary professors often told us, "Men, it takes no size to criticize." I often think about that when I am tempted to take cheap shots at other people. The world is filled with critics; where are the affirmers? On every hand we have self-appointed "truth-tellers" whose calling in life seems to be finding what's wrong with everyone else. You know if you listen to them long enough they'll soon begin sniping at others.

But there is a better way. Years ago I picked up a copy of the Rotary Four-Way Test. It consists of four questions to ask yourself when you are tempted to say something unkind.

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Pretty simple, isn't it? What a difference it would make if we would apply those four questions to every conversation this week.

Think about it. Every time you open your mouth, life or death comes out.

Lord, let Your life be in me so that I may speak words of life to all I meet. Amen.

How have you been hurt by the words of others? How have you hurt others with your own words? Are you better at criticizing or affirming?

Take a moment and ask God to help you speak only words of life today.

Proverbs 18:20-21 The Tongue: Life and Death Are In Your Mouth!

October 1994 –

Proverbs has a lot to say about what we say. In fact, the subject of the tongue and how we use our words is perhaps the preeminent theme of this book. Over 150 times in this book alone, Proverbs refers to our lips, our mouth and our tongue. One of the central issues of the Book of Proverbs is how you use your tongue. I think all of us remember reading in the book of James where it says "Though the tongue is small, it is set on fire of hell. With the same tongue we bless the Lord and curse our friends."

Words are important. After all, God created the universe with words. He spoke and it was so. Our Lord Jesus was called THE WORD. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Two reasons why words are important:

#1. Because of the sheer quantity of words we use.

Do you have any idea how many words you use in the course of an ordinary day? To illustrate, let's take the books of Tom Clancy. I'm sure you have read or heard of those techno-thrillers: "Hunt for Red October," "Cardinal of the Kremlin," "Clear and Present Danger," "The Sum of All Fears," "Without Remorse." His works are always very thick, about 500-700 pages. You could use it for a door stop or throw it at somebody you disagreed with. There are 1/2 million to 3/4 million words in an average Tom Clancy novel. How long would it take you to say as many words as he writes in one of his books? According to researchers, each person here will open his mouth an average of 700 times in a day. In those 700 times, you will use an average of 18,000 words. Those 18,000 words would translate to about 54 printed pages. That means that in one year, an average person would fill 66 books of 800 pages each. Every year you write with your words 66 volumes that are larger than those Tom Clancy novels. No wonder Jesus said, "By your

words you will be condemned and by your words you will be justified.” Is it any wonder that the fastest growing segment of radio today is talk radio? The sheer quantity of the words we use is amazing.

#2. Because of the amazing power of words.

Think of what a few words put together can convey. “Mr. Watson, come here, I want you,” were the first words spoken over the telephone. “What hath God wrought?” were the first words sent by Morse code over the telegraph wire. “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” were the words spoken by Neil Armstrong 25 years ago. “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask instead what you can do for your country,” spoken by John F. Kennedy at his inauguration. If you have cable TV, maybe you have been watching C-SPAN and seen the Lincoln-Douglas debates that are being reenacted all over the state of Illinois. I was watching one yesterday and it brought to mind the words of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, probably the most famous words ever spoken by any American President. “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the principle that all men are created equal.” Your words are important, because with your words you either say something worthwhile or something that is not worth anything at all.

These are the words of Proverbs 18:20-21, “From the fruit of his mouth a man’s stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Underline the phrase “the tongue has the power of life and death.” Whether you know it or not, there is the power of life and there is the power of death within you. Everything you have said this week has either been life-giving or death-dealing, and there is nothing in between. The tongue has the power to kill, to destroy, to hurt, to maim and to assassinate.

Right Uses of the Tongue

1. The tongue may be used for wise counsel and sound advice.

Proverbs 10:31 says, “The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom.” Proverbs 15:7 says, “The lips of the wise spread knowledge.” What comes out of a righteous man? Wisdom. What comes out of a wise man? Knowledge. These two things ought to be coming out of your mouth all the time.

I have a few friends in my life who are like that. Every time they speak, they speak wisdom and knowledge. Some of them are people I have known for 20 or 30 years. Some of them are people I don’t talk to very often. Some of them are people I may not talk to except once every ten years. But because they are people of wisdom and knowledge, I know that if I have not talked to them for ten years, I can go back to them and say, “What do you think about this?” And even though he hasn’t seen or heard from me for ten years, because his lips speak wisdom and knowledge, he can say, “I don’t think you should do this; I don’t think you should do that; Ray, have you thought about this?” Invariably when I talk to people like that, my life is enriched because the lips of the righteous bring forth wisdom and knowledge. Blessed are you if you have a few people in your life who can speak wisdom and knowledge to you. And blessed are you doubly if you have the ability to speak wisdom and knowledge to other people.

2. The tongue can speak rebuke and reproof.

Proverbs 17:10 says, “A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.” If you find a man of understanding and you rebuke him, he will be impressed by your rebuke more than if you find a fool and beat him with a lash 100 times. That is because a wise man, a man of discernment, is a man you can come to and say, “My friend, I think you’re on the wrong path. My friend, I’m not sure about what you’re doing. Before you do that, stop and think. Let’s talk for a bit.” Blessed is the man who has a friend who is willing to come and give you advice like that.

Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.” At this point I like the King James version better. It says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Better to have a friend tell you the hard truth than have somebody try to butter you up and cover up the hard thing you need to hear.

Whenever I think of this I always think of my dear friend from Texas, Randy Miller. Randy was in the church I pastored in Texas. One year he served as the Chairman of our Elder Board. One of the things I learned about Randy was he always had a certain method of doing things. He was very orderly, not given to flamboyance, very much an administrator, doing things the right way.

He would come to me about once every other week and would always have one of those spiral hand notebooks. He’d sit down and say, “Pastor, I want to talk to you.” He’d go over all of his points with me, and then most of the time he would finish it and then turn the page. The second page would always be about me. He would say, “Pastor, this is hard for me to say, but when you said that last week in the sermon, you didn’t mean it this way, but this is how some people took it.” Or, “Pastor, when you didn’t take time to talk to those folks, they were really hurt.” Or, “Pastor, I know you think we ought to do this, but I’m not sure it’s the right idea.” Or sometimes, “You said this and you shouldn’t have and you need to do something about it.” I discovered this: he was always right, 100% of the time. He was a friend who loved me enough to tell me when I was making a mistake. You want to know how I feel about

Randy Miller today? I haven't seen him in five years and three months now, but I love him like I love my own brother. I consider him one of my best friends. He's welcome in my home anytime.

3. The tongue may be used for encouragement.

Proverbs 12:25 says, "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up." Proverbs 15:4 says, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life." Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" Proverbs 16:24 says, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." I bet when you read that you think it is just metaphorical. Any medical doctor or nurse will tell you that's not metaphorical at all. If you talk to people who work in the healing profession, they will tell you that whenever there is a patient who is surrounded by positive, optimistic, caring people who build him up and affirm him, that person has a much better chance of getting better and will normally recover a lot faster. When you have a patient who is off by himself and has no encouragement, or who is surrounded by negative, critical, pessimistic people, that person will have a much harder time getting better under normal circumstances. Why? Because pleasant words literally bring health to the bones. How blessed are you if you have somebody who comes alongside and uses words to lift you up. Doubly blessed are you if you are an encourager.

How many of your words this last week were words of encouragement? How many of your words were words to build up? How many times in the last week did you find it necessary to criticize, to tear down and destroy? My friend Dr. Howe in seminary used to say, "Gentlemen, it takes no size to criticize." Anybody can sit in the critic's corner and just tear something down. Are you the kind of person that other people are glad to see coming into the room, or are you the kind of person that causes other people to turn their face away? One reason may be that they see you as a negative, discouraged, critical person. Everybody has troubles and problems. Nobody gets a free ride from earth to heaven. How blessed you are if you use your tongue to lift up and encourage the people around you.

4. The tongue may be used for witnessing to others.

Proverbs 10:21 says, "The lips of the righteous nourish many." That means that you can use your lips to help bring people to God. You can use your lips to give spiritual nourishment to other people. Proverbs 11:30 says, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise." That means that somebody, somewhere, opened their mouth and gave you the gospel. You are a Christian because somebody shared the gospel with you, spoke on the radio, from a pulpit, or because somebody close to you spoke the words of life to you. What have you been doing to become a tree of life where you work, at your school, to your friends, to your neighbors, to your loved ones? By your lips you should give such good fruit that people come and want what you have.

Wrong Uses of the Tongue

1. The tongue may be used for flattery.

Proverbs 20:17 says, "Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel." That is a picturesque verse. If you get ahead in life by buttering other people up, by telling people what you think they want to hear, what you end up is chewing on rocks. Proverbs 26:28 says, "A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin." Proverbs 28:23 says, "He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue." That means that I love Randy Miller. Isn't it funny that after five years, when I prepared this sermon, his name popped into my mind? This is exactly what this verse means. He has gained favor with me because years ago he talked with me the way I needed to be talked to. Now I count him as somebody I love and as a dear brother.

The world tells us that you smooze your way to the top. Butter people up, brown nose your way to the top, tell people what they want to hear. The Bible says exactly the opposite. If you rebuke somebody in love, they will love you much more than if you give them empty, meaningless flattery.

2. The tongue may be used for quarreling.

Proverbs 18:6 says, "A fool's lips bring him strife, and his mouth invites a beating." I meet people like this every week. I hear them some of these smart alecks on TV and think, "What somebody needs to do is take that guy out behind the woodshed in the name of Jesus." The world is full of fools. The Bible says his mouth invites a beating.

Proverbs 29:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." Young people, you'll never learn a better lesson than this: learn to control your temper. How many of us have undergone tremendous heartache because at a crucial moment we lost our temper and spouted off when we should have been silent. A fool says that since you have it inside, you have to get it out. There are a lot of times when if you have to get it out, you'd be better off to go down to the basement, lock the door, turn on the stereo real loud and get it out where nobody can hear you. A wise man keeps himself under control.

Proverbs 22:24-25 is a good verse for all of us. It says, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one

easily angered." What that means is that we shouldn't run around with people who act like that. If you run around with hot heads, you're going to become a hot head yourself. The verse goes on to say, "Or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared." This week I got a telephone from a dear friend in another state. He is going through a terrible divorce right now. He started out friendly, they always do. They rarely end that way and this one is not ending that way for various reasons. He called me on Thursday with some unbelievable news. He said, "Ray, you won't believe it, but while I was watching, she drove up to my house with a 24 foot U-Haul house and she took everything out. She took out the chairs, the tables, the pictures. She took out the tablecloth, the china, the linen. She took everything. There is nothing left. I didn't find out until a couple of hours later that she took my clothes. She even took my underwear. You can't believe how angry I am right now. I want to go down there and put a bullet through her head."

Unless you've been that you can't really understand what it's like. If you have been through it, you understand the depth of emotion. I said to my dear friend, "Whatever you do, don't go down there. If you go down there, you're going to lose your cool and lose everything. Whatever you do, don't have a confrontation and don't blow up at her." I gave him some advice that has helped me over the years in some tough times. I said, "Remember these words: If you keep your cool, you can't lose. If you lose your cool, you can't win. If you lose your cool now, you're going to pay for it for the rest of your life."

Oh, the power of angry words! Let an angry man start taking a drink, and those words start uncontrollably coming out. That's why Proverbs warns us about this.

3. The tongue may be used for gossip.

Proverbs 10:18 says, "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool." Proverbs 16:28 says, "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." Proverbs 17:9 says, "He who covers over an offense promotes love." That means that you don't have to tell everything you know. You don't have to make everything right. You can cover over some things so you can go on with life. "But whoever repeats the matter separates close friends."

Three questions to ask yourself whenever you're tempted to tell something to someone else about what somebody has done:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

4. The tongue may be used for lying.

Proverbs 6:16-19 give us the seven things the Lord hates. Two of them are a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies. Proverbs 14:25 says, "A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful." Proverbs 12:19 says, "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment."

5. The tongue may be used to seduce to evil.

Proverbs 5 talks about the lips of an adulteress. It says her lips drip with honey. Proverbs 6:24 says, "Keeping you from the immoral woman (or man), from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife (or husband.)" Proverbs 22:14 says, "The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the Lord's wrath will fall into it." Your tongue, which is meant to bless God, can be used to drag other people down into sin. Don't do it.

6. The tongue may be used to talk too much.

Proverbs 10:19 says, "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise." That verse is a tough one for a preacher, because I make my living talking. Proverbs 13:3 says, "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin." Proverbs 17:27 says, "A man of knowledge uses words with restraint." Proverbs 17:28 says, "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue." That means that you don't have to have an opinion on everything. You don't have to comment on everything that goes by you in life. You don't have to answer every question. How blessed we would all be if we would learn to listen more and to speak less.

How Shall We Tame The Tongue?

Admit you have a problem.

You will never be healed until you admit there is something wrong. This is an area with which I have struggled for a number of years because I am paid to talk, because I am good at talking, because I can talk myself into and out of almost anything. My tongue has gotten me into trouble a lot of times through flippant comments or sharp put-downs or foolish comments about people's motives. In preaching this sermon I am really preaching to myself.

Memorize James 1:9.

This is the best single verse on the tongue in all the Bible. It says, "Let every person be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." You wouldn't have too many interpersonal problems anywhere if you just put that verse into practice.

Ask a friend to hold you accountable.

That means going to a friend and saying, "Listen, I have a problem with this. If you ever hear me saying something that sounds like something that I as a Christian shouldn't say, don't let it pass. Be enough of a brother to come to me and say, 'Either I didn't understand that, or I understand it and you shouldn't have said it.' " Sometimes you need a friend who loves you enough to tell you to take a time out, to not say anything else, because it's bad enough already.

Yield your tongue to God.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever said, "Lord, my tongue now belongs to you?" That's where Romans 6 comes in, talking about yielding the members of your body to God. Have you ever told the Lord, "I have been using my tongue for myself. I am now going to use it for you. Here are my lips, let me speak for you. Here is my mouth, let my mouth speak the words that you want." Proverbs 16:1 says, "To a man belongs the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue." That verse means the tongue can be put under the Lord's control. That's a great thought. Your tongue, which today may be set on fire of hell may become a tongue under God's control. He can give you new lips. He can give you a new tongue. He can put new words in your mouth. He can baptize your speech. Shall we not yield our tongue to him? Shall we not give him our lips? Shall we not give him our speech? Shall we not say, "Oh, Heavenly Father, here is my tongue, let it speak only for you? Let my words lift up and not tear down."

Hymn 568 says, Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. The third verse has that wonderful phrase which goes this way: Take my lips and let them be filled with messages for thee.

Oh God, help us today and this week to yield our lips to you and so may they be filled with messages for thee. Amen.

Proverbs 18:22 MARRIAGE A Gift from God

He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord. Proverbs 18:22

An old preacher used to introduce his marriage ceremony with these words: "John, matrimony is a blessing to few, a curse to many, and an uncertainty to us all. John, will you venture?"

It is natural to want to venture. The impulse to spend to your life with another person is put in the human heart by God Himself. It is part of His original plan for the human race. Mankind did not begin as a unit, but as a united pair. We were born in wedlock.

It is no exaggeration to say that we were made for marriage. When all is said and done, and when the final count is taken, most people will be married at some time or another. Not that marriage is better than singleness. It all depends on the two people who are married and the one person who is single. Many people can best fulfill God's will for their lives by remaining single forever (1 Corinthians 7:7-8). Others may choose to marry later in life. But that should not obscure the main point: Marriage is one of God's best gifts to the human race because it establishes a relationship that is more intimate than any other human experience. You become "one flesh," which contains the idea of being glued together face-to-face. In marriage two separate people become truly one. They think as one, they act as one, they speak as one. Two people uniquely created by God-but in the act of marriage they become one flesh, proving that in God's arithmetic, one plus one still equals one.

That leads to an important truth found in Ephesians 5:22-33: A marriage between two Christians is meant by God to point to the relationship between Christ and the church. The one leads to the other. The husband points to Christ and the wife points to the church. He provides an example of loving sacrifice and she provides an example of gracious submission. He leads, she follows. He loves, she responds. In a sense, marriage is a God-ordained mirror in which we can view eternity.

We are like actors on a stage, with the whole world watching. Our marriage is our starring role. When a husband plays his part well, when a wife plays her part well, the audience sees something deeper; they see Christ and the church. That's the way God set it up, which is why a Christian marriage either draws people to Christ or drives them further away.

I've got news for you. You are a missionary to that office-and your marriage is your message. You don't have to preach a sermon. Your lifetime commitment to your husband or wife is a visible sermon that people see every day.

How can you show God's love to others? Let them see it in your marriage. It's more effective than a hundred tracts or two hundred Scripture verses. People may doubt the things you say, but they cannot deny the reality of a truly Christian marriage.

Lord God, may my marriage be a window in time through which others may catch a glimpse of eternity. Amen.

What kind of marriage did your parents have? If you are married, how is your relationship similar and how is it different? If you are single, would you want your marriage to be like the one your parents had?

If you are married, take a moment to pray for your mate right now.

PROVERBS 19

Proverbs 19:3 COMPLAINING Don't Blame God for Your Problems

A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord. Proverbs 19:3

Here is a common problem. When things go bad for us, we start to blame God as if He were the source of all our problems. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden, we say, "It was the woman you gave me," forgetting all along that no one made us eat the fruit.

Complaining is counterproductive in many ways. First, it may turn us against God and block the flow of His blessing into our lives. Second, it may cause us to blame others instead of looking within for the source of our problems. Third, it may cause us to miss the lessons God is trying to teach us through the difficulties we encounter.

Hard times provide some of the most important lessons of spiritual growth. Several years ago a friend shared a statement that revolutionized my thinking in this area. It is deceptively simple: "When hard times come, be a student, not a victim." The more I ponder those words, the more profound they seem. Many people go through life as professional victims, always talking about how unfair life is.

A victim says, "Why did this happen to me?" A student says, "What can I learn from this?"

A victim blames others for his problems. A student asks, "How much of this did I bring on myself?"

A victim looks at everyone else and cries out, "Life isn't fair." A student looks at life and says, "What happened to me could have happened to anybody."

A victim believes hard times have come because God is trying to punish him. A student understands that God allows hard times in order to help him grow.

A victim would rather complain than find a solution. A student has no time to complain because he is busy making the best of his situation.

A victim believes the deck of life is forever stacked against him. A student believes that God is able to reshuffle the deck anytime He wants to.

A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself.

A victim begs God to remove all the problems of life so that he might be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true happiness.

Victims worry about what other people think of them. Students know that the only thing that matters is what God thinks of them.

Victims limp through life, complaining about their heavy burdens. Students race toward the finish line, looking to their reward.

Many things happen to us beyond our control. In that sense, we are all victims of unexpected circumstances. Unfortunately, some people never rise above the victim mode. But it doesn't have to be that way. We have the opportunity to choose the way we respond to the things that happen to us. By the grace of God, we can decide to become students, not victims, as we face the trials of life.

O Lord, help me to be a student and not a victim today. Amen.

Are you a complainer? What would your friends say? In what areas of life are you most tempted to be a victim? What can you do to become a student instead?

Proverbs 19:11 TOLERANCE A Misunderstood Virtue

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11

The dictionary defines tolerance as "respecting the nature, beliefs, or behavior of others." To tolerate someone means to respect his opinion without necessarily agreeing with him. In that sense, tolerance is a noble virtue, for it allows us to live amicably with people who may be quite different from us. Indeed, without tolerance no society (or community or church or family, for that matter) could long endure.

Tolerance in the classical sense requires that we hold our convictions firmly while at the same time respecting those who may disagree. Sometimes tolerance will mean enduring foolish comments and overlooking offensive behavior by others.

But there is another, darker definition of tolerance emerging. Josh McDowell argues that toleration has replaced justice as the primary American virtue. Tolerance today means that every view of truth and morality is equal to every other view. This view of toleration differs from the classic view in that it says that there is no such thing as absolute truth. If you dare to tell someone else that what he is doing is wrong, you are going to be branded an intolerant bigot. In this view, everything is right and nothing is wrong. Some educators now argue that the public schools must teach students to be intolerant of intolerance. And who is the most intolerant of all in the eyes of the world? Christians are, because we believe in a Creator who established absolute standards of right and wrong. It may well be that in just a few years we will see a major cultural shift in which anyone who dares to speak out for God or against evil will risk being ostracized and publicly humiliated.

If that is true, then we will face some tough decisions in the days ahead. Satan's strategy has always been to stir up opposition to the church so that we will be intimidated into silence and compromise. It was true in the first century and it is still true today.

You may face opposition at work or from a critical colleague or from a classmate, a friend, a teacher, a neighbor, a relative, or even from your children or your spouse. Satan's primary strategy against the church is to discourage us by stirring up opposition so that we will stop spreading the Gospel.

In the years following World War II, the Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood observed that America had become a "cut-flower" society where the bloom of Christian values had been cut off from its roots in the truth of God's Word. So much that passes for accepted truth is "accepted" simply because enough people have naively "accepted" it. But we as Christians do not determine our view of the world by reading the latest Gallup poll or by silently acquiescing to the views the majority currently happens to hold. As a matter of fact, the majority has usually been wrong throughout history, especially on matters of morality and spiritual truth.

Stand up for what you believe. Don't be intimidated by those who disagree, but don't be disagreeable either. Speak the truth, do it in love, and be patient with those who don't see things the way you do.

Lord Jesus, may I have Your perfect balance of grace and truth today. Amen.

What signs do you see of the "new" tolerance today? When does tolerance become compromise?

Where do you need to show more tolerance right now? Where do you need to stand up for what you believe?

Proverbs 19:11 FORGIVENESS Letting Go of the Past

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11

Many Christians struggle with issues of anger and bitterness because of things that have happened to them in the past. How do we find freedom from those angry feelings? May I remind you of two truths? First, you are to forgive because God has already forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Second, you are to forgive because you promised God you would forgive. Every time you pray the Lord's Prayer you are promising to forgive. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

As long as you hold a grudge, you are chained to the past. As long as you are angry about the way you have been treated, you are still living in the past.

Recently a friend made a statement that stuck in my mind. Out of the blue, she said, "I have decided to forgive him." No conditions, just a simple declaration of intent. That strikes me as an entirely Christian thing to do. We choose to forgive even when some part of us would rather hold a grudge.

The most important truth to know is that forgiveness is an act of the heart. You forgive by a conscious choice of your will. For those who have been deeply hurt, forgiveness means consciously choosing not to dwell in the past, not to constantly repeat the sordid story of what was done to you. It means actively deciding you will move forward by faith, letting go of the bitter feelings one by one.

This isn't easy, and it won't happen overnight, and you will probably need the help of some good friends who can help you talk through your feelings and hold you accountable to move forward and not backward. But it can be done.

In one of her books, Corrie ten Boom tells of some Christian friends who wronged her in a public and malicious way. For many days, she was bitter and angry until she forgave them. But in the night she would wake up thinking about what they had done and she would get angry all over again. It seemed the memory would not go away.

Help came from her Lutheran pastor to whom she confessed her frustration after two sleepless weeks. He told her, "Corrie, up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. When the sexton pulls the rope, the bells peal out-ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong. But if he doesn't keep pulling on the rope, the sound slowly fades away. Forgiveness is like that. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They are just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

So it's not surprising if, after forgiveness, the memories keep coming back for a while. If you refuse to dwell on them, slowly they will fade away. Why? When you forgive, you let go of the rope and the force is gone out of your anger.

Lord Jesus, You showed us how to forgive those who hurt us. Help me to do that, I pray. Amen.

What are the major forgiveness issues in your life right now? What needs to happen in each case so you can "let go of the rope"?

Do you have a friend with whom you can talk over these forgiveness issues?

Proverbs 19:21 FLEXIBILITY Shifting Gears Without Changing Direction

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. Proverbs 19:21

Flexibility is the ability to adjust to a changing situation. Some people are naturally better at this than others, but all of us need some degree of flexibility, for we live in world of change.

My wife happened to hear a fascinating comment on the radio while we were cutting across the edge of Georgia on our way from Tallahassee, Florida, to Dothan, Alabama. She scribbled it down so I could look at it later. "The key to success in life is how well you adapt to Plan B."

There is a world of truth in that simple sentence. So many of us go through life frustrated because we're still working on Plan A. That's the one where everything works out, where your marriage lasts forever, where your children grow up without any problems, where you climb to the top of the career ladder, where everyone loves you and no one hates you, where all your dreams come true and you live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, Plan A never pans out. Life isn't that simple or that easy. Meanwhile, the people who are frustrated by the failure of Plan A are overtaken by the folks who have decided to make Plan B work instead.

What's Plan B? It's the reality that your divorce is final and your marriage is over. It's the reality that your first career choice was a mistake and now it's time to start over. It's the reality that you don't have the money to buy the bigger house you want. It's the truth that you have cancer and your future is uncertain. It's the understanding that some people who seemed to be close friends aren't going to be there for you when you really need them. It's the reality that you lost the election even though you were clearly the better candidate.

Born in poverty and educated at home, he failed in his first business venture, ran for office the next year and was defeated, failed in yet another business, had a nervous breakdown, and was defeated in five more elections. But he never gave up, and in 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president.

Plan A not working out for you? Don't despair. Plan A never works out. Your success in life is largely determined by how well you adapt to Plan B.

Here are two suggestions for those who feel a bit overwhelmed by circumstances: First, embrace change as a natural part of life. Solomon says as much when he writes, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven" (Ecclesiastes

3:1). If you live long enough, you'll eventually see it all—birth and death, war and peace, building up and tearing down, winning and losing, loving and hating. Nothing stays the same. You can fight change, but you can't stop it.

Second, embrace the only Person who never changes. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Leaders come and go; children are born, grow up, and die. But Jesus Christ never changes! He remains the same. He is the one constant in an ever-changing world. Anchor your life in Him and you can face the future without fear.

Lord Jesus, You are the still point in our turning world. Help us to find our security in You alone. Amen.

What was the Plan A of your life? How well are you doing on Plan B?

How well do you embrace change? How can a person who loves order and regularity learn to grow more flexible?

Proverbs 19:23 SATISFACTION Living Above Your Circumstances

The fear of the Lord leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble. Proverbs 19:23

To fear the Lord means living in the light of His presence. Those who truly fear God respect Him and live by His principles. They never forget that He is watching everything they do and weighing all their words and deeds. While that might seem oppressive to some, Solomon tells us that this is the only way to real life. When you respect the Lord, you are content no matter what happens to you. Though circumstances may overwhelm you, the center of life is "untouched by trouble."

Not long ago I received a letter from a friend in Florida who wrote to tell me about an unexpected change of plans in his life. Suddenly his future was not as certain as he thought it was. To make things worse, the change of plans was not definite. Things might change or they might not. But he wouldn't know for a few months, so he couldn't do anything other than wait. That's a frustrating position to be in.

I found his response invigorating. His letter described his dilemma and then included this sentence: "I guess I'll have to be happy no matter what happens, so I will."

It's that last phrase that grips the mind: "So I will." When I read those words, I stopped and said to myself, What a great way of looking at life. So many of us get grumpy when our plans are waylaid by unexpected circumstances. I know people who lose their religion if they hit a traffic jam or don't have enough change to buy a newspaper. How easy for all of us to let circumstances dictate our moods. When things are going great, we feel great. When life is tough, we're grouchy and mean-spirited.

I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said, "Most people are as happy as they want to be." Happiness is a choice. Each day when we roll out of bed we're faced with a profound choice: Will we face this day with optimism, courage, and a positive spirit, or will we give up and start complaining because someone forgot to put the cap on the toothpaste? Think about it. How many days are ruined before they begin because we have chosen (yes, chosen) to focus on the irritations of life?

In using such trivial events I don't mean to downplay the truly great problems of life—sickness, the loss of a job, a wrecked car, an angry boss, impending surgery, and so on. But most of us face those things infrequently. Traffic jams are a daily reality for most of us. The same with mislaid scissors, handprints on the wall, overdue bills, and discovering at 6 A.M. that you've run out of milk and Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch. These are the true tests of character.

I think my friend is on to something. "I guess I'll have to be happy no matter what happens, so I will." This is a step beyond *que sera, sera*, because the secret of happiness is not simply accepting what happens, but choosing to be happy in the midst of the unplanned surprises of life.

You have a choice to make. If you fear the Lord, you can be content no matter what happens.

Ruler of my life, help me to choose happiness today. Amen.

How can one be "untouched" by trouble even in the midst of overwhelming difficulty?

Did you "choose happiness" today? If so, how has the day gone? If not, what does that say about your relationship with God?

Do you fear God enough to be happy?

Proverbs 19:24 SLOTH An Underestimated Sin

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth! Proverbs 19:24

Here is a picture both sad and silly: A grown man so lazy he won't even lift his food to his mouth. He just bends over and buries his face in the mashed potatoes. With the means of nourishment right in front of him, the sluggard is too sleepy to eat.

Solomon offers many other warnings in Proverbs about the sluggard. He won't take advantage of his opportunities: "A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing" (20:4). He loves his bed: "Do not love sleep or you will grow poor; stay awake and you will have food to spare" (20:13). He refuses to work even though he is filled with unsatisfied desire: "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing" (21:25-26). He makes silly excuses: "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside!' or 'I will be murdered in the streets!'" (22:13). He can't finish a job: "The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions" (12:27). In his conceit he believes he is wiser than those fellows who work hard: "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly" (26:16). As a consequence, he never accomplishes anything: "The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway" (15:19). And he is an enormous annoyance to anyone who hires him: "As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him" (10:26). The poorhouse is his final destination: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest-and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (24:33-34).

Sloth comes in many forms, but perhaps most commonly in the unfinished projects of life. We get a job and can't keep it. We start a book and don't finish it. We begin a job around the house but don't complete it. We start a list but don't finish it. We switch from this to that. We play here awhile, there awhile, and then somewhere else awhile. Always changing, always restless, never able to see anything through to the end. We do the minimum required and barely slide by.

Here is the application. What do you need to do this week that is undone in your life? It will take you less than three seconds to answer that question. Now that you know what it is, name it. Plan it. Schedule it. Do it. This week. Don't put it off. Stop making excuses.

It is not for nothing that sloth was counted as one of the seven deadly sins. You want to rest? You will have time later. Go out to the cemetery. There is not much work out there. Until then, get busy doing what needs to be done.

Lord Jesus, help me to do what needs to be done today and to do it with gusto. Amen.

What do you need to do this week that is undone in your life? What do you plan to do about it?

How many unfinished things are there in your life right now?

PROVERBS 20

Proverbs 20:1 SOBRIETY Knowing When to Say No

Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise. Proverbs 20:1

There are a great many references to wine, strong drink, and drunkenness scattered throughout the Bible. The earliest reference is in Genesis; the last, in Revelation. The total number of verses would run up into the hundreds. However, there is not a binding rule, i.e., "Thou shalt not drink." In one place, the Bible says, "Do not get drunk on wine" (Ephesians 5:18). In another place, the Bible speaks of "wine that gladdens the heart of man" (Psalm 104:15). In one place, Paul says that no drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10). In another place, he advises Timothy to "use a little wine because of your stomach" (1 Timothy 5:23).

Because there is no universal rule, each believer must make his own decision guided by the larger teachings of Scripture, his own situation, the counsel of others, and common sense.

However, to put the matter that way does not exactly settle the issue, does it? A quick check of the concordance under the word wine shows that many of the references warn the reader of the negative effects of alcohol. Consider the following examples:

Proverbs 20:1: "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler."

Isaiah 24:9: "The beer is bitter to its drinkers."

First Corinthians 6:10: "[No] drunkards . . . will inherit the kingdom of God."

Ephesians 5:18: "Do not get drunk on wine."

Galatians 5:19-21: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: . . . drunkenness."

First Peter 4:3: "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry."

The Bible warns us repeatedly of the dangers of alcohol. Let's look at one other passage: Proverbs 23:29-35.

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. "They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it. When will I wake up so I can find another drink?"

What is the Bible telling us? That we cannot drink? No. That it's a sin to take a drink? No, not necessarily. It's telling us there's danger ahead. Think twice before you take the first drink.

Suppose you are traveling through the mountains and come to a fork in the road. One fork says "Safe for all travelers." The other is labeled "Dangerous road." Watch out for falling rocks. Soft shoulders. Landslides possible. Sharp curves, no guard rails. Travel at your own risk." Both roads are open, both offer scenic views, and you see cars going both ways. Which way are you going to go? I suppose it depends on how ready you are to risk your own life. Either way, you've got a choice to make.

Lord, give me wisdom in my personal decisions, knowing that others are influenced by the choices I make. Amen.

What is your own personal practice regarding the use of alcohol? Are you comfortable with the decisions you have made?

Is there any history of alcohol abuse in your family or among your close friends? How does that impact your own decisions regarding alcohol?

Proverbs 20:22 WAITING Give God Time to Work

Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you. Proverbs 20:22

One commentator notes that this verse is the answer to selfish haste. Often when we are mistreated we rush to get even with our tormentors, sometimes at the expense of our own reputation. But in our haste to balance the scales, we forget the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Over and over Scripture exhorts us to "wait for the Lord." To us, waiting is nothing more than passive resignation, giving into our circumstances, throwing up our hands in despair and walking off the playing field. We don't "wait" for the Lord because we think that "waiting" means giving up.

But that only shows how little we understand either the Bible or the Lord. From a biblical perspective, waiting isn't passive; it's the most proactive thing we can do. To "wait" on the Lord means to get out of the way so that He can act. I would define waiting on the Lord this way: It is being so confident in God that you refuse to take matters into your own hands. When Jesus stood before His accusers, "He never said a mumblin' word." "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). If you think it's easy to keep silent in the face of false accusations, it's only because you haven't tried it lately.

Nothing in life seems as hard to take as waiting. Maybe for a phone call or for a word from the doctor. Maybe for a job or for a letter you expected last week. Maybe for the fever to break or for someone you love to come home again.

People who spend time in the hospital understand this concept because hospital days don't last twenty-four hours; they last seventy-two hours. You look at the clock, thinking it has been five minutes and it has only been thirty seconds. Twenty minutes later it has only been three more minutes. This gives you plenty of time to think.

Perhaps an illustration will help. A few years ago a well-known football coach, upon being fired, commented that "Scripture says,

"This too shall pass." He was partly right and partly wrong. Scripture nowhere says, "This too shall pass." The phrase comes from an old tale about an Oriental monarch who asked his wise men to come up with a sentence that would suit every occasion, good or bad. Abraham Lincoln once repeated the story and then added this comment concerning "This too shall pass": "How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!"

If "this too shall pass" doesn't come from the Bible, the thought is entirely biblical. The good times and the bad times, the joys and the sorrows, the Super Bowl victories and the untimely firings-these will all eventually pass away.

Take heart while you wait on the Lord. Though for the present you are sorely mistreated, this too shall pass. In the meantime, let God be God and give Him room to work.

Lord, when I am tempted to interfere, please remind me that You don't need any help from me. Amen.

What are you waiting for right now? In what areas of life are you tempted to "help God out"?

Why is the phrase "This too shall pass" both chastening and consoling?

Proverbs 20:27 CONSCIENCE It Can Be the Voice of God

The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being. Proverbs 20:27

What is meant by "the lamp of the Lord"? There are two answers. First, it refers to human conscience, which "searches out" a man's motive, helping discern between good and evil. God has placed the light of conscience inside every heart. Romans 2:15 explains that the conscience, informed by the innate laws of God, sometimes accuses a person and sometimes excuses him. That means God has written on the heart of every man a basic moral code. That code is similar to the things contained in the Ten Commandments. This universal moral code consists of things like "Do not steal," "Do not cheat," "Tell the truth," "Honor your parents," "Keep your word," "Help the poor," "Do not kill," and so on. It would be hard to find a culture anywhere in the world where those moral values are not honored. God gives us a conscience so that we will live up to the moral values common to all mankind.

There is an ancient tale about a court magician who wanted to give his king a very special gift. After much work, he designed a magic ring which had a very special property. Every time the king had an evil thought or an unworthy ambition, the ring began to shrink tightly around his finger, thus warning him of impending danger.

The human conscience is like that. It is a ring around the heart that tightens every time we begin to violate our own standards. It warns of impending danger. We disregard our conscience at our own peril.

From the New Testament perspective, the "lamp of the Lord" also refers to the Holy Spirit, who, like a bright lamp, goes from one "room" of the heart to another, searching out those things that even conscience cannot discover. After all, a man may have a "seared conscience" and be a moral sociopath, totally unable to know right from wrong. Conscience is a good guide, but it is not infallible. The Holy Spirit sees and knows every thought and intent of the heart (see Hebrews 4:13). Nothing is hidden from Him. Like a blazing light, the Spirit of God exposes everything, sees everything, and drags the deepest secrets out of the closet and exposes them to the light of God. Proverbs 5:21 speaks of the same truth: "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths." To that we might add Proverbs 15:3: "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good."

This truth is both comforting and terrifying. To those who have nothing to hide, the lamp of the Lord holds no fear; but to those who have many "hidden things," the lamp of the Lord brings them all to the light sooner or later.

How should we then live? First, we should pay attention to our conscience, for it can keep us out of trouble. Second, since the Holy Spirit constantly searches our inmost being, let us live openly and honestly, hiding nothing. Then we will have nothing to fear.

Holy Spirit, search me, cleanse me, move within me until nothing is hidden and all things are laid bare before You. Amen.

How is the human conscience "the voice of God" to the soul? How does a conscience become "seared"?

Under what circumstances should we disregard our own conscience?

How can you become more responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit in your own life?

Proverbs 21:2 MOTIVES It's the Thought That Counts

All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart. Proverbs 21:2

The man's case was very simple. That he had been cheated out of his job was clear enough. That he had also lost his temper once or twice was also very clear. His boss had it in for him and was probably looking for a way to get rid of him. Eventually he found it. It wasn't fair, but that's the way the cookie crumbles.

As he told me his story, I could sense his anger, his outrage, his frustration. The trouble didn't end when he lost his job. Now the company was fighting his unemployment claim. What about your union? He shrugged his shoulders and said they were doing what they could.

The real pain was not from the loss of a job, as terrible as that was. The real pain came from the anger eating away at his soul. The acid of resentment bubbled away like hot lava inside a volcano. "Pastor, the reason I came to see you was because I hate living like this. For the first time in my life I feel prejudice toward people whose skin doesn't happen to be white like mine. That's what's killing me. I can't stand it anymore."

When the woman told her side of the story, I could feel the deep emotion in her words. "I'm not going to play the game any longer. For years people looked at me and said, 'Everything is all right. She's got the perfect life.' But it's not all right. It's hasn't been right for years."

Now at last, after suffering in silence for too long, she has decided to get better. That's a risky step because some of her friends won't understand her decision. Sometimes people feel better if you just "grin and bear it" and pretend that life is rosy. That way no one has to worry about messy things like coming to grips with your past. Nice people play the game, even if things aren't really so nice behind closed doors.

My friend said something that stuck in my mind. "Do you remember the story of Saul on the road to Damascus? It hit me just like that. I can't explain it other than to say that in one blinding moment of truth I saw myself. Since that moment everything has changed. There's so much pain now that I feel overwhelmed. But I know that going through pain is the only way to grow."

She's right. Real growth only comes through pain. My friend who lost his job is learning that truth. So is my friend who decided not to play the game anymore.

Do you want to get better? You can, but you've got to go through pain to get there. To paraphrase the words of Jesus, the truth will set you free, but it will hurt you first. Or, to paraphrase Solomon, you may think you're OK the way you are, but that's not what matters. God starts with the heart and works from there. He searches and sifts and weighs your motives. Nothing escapes His piercing glance. This is frightening at first, but then the healing begins.

Search me, O God, and try my heart. See if there be any wicked way in me. Let the truth come out, even if it hurts. Amen.

How would you feel if the thoughts of your heart were revealed for everyone to see? What part of your heart would you like the Lord to search, sift, and heal right now?

Proverbs 21:21 RIGHTEOUSNESS If You Want It, You Can Have It

He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor. Proverbs 21:21

Whatever you seek in life, you tend to find. It may be sexual pleasure or financial gain or personal happiness. Or it may be something higher and better. In this case Solomon tells us that if we want life, prosperity, and honor (and who doesn't?), we can have it. But you don't receive those things by seeking after them. Seek righteousness! And everything else you desire will be added to you. If that reminds you of Matthew 6:33, it should. This is the Old Testament version of that famous verse.

The tragedy of our time is that so many people are wasting their lives chasing after three things that can never satisfy—money, sex, and power. We want money, so we sacrifice our families to get it. We want sex, so we sacrifice our morals to get it. We want power, so we sacrifice our friends to get it.

If you want righteousness, you can have it. Let me go out on a limb and make a bold statement. Whatever you want in the spiritual realm, you can have if you want it badly enough.

If you want it, you can have a close walk with God.

If you want it, you can have a better marriage.

If you want to, you can do God's will.

If you want to, you can grow spiritually.

If you want to, you can become a man of God or a woman of God.

If you want to, you can change deeply ingrained habits.

If you want to, you can break destructive patterns of behavior.

There is a "God-shaped vacuum" inside every human heart. Since nature abhors a vacuum, if we don't fill it with God, we will fill it with something else. So many of us have filled our hearts with the junk food of the world. No wonder we are so unhappy. No wonder we jump from one job to another and from one relationship to another.

We're like little children who won't let go of the marble in order to receive a diamond. "No, I won't give up my weekend affair for eternal joy." "Trade a broken marriage and a failed career for peace and forgiveness? Forget it!" "Give up my drug addiction and be forgiven for all my sins? No way, man." "You say I can replace my anger and bitterness with peace and contentment? I can't take the chance. Sorry."

No wonder we stay the way we are. We're trapped in the pit of a thousand excuses. We'd rather have misery and pain than risk it all on Jesus.

Sixteen hundred years ago Saint Augustine explained both the problem and the solution: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." You will never be happy until you put God first in your life. And you can never do that until you surrender your life to Jesus Christ once and for all.

In the kingdom of God everything begins with a seeking heart!

O God, I hunger and thirst to know You better. May I be less pleased with what I am than I may become all You want me to be. Amen.

Are you pursuing righteousness with all your heart? If the answer is no, what are you pursuing instead of righteousness?

Are you ready to risk it all on Jesus?

Proverbs 21:31 Preparation: Where Victory Begins

October 2002 – PREPARATION: WHERE VICTORY BEGINS by Ray Pritchard "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord." (Proverbs 21:31)

When the Bible Bus passed through Proverbs 21 earlier this week, a long-forgotten melody rolled through my mind. Over 20 years ago, when Joshua was only two or three years old, and we lived in a church parsonage on Halcourt Avenue in Norwalk, California, I carried him on my shoulders and sang Scripture verses to him. I made up the songs as we walked along and eventually he would join in with me. We learned quite a few verses that way, including Proverbs 21:31. In fact, the memory is so strong that the tune won't stop bouncing around in my head as I am typing these words. This particular proverb contains a finely-balanced blend of human initiative and divine sovereignty. Three thousand years ago every soldier knew what Solomon meant when he said, "The horse is made ready for the day of battle." What does that entail? You have to round up the horses, feed them, check the bit and the bridle of each horse, find the right match of horse and rider, prepare the food the horses will need on the journey, make sure you have enough handlers so the soldiers don't have to worry about anything but fighting, and you have to weed out the horses that are sick and lame. A few months ago I heard some military experts discussing the first stages of the war in Afghanistan. They made the point that when it comes to warfare, amateurs talk strategy, professional soldiers talk logistics. The Duke of Wellington said the victory over Napoleon was won on the playing fields of Eton. Most battles are won "behind the lines" in the planning and preparation that leads up to the clash of arms. Football coaches like to say that you "play like you practice," and more often than not, it proves to be true. This means there is no substitute for preparation whether you are playing the piano, taking Advanced Geometry, or leading a company. Someone has to put in the long, hard hours of grunt work in any human endeavor if success is to be achieved. Victory never just "happens." Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. But that's not the whole story. The last half of the

verse reminds us that victory comes only from the Lord. There is no conflict here. When facing any big challenge in life, we must do our part. We must plan the big picture, sweat the details, and burn the midnight oil. And we must pray fervently, calling on the Lord for his help, knowing that human effort apart from divine blessing leads to failure. So get those horses ready for battle. But while you're at it, remember that victory still comes from the Lord.

The Tongue: Life and Death Are In Your Mouth! – Proverbs 18:20-21

Proverbs has a lot to say about what we say. In fact, the subject of the tongue and how we use our words is perhaps the preeminent theme of this book. Over 150 times in this book alone, Proverbs refers to our lips, our mouth and our tongue. One of the central issues of the Book of Proverbs is how you use your tongue. I think all of us remember reading in the book of James where it says "Though the tongue is small, it is set on fire of hell. With the same tongue we bless the Lord and curse our friends."

Words are important. After all, God created the universe with words. He spoke and it was so. Our Lord Jesus was called THE WORD. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Two reasons why words are important:

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#1. Because of the sheer quantity of words we use.

Do you have any idea how many words you use in the course of an ordinary day? To illustrate, let's take the books of Tom Clancy. I'm sure you have read or heard of those techno-thrillers: "Hunt for Red October," "Cardinal of the Kremlin," "Clear and Present Danger," "The Sum of All Fears," "Without Remorse." His works are always very thick, about 500-700 pages. You could use it for a door stop or throw it at somebody you disagreed with. There are 1/2 million to 3/4 million words in an average Tom Clancy novel. How long would it take you to say as many words as he writes in one of his books? According to researchers, each person here will open his mouth an average of 700 times in a day. In those 700 times, you will use an average of 18,000 words. Those 18,000 words would translate to about 54 printed pages. That means that in one year, an average person would fill 66 books of 800 pages each. Every year you write with your words 66 volumes that are larger than those Tom Clancy novels. No wonder Jesus said, "By your words you will be condemned and by your words you will be justified." Is it any wonder that the fastest growing segment of radio today is talk radio? The sheer quantity of the words we use is amazing.

#2. Because of the amazing power of words.

Think of what a few words put together can convey. "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you," were the first words spoken over the telephone. "What hath God wrought?" were the first words sent by Morse code over the telegraph wire. "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," were the words spoken by Neil Armstrong 25 years ago. "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask instead what you can do for your country," spoken by John F. Kennedy at his inauguration. If you have cable TV, maybe you have been watching C-SPAN and seen the Lincoln-Douglas debates that are being reenacted all over the state of Illinois. I was watching one yesterday and it brought to mind the words of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, probably the most famous words ever spoken by any American President. "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the principle that all men are created equal." Your words are important, because with your words you either say something worthwhile or something that is not worth anything at all.

These are the words of Proverbs 18:20-21, "From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit." Underline the phrase "the tongue has the power of life and death." Whether you know it or not, there is the power of life and there is the power of death within you. Everything you have said this week has either been life-giving or death-dealing, and there is nothing in between. The tongue has the power to kill, to destroy, to hurt, to maim and to assassinate.

Right Uses of the Tongue

1. The tongue may be used for wise counsel and sound advice.

Proverbs 10:31 says, "The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom." Proverbs 15:7 says, "The lips of the wise spread knowledge." What comes out of a righteous man? Wisdom. What comes out of a wise man? Knowledge. These two things ought to be coming out of your mouth all the time.

I have a few friends in my life who are like that. Every time they speak, they speak wisdom and knowledge. Some of them are people I have known for 20 or 30 years. Some of them are people I don't talk to very often. Some of them are people I may not talk to except once every ten years. But because they are people of wisdom and knowledge, I know that if I have not talked to them for ten years, I can go back to them and say, "What do you think about this?" And even though he hasn't seen or heard from me for ten years, because his lips speak wisdom and knowledge, he can say, "I don't think you should do this; I don't think you should do that; Ray, have you thought about this?" Invariably when I talk to people like that, my life is enriched because the lips of the righteous bring forth wisdom and knowledge. Blessed are you if you have a few people in your life who can speak wisdom and knowledge to you. And blessed are you doubly if you have the ability to speak wisdom and knowledge to other people.

2. The tongue can speak rebuke and reproof.

Proverbs 17:10 says, "A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool." If you find a man of understanding and you rebuke him, he will be impressed by your rebuke more than if you find a fool and beat him with a lash 100 times. That is because a wise man, a man of discernment, is a man you can come to and say, "My friend, I think you're on the wrong path. My friend, I'm not sure about what you're doing. Before you do that, stop and think. Let's talk for a bit." Blessed is the man who has a friend who is willing to come and give you advice like that.

Proverbs 27:6 says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted." At this point I like the King James version better. It says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Better to have a friend tell you the hard truth than have somebody try to butter you up and cover up the hard thing you need to hear.

Whenever I think of this I always think of my dear friend from Texas, Randy Miller. Randy was in the church I pastored in Texas. One year he served as the Chairman of our Elder Board. One of the things I learned about Randy was he always had a certain method of doing things. He was very orderly, not given to flamboyance, very much an administrator, doing things the right way.

He would come to me about once every other week and would always have one of those spiral hand notebooks. He'd sit down and say, "Pastor, I want to talk to you." He'd go over all of his points with me, and then most of the time he would finish it and then turn the page. The second page would always be about me. He would say, "Pastor, this is hard for me to say, but when you said that last week in the sermon, you didn't mean it this way, but this is how some people took it." Or, "Pastor, when you didn't take time to talk to those folks, they were really hurt." Or, "Pastor, I know you think we ought to do this, but I'm not sure it's the right idea." Or sometimes, "You said this and you shouldn't have and you need to do something about it." I discovered this: he was always right, 100% of the time. He was a friend who loved me enough to tell me when I was making a mistake. You want to know how I feel about Randy Miller today? I haven't seen him in five years and three months now, but I love him like I love my own brother. I consider him one of my best friends. He's welcome in my home anytime.

3. The tongue may be used for encouragement.

Proverbs 12:25 says, "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up." Proverbs 15:4 says, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life." Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" Proverbs 16:24 says, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." I bet when you read that you think it is just metaphorical. Any medical doctor or nurse will tell you that's not metaphorical at all. If you talk to people who work in the healing profession, they will tell you that whenever there is a patient who is surrounded by positive, optimistic, caring people who build him up and affirm him, that person has a much better chance of getting better and will normally recover a lot faster. When you have a patient who is off by himself and has no encouragement, or who is surrounded by negative, critical, pessimistic people, that person will have a much harder time getting better under normal circumstances. Why? Because pleasant words literally bring health to the bones. How blessed are you if you have somebody who comes alongside and uses words to lift you up. Doubly blessed are you if you are an encourager.

How many of your words this last week were words of encouragement? How many of your words were words to build up? How many times in the last week did you find it necessary to criticize, to tear down and destroy? My friend Dr. Howe in seminary used to say, "Gentlemen, it takes no size to criticize." Anybody can sit in the critic's corner and just tear something down. Are you the kind of person that other people are glad to see coming into the room, or are you the kind of person that causes other people to turn their face away? One reason may be that they see you as a negative, discouraged, critical person. Everybody has troubles and problems. Nobody gets a free ride from earth to heaven. How blessed you are if you use your tongue to lift up and encourage the people

around you.

4. The tongue may be used for witnessing to others.

Proverbs 10:21 says, "The lips of the righteous nourish many." That means that you can use your lips to help bring people to God. You can use your lips to give spiritual nourishment to other people. Proverbs 11:30 says, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise." That means that somebody, somewhere, opened their mouth and gave you the gospel. You are a Christian because somebody shared the gospel with you, spoke on the radio, from a pulpit, or because somebody close to you spoke the words of life to you. What have you been doing to become a tree of life where you work, at your school, to your friends, to your neighbors, to your loved ones? By your lips you should give such good fruit that people come and want what you have.

Wrong Uses of the Tongue

1. The tongue may be used for flattery.

Proverbs 20:17 says, "Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel." That is a picturesque verse. If you get ahead in life by buttering other people up, by telling people what you think they want to hear, what you end up is chewing on rocks. Proverbs 26:28 says, "A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin." Proverbs 28:23 says, "He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue." That means that I love Randy Miller. Isn't it funny that after five years, when I prepared this sermon, his name popped into my mind? This is exactly what this verse means. He has gained favor with me because years ago he talked with me the way I needed to be talked to. Now I count him as somebody I love and as a dear brother.

The world tells us that you smooze your way to the top. Butter people up, brown nose your way to the top, tell people what they want to hear. The Bible says exactly the opposite. If you rebuke somebody in love, they will love you much more than if you give them empty, meaningless flattery.

2. The tongue may be used for quarreling.

Proverbs 18:6 says, "A fool's lips bring him strife, and his mouth invites a beating." I meet people like this every week. I hear them some of these smart alecks on TV and think, "What somebody needs to do is take that guy out behind the woodshed in the name of Jesus." The world is full of fools. The Bible says his mouth invites a beating.

Proverbs 29:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." Young people, you'll never learn a better lesson than this: learn to control your temper. How many of us have undergone tremendous heartache because at a crucial moment we lost our temper and spouted off when we should have been silent. A fool says that since you have it inside, you have to get it out. There are a lot of times when if you have to get it out, you'd be better off to go down to the basement, lock the door, turn on the stereo real loud and get it out where nobody can hear you. A wise man keeps himself under control.

Proverbs 22:24-25 is a good verse for all of us. It says, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered." What that means is that we shouldn't run around with people who act like that. If you run around with hot heads, you're going to become a hot head yourself. The verse goes on to say, "Or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared." This week I got a telephone from a dear friend in another state. He is going through a terrible divorce right now. He started out friendly, they always do. They rarely end that way and this one is not ending that way for various reasons. He called me on Thursday with some unbelievable news. He said, "Ray, you won't believe it, but while I was watching, she drove up to my house with a 24 foot U-Haul house and she took everything out. She took out the chairs, the tables, the pictures. She took out the tablecloth, the china, the linen. She took everything. There is nothing left. I didn't find out until a couple of hours later that she took my clothes. She even took my underwear. You can't believe how angry I am right now. I want to go down there and put a bullet through her head."

Unless you've been that you can't really understand what it's like. If you have been through it, you understand the depth of emotion. I said to my dear friend, "Whatever you do, don't go down there. If you go down there, you're going to lose your cool and lose everything. Whatever you do, don't have a confrontation and don't blow up at her." I gave him some advice that has helped me over the years in some tough times. I said, "Remember these words: If you keep your cool, you can't lose. If you lose your cool, you can't win. If you lose your cool now, you're going to pay for it for the rest of your life."

Oh, the power of angry words! Let an angry man start taking a drink, and those words start uncontrollably coming out. That's why Proverbs warns us about this.

3. The tongue may be used for gossip.

Proverbs 10:18 says, "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool." Proverbs 16:28 says, "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." Proverbs 17:9 says, "He who covers over an offense

promotes love.” That means that you don’t have to tell everything you know. You don’t have to make everything right. You can cover over some things so you can go on with life. “But whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”

Three questions to ask yourself whenever you’re tempted to tell something to someone else about what somebody has done:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

There wouldn’t be any gossip if we used those three questions before speaking.

4. The tongue may be used for lying.

Proverbs 6:16-19 give us the seven things the Lord hates. Two of them are a lying tongue and a false witness who pours out lies. Proverbs 14:25 says, “A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful.” Proverbs 12:19 says, “Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.”

5. The tongue may be used to seduce to evil.

Proverbs 5 talks about the lips of an adulteress. It says her lips drip with honey. Proverbs 6:24 says, “Keeping you from the immoral woman (or man), from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife (or husband.)” Proverbs 22:14 says, “The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the Lord’s wrath will fall into it.” Your tongue, which is meant to bless God, can be used to drag other people down into sin. Don’t do it.

6. The tongue may be used to talk too much.

Proverbs 10:19 says, “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.” That verse is a tough one for a preacher, because I make my living talking. Proverbs 13:3 says, “He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.” Proverbs 17:27 says, “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint.” Proverbs 17:28 says, “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.” That means that you don’t have to have an opinion on everything. You don’t have to comment on everything that goes by you in life. You don’t have to answer every question. How blessed we would all be if we would learn to listen more and to speak less.

How Shall We Tame The Tongue?

Admit you have a problem.

You will never be healed until you admit there is something wrong. This is an area with which I have struggled for a number of years because I am paid to talk, because I am good at talking, because I can talk myself into and out of almost anything. My tongue has gotten me into trouble a lot of times through flippant comments or sharp put-downs or foolish comments about people’s motives. In preaching this sermon I am really preaching to myself.

Memorize James 1:9.

This is the best single verse on the tongue in all the Bible. It says, “Let every person be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” You wouldn’t have too many interpersonal problems anywhere if you just put that verse into practice.

Ask a friend to hold you accountable.

That means going to a friend and saying, “Listen, I have a problem with this. If you ever hear me saying something that sounds like something that I as a Christian shouldn’t say, don’t let it pass. Be enough of a brother to come to me and say, ‘Either I didn’t understand that, or I understand it and you shouldn’t have said it.’ “ Sometimes you need a friend who loves you enough to tell you to take a time out, to not say anything else, because it’s bad enough already.

Yield your tongue to God.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever said, “Lord, my tongue now belongs to you?” That’s where Romans 6 comes in, talking about yielding the members of your body to God. Have you ever told the Lord, “I have been using my tongue for myself. I am now going to use it for you. Here are my lips, let me speak for you. Here is my mouth, let my mouth speak the words that you want.” Proverbs 16:1 says, “To a man belongs the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue.” That verse means the tongue can be put under the Lord’s control. That’s a great thought. Your tongue, which today may be set on fire of hell may become a tongue under God’s control. He can give you new lips. He can give you a new tongue. He can put new words in your mouth. He can baptize your speech. Shall we not yield our tongue to him? Shall we not give him our lips? Shall we not give him our

speech? Shall we not say, "Oh, Heavenly Father, here is my tongue, let it speak only for you? Let my words lift up and not tear down."

Hymn 568 says, Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. The third verse has that wonderful phrase which goes this way: Take my lips and let them be filled with messages for thee.

Oh God, help us today and this week to yield our lips to you and so may they be filled with messages for thee. Amen.

PROVERBS 22

Proverbs 22:1 CHARACTER More Precious than Gold

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. Proverbs 22:1

Of all the gifts we can give to our children, none is greater than the gift of a good name. In the small town in Alabama where I grew up, my father was a well-known and greatly loved physician. There were four of us Pritchard boys who grew up in that small town. Outside our circle of friends we were known as "Dr. Pritchard's sons." In those days, that meant a certain responsibility was laid on our shoulders. We had to live up to the good name our father had established. And we knew-boy, did we know!-that if we ever got into trouble our misbehavior would reflect badly on our father.

My father has been dead for many years. But when I go back to visit that small town, someone always recognizes me as "Dr. Pritchard's son." Such is the power of a good name; such is the enduring relationship that lasts long after a father has died. And to be truthful, the sweetest, most wonderful compliment anyone can ever pay to me is to say, "Your father would be proud of you." He had a good name, a name that has lasted longer than his own life. When I teach my boys about their grandfather, I am passing that good name down to the next generation.

I find it interesting that Solomon makes a comparison between riches and a good name. Money is good, but how others esteem you is much more important. What will you have to show for your life when it is over? What legacy will you leave behind?

What good will money do you after you are dead? You can't spend it, you can't invest it, you can't even give it away. The same goes for all that money can buy- stocks and bonds, a business, a college degree, a nice home, two cars in the garage, a summer home in the country. They all stay behind when you die.

Most of what you work for will be left behind when they lower you into the ground. Your money is no big deal. Somebody else gets it after you're gone. Your position at work? It's filled before the funeral. Your degrees, your awards, your prized possessions? Nice stuff, but it's gathering dust in the attic.

Is there anything at all that you can take with you when you die? I can think of two things, but they have nothing to do with money.

One is character; the other, relationships. After you are gone, we'll remember two things about you: what kind of person you were and how you treated people. God says, "Live your life any way you want. But when it's over, only two things will remain for eternity- your character and your relationships. The rest goes up in smoke."

Lord, help me to focus on the things that really matter, so that when the smoke clears, I'll have something to show for my life on earth. Amen.

What kind of "name" did you inherit from your parents?

If you have children, what kind of "name" are you leaving them?

Why is a good name more important than silver or gold?

Proverbs 22:2 EQUALITY We're All in This Together

Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all. Proverbs 22:2

This same thought is expressed in a slightly different manner in 29:13, "The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: The

Lord gives sight to the eyes of both.” If you put the rich and poor together and study them from a distance, they appear to be quite different and to be moving in different directions. From the moment of birth the poor man struggles to survive in a hostile world. He fights for every scrap of bread and toils around the clock simply to afford the bare necessities of life. Meanwhile, the rich man enters the world with a silver spoon in his mouth. He wants for nothing. Indeed, he has only to wish and his wish comes true. He is surrounded by friends, admirers, courtiers, groupies, and wannabes. But the poor man? He has few friends and no one to take up his cause. Solomon commented on this undeniable fact of life: “The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends” (14:20).

Solomon wrote those words three thousand years ago, but they could well have been written last week. No one can deny that there is a huge gap between the rich and poor today. The rich have their own subdivisions, their own schools, their own exclusive clubs, their own stores, and their own entertainment. They don't mix with the poor, and the poor don't mix with them.

But to reason that way is to leave God out of the picture. When you look from the standpoint of eternity, the rich and poor are much more alike than different. They have the same Maker, who gives life equally. They come into the world in exactly the same way, and they leave in the same way. In the cradle and in the grave, rich and poor lie side by side.

They are made of the same dust, and to that dust they will one day return. They are both sinners standing in desperate need of a Savior. If it is true that they clothe themselves differently, underneath the clothing their hearts are one and the same. When hungry, they both must eat; when weary, they both must rest. The differences in this regard are only in quality and quantity-their basic needs are precisely the same.

When the day comes that the poor man must leave this world, he will stand before the same God as the rich man. In that moment, the rich man's riches will be of no advantage and the poor man's poverty will be no hindrance.

The lesson is obvious and should be repeated for the benefit of rich and poor alike. The outward things of this world-those individual markers of money, power, family background, reputation, ethnic background, race, color, and national origin-do not tell the true story of a man or woman. They are at best temporary indicators- nothing more. In Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, rich nor poor, black nor white, nor any other color.

In heaven we will mingle in complete equality with the whole family of God. It only makes sense to get started now.

Lord Jesus, I pray for a heart as big as Yours to love others as You have loved me. Amen.

How do you define prejudice, and why should it be considered a sin? How have you encountered prejudice in your own experience?

What step could you take this week to reach out across racial, ethnic, or economic lines?

Proverbs 22:6 CHILDREN Planting Seeds for God to Harvest

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. Proverbs 22:6

What exactly do these famous words mean? I believe the key lies in the phrase the way. When Solomon uses those words he almost always means either “the way of righteousness” or “the way of wickedness.” (For example, see 8:20; 10:29; 12:26; 14:12; 15:9.) To raise a child “in the way he should go” is to teach him to choose the path of righteousness and to reject the path of evil. We might state the meaning of the verse this way: Children make many mistakes in the course of life, but those raised in a godly home will be inclined toward righteousness. Christian parents need to take the long view when evaluating how their children are doing. Many teenagers and young adults go through a period of questioning values and testing limits. But the good seed planted in childhood will eventually bear fruit, though not necessarily as soon as we would like or as abundantly as we would like.

As you can tell, I am not among those who believe that children raised in a godly environment will automatically follow in the footsteps of their parents. But I firmly believe that we can “tip the scales” to our advantage so that our children have an inclination to follow the Lord when they are older.

Recently I was asked to find a biblical father who “did it right.” That sounds simple, but it isn't, for the Bible doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know. For most of the men of the Bible, we'd have to say, “We don't know whether they were good fathers or not.”

But if one criterion of good fatherhood is whether your son follows in your footsteps, then I would nominate Asa, king of Judah, as one father who did it right. To begin with, Asa did not grow up in a godly home. His father was a man named Abijah, about whom the Bible says, “He committed all the sins his father had done before him” (1 Kings 15:3). But that takes us back to Rehoboam, who introduced idolatry into Judah. And that takes us back to Solomon, a wise man with a divided heart.

So when Asa came onto the scene, he entered as the third generation after his great-grandfather. His father and grandfather had brought evil into the land. What would Asa do? The Bible says that he “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done” (1 Kings 15:11). That takes us back four generations, to his great-great-grandfather.

What legacy did Asa leave behind? A son named Jehoshaphat. Which way would he go? Second Chronicles 20:32 tells us that “he walked in the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them.” I cannot imagine a better compliment.

Perhaps you are the first Christian in your family or the first one in several generations. Are you worried about whether your children will follow you? The best thing parents can do for their sons or daughters is to give them an example worth following. By God’s grace, the pattern of sin can be broken and a godly heritage established. Asa did, and so can you.

Lord God, help me to live so that those who come after me will know that I have followed You. Amen.

What kind of example did your parents leave for you? What are you doing to proactively train your children to choose the right path? If your closest friends followed your example, would they end up following the Lord?

Proverbs 22:6 Discipline: Coaching Your Children to Greatness

January 1995 – This is a sermon about children, but it is not a message to children. It is a message to parents about their children. I want you to know that as I thought about this, prayed about it all week long, I feel impressed that at the end of my message we should take some time to pray for our children. I want you to know as I start, where I will be finishing.

I address my remarks to parents and grandparents, not just to the parents who just have children living at home, but also to the parents whose children have grown up and left the home. Sometimes our greatest prayers are not for the children in diapers, but for our children who are out in the world by themselves. I want you to think about this for your kids, whatever ages they may be. If the Lord Jesus were here this morning and you could ask him for just one thing for your children, or one thing for each child, what would it be? We will come back to that thought in a little bit.

It has been kid’s week at our house. We never planned those things, but I guess God knew I was going to preach about this today, so he arranged it that the kids have been on the top of our agenda this week, much more than normal at our house. You could summarize this week at our house with three words: sickness, school and sports. We started on Monday with two of the boys home sick. We graduated on Tuesday to all three of the boys home sick. By Wednesday, Mom and Dad were home sick. Just about the time we got the boys O.K. again, on Wednesday it was term paper time. This is the time when the semester is coming to an end. So for hours on Wednesday Mom was making posters for our middle son, Mark, who was assigned this project weeks ago, but finally decided on Wednesday that it was time to get it done. Then on Thursday Dad was here at the church late, then home helping our oldest son after midnight. That is technically incorrect. I was sitting at the typewriter and he was sleeping on the couch till after midnight. Because though it had been assigned for two months, it was due Friday morning. So it was up before 6:00 and over to the church at 6:15 to make the laser writer work so we could print everything off and turn it in. Just about the time we were ready to relax on Friday night, Nicholas said, “Dad, you know we have my basketball game tomorrow.” So it was a meeting yesterday morning, then off to his basketball game, where he is the leading scorer on his team. Yesterday he shot an amazing five for 29. There were only 35 shots taken by the entire team, and he took 29 of them. He told me, “I want to be like Scottie Pippen,” and I am expecting him to ask for a raise any day.

There is always a certain amount of hesitation when a pastor comes to speak on the subject of parents and children, especially when your own kids are not yet grown, when you’re still in process. You don’t know yet how your kids are going to turn out. I don’t know how old you have to be to be sure how your kids are going to turn out, but I’m not old enough yet.

I was thinking about so many people, even pastors in the ministry, who have sorrow in their hearts because their children are not following the Lord. Our kids today face so many dangers. I know that it is popular to say that every generation faces more problems than the preceding one. But I do think it is true to say there is a lot more cultural pressure on our kids today. There is a lot more media pressure today. There is a lot more inclining them to do that which is wrong out there in the world than there is inclining them to do that which is right.

But I am not going to talk about my family this morning. I am going to talk about what God’s word has to say, because I think that is one place where we can get some solid answers and advice.

I begin in my comments with two simple observations.

1. When it comes to the raising of your children, one of the most important things that all parents learn is that if you have more than one child, you have two very different people on your hands. Every child is different and unique. One child can be very gregarious and the other can be very quiet. One can be very gifted in the area of music, and another will be gifted with her hands. One child will be happy to stand up and speak in public, and another would die a thousand deaths before they would ever stand up in front of other people. You learn very quickly that there aren't that many hard and fast rules because children are individuals and children are different. And each child has to be treated as an individual.

2. What you do to raise your children is going to vary. It is going to change because your children are going to change as they grow up. This week I was reading through some material that Bob Boerman gave me from Gary and Ann Marie Ezzo from their course "Growing Kids God's Way." In it they talk about the four phases of raising your children. They name them as follows: Phase One is discipline. This phase covers the period from birth until five years of age. This is when you establish that you love your children and that you care about them, but that you are the one who is in authority. Phase Two is the phase of training. It takes place from age six to 12. To use a sports analogy, a trainer works with an athlete each day in different settings, going through drills and exercises, getting the children ready to play the game of life. Phase Three is the phase of coaching. That is from ages 13 to 19. Now the children are in the game of life for themselves. We can send plays in from the sidelines and help during the time outs, but we can no longer stop the game and show them how it is to be played. They are now calling the plays themselves and moving forward. Phase Four is the friendship phase. The relational goal of our parenting is friendship with our children. Although the parent-child relationship does not cease, both the parent and child eventually enter into a new season of life. So what starts out with discipline goes to training, coaching, and if all goes well when your children become adults, they will eventually enter the phase of friendship. The way you are dealing with your children today is going to be specific as to who they are as individuals. It is also going to be specific as to where they are along the age spectrum of life.

For our purposes, I want to focus mainly on one verse of Scripture. It is certainly a central passage in all the Bible on the great challenge that parents face. It is Proverbs 22:6. Most of us know it by heart. It says, "Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not turn from it." This is a much discussed verse of Scripture. It is also a verse of Scripture about which the people of God have many questions. What does it mean to train your children and how do you do it? What is the way he should go? What does it mean when he is old he will not turn from it?

Many Christian parents struggle with this verse because they struggle with the fact that their children are not where they ought to be in relation with the Lord Jesus Christ. There are, I am sure, a number of Christian parents who wonder how this verse really applies. It is good if your children are grown up and serving the Lord. This verse is difficult to completely understand if your children are not what you always hoped and prayed they would be.

I want to take a look at this verse under three parts.

I. The Command.

Train a child. If you will, train up a child. What you need to know is that this word that is translated train is actually a word which if you trace it back in the Hebrew has a very unusual word picture behind it. It actually means to place a morsel of food in the mouth. You would never have gotten that from the word train. But it is a picture of what a mom or dad does for a little infant who does not even know how to eat. In the beginning you make sure not just that your tiny little child has food, but you take it to him and make sure the milk or formula is right there. You don't tell your newborn child to go get it himself. To train your child is to take the food of life and bring it to your child so he will find the appropriate nourishment he needs.

Why is it that in the beginning the parent takes the food to the child? Because the child cannot do it for himself. What is the goal? You give the bottle to your child when he is young so that you do not have to do it when he is old. It is one thing to give a bottle to a child who is six or eight months old. That is normal and understandable. If you are still giving a bottle to your child when he is 14, 15 or 16 years old, something has gone badly wrong somewhere. So the word means that we give the child everything he needs in life when he is young so that later we won't have to. That is why the marginal rendering of this text in the NIV is translated "start." That is also a good translation of the Hebrew. It refers to starting children out in the way they should go. When you first have your child, get them started in the right direction. It's just like the song says, that in the beginning the child is 100% dependent on you, and after a few years the child is 90% dependent, then 80%, then 70%, and the whole process of growing up is the process of your child beginning to break free, moving from dependence to independence. The Bible is telling us that the crucial, key, most important time is in those early days, months and years. Start your child, train your child, make sure your child has what he or she needs, because in the end, after you have started them, they are going to keep on going in that direction. Eventually they won't depend upon you like they do now, and whatever way you've started them is the way they are going to continue down the road, long after they've left your family, long after they have left your direct control.

What is it going to take to do this?

1. Sensitivity to your children, to understand their individual needs.
2. Discipline. It is the willingness to get involved in the affairs of life with your children, especially when they have done wrong.
3. Flexibility, because you are going to discover that what worked yesterday and the day before and last month no longer works. As your children grow up, the methods have to change and be flexible.
4. Diligence. Staying with the stuff as it regards your children, because raising children today is difficult. It is not a one day or a one month or one year job.
5. A great deal of time. A specific investment of your heart and mind.

The command is train a child. Take the food of life, the water of life, the truth of life, the instruction about life right to your child and put it on his lips. Feed him now so that later he'll be able to feed himself. Show him the right direction to go so that when he is old he will stay in the same direction that you have started him.

II. The Direction.

Train a child in the way. The Hebrew word is *debar*. I should tell you that the commentators are somewhat divided about the meaning of this phrase. There are some Bible teachers who will give you a slightly different meaning than what I am going to suggest. There are those who suggest that this word *debar*, train up a child in the way he should go, should be translated "train up a child according to his way or his bent." What they say it means is that you should come to understand each child individually, that God made each child with his own set of traits and temperaments and personality factors. As a parent, your job is to discover which way God made them so you can lead them toward their gifts, talents and abilities. You can lead them according to the way which they should naturally be going. That is certainly good advice and it is true, but I doubt that is what Proverbs 22:6 is really telling us. This word *debar* "the way" almost always in the book of Proverbs refers not to an individual's way, but to the way of the Lord. It is the same word that is translated over and over the way of wickedness vs. the way of righteousness. "There is a way," same word, "that seems right unto a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death." It is a word used over and over by Solomon. So I believe that when we are being told here to train up a child in the way he should go, we are being told to train him up in the right way, in God's way, in the way of righteousness, holiness and truth. As someone has said, you should not understand this verse this way: it is not train up a child in the way he would go, but train up a child in the way he should go." That is one reason God made parents, especially Christian parents, because Christian parents who love the Lord ought to know the way their children should go—the way of righteousness, truth, obedience, honesty, integrity, and values.

III. The Principle.

"And when he is old he will not turn from it." Our problem is not with the verse, our problem is with our kids. This verse sounds just right. Our problem is that our children aren't robots or puppets. God made our children with minds of their own. So God has given our children a will, and each boy or girl has his own ability to choose which way he is going to go. Sometimes, to our own heartbreak and disappointment, our children choose not to follow the way we have taught them. That is true, yet this verse is still in the Bible. "When he is old he will not depart from it." I think what this verse is telling us is this: God has given you the chance to plant the seeds into your children. Eventually, if you will hope and wait and pray, the harvest will come.

I read a commentary this week that used an unusual phrase. It said, "If you will but train your children up in the way of the Lord, though later on they may drift from it as kids often do, at some point in life that training, those prayers, that hope, that commitment, will be like arms of love, reaching across the years and decades, bringing at last those children back to God." It is in the Bible and I think we ought to believe it. If you start your children in the right way, when they are old they will not depart from it.

A mother who was raised Catholic used to quote the nuns who taught her at the parochial school she attended. "Give us a child until they are seven, they will be Catholic for life." There is truth there. Give anybody a child for seven years and you will have set the pattern for the next 70. Children are like wet cement, but it hardens so fast. Our children do grow up to be more like us than we realize and more like us sometimes than we would like to admit.

What do you do if you're a parent and your children are grown up, away from the Lord? I have four answers to that question, for parents who pray for 30 and 40 year old children.

1. Be honest about your feelings. Honesty is important. Admit the hurt and pain in your heart.
2. Never give up hope. Our God is the God of hope.
3. Love your children no matter who they are or where they are or what they're doing.
4. Keep on praying. Don't ever give up.

There are some things in life that should be taken lightly, and some that should be taken with utter seriousness. Your children must never be taken lightly. You can be haphazard about a lot of things in life and it won't matter. But here is one area that you have to take seriously. You must take your children with utmost seriousness because you won't have them forever.

The goal of Christian parents ought to be to create a family atmosphere that makes it easy for your children to follow Jesus Christ. That ought to be the home goal—to have a home and a relationship that makes it easy for you children to follow in your steps.

Pastor Mark Bubeck told a story last year on Saturday morning during a Spiritual Warfare Conference. He was talking about the importance of praying for your children. He told the story of a family he knows. A father has prayed for years for his children. When his children went to bed, the father would go into the bedroom, stand over his children, praying for them every single night. They always knew that Dad was there when they were younger. As they got older, he would wait until they were asleep and then go in and pray. Even later when they were gone off to college, he would still go in and pray over where they had been. The father was talking to his children one day and he mentioned that he still prayed for them every night without fail. The kids said they knew that. The father was surprised and asked how they knew that. They said, "We see the footprints in the carpet."

About a year ago I was invited to Moody Bible Institute for a retirement party for my dear friend John Tahl, who was retiring from Moody after 30 some years. They had a meal and some speeches. Different people said different things and it was all very nice. I have forgotten almost everything anybody said expect one thing. John's daughter, Carol Michaels, got up and gave a testimony about her father. She talked about his love and hard work. Then she said, "But the thing that I remember most about my Dad," and with that she broke down and started crying, "I remember that every morning when we would get up I would come downstairs and see my father praying and I would hear him praying for me. Nothing he has ever done has meant more to me than the knowledge that my father is praying for me."

It is not easy to raise children. Everything in the world fights against it. It is not easy to raise God's children, who will hold to godly values. The Devil fights against us; the world, the flesh fight against us. It is easy to be frustrated. God gives you these little gifts and you do your best and you hope and pray that some day when the job is done, your children will still follow the Lord. Only parents know the tears, the worry, the anguish and the fears.

There are many things that parents can do for their kids and many things they must do. But one thing is absolutely essential. You have to pray for your children. You can do many things once you are praying. You really can't do anything for your kids until you've prayed.

I want you to take some time right now to pray for your children. Moms, Dads, together or alone. Pray for your little kids, your teenagers, your grown up kids. If you're single or have no children, pray for the children you care about. Pray for the children of your family and friends.

Proverbs 22:7 BORROWING It's Not Wrong, but It Can Be Dangerous

The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender. Proverbs 22:7

No one should be surprised that Solomon has so much to say about money. After all, we live in a world where money is the measure of all things. Like it or not, we are evaluated by how much we make, how much we spend, and how conspicuously we spend it. The currency of the day is the credit card. Who among us goes shopping without at least one credit card-for identification, if not to make our purchases?

But the problem is deeper than those little rectangles of plastic. Over and over Proverbs warns us of the danger of making money the measure of life. "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (23:4-5). Those who are in a hurry to get money find that once they get it, it has a way of slipping through their fingers.

Take your time, Solomon says. Work hard, save your money, don't buy what you can't afford. Remember that wealth in any amount is a gift from God. Be honest in all your dealings; don't rig the scales to gain an advantage. Beware of bribes, don't oppress the poor, and be generous, and God will be generous to you. These tried-and-true principles are the secrets of financial freedom.

It is against that backdrop that we should consider Proverbs 22:7. The first half makes an observation on the way of the world that cannot be denied. As the saying goes, money talks. This is not a moral judgment but a simple fact of life. It is the world's version of the Golden Rule: Those who have the gold make the rules. But the second half is equally important. In what way is the borrower a servant to the lender? He is a servant because the lender has a legal (and moral) claim on his money. If he defaults, the lender can

(and often does) take him to court, where he may lose all his possessions. All that he has is at risk until the loan is paid off.

Does this mean it is wrong to borrow money? No. Solomon simply intends to remind us that there is no such thing as a “free” loan. If it’s “free,” it’s not a loan; if it’s a loan, it’s not “free.”

Far too many people have a cavalier attitude toward debt, which is why they run up credit card bills into the tens of thousands of dollars. But at that point, they are in prison, whether they know it or not. And because of their careless actions, they aren’t free to be generous to others and to the Lord. In the words of Harry Ironside, “It is far better to be in meager circumstances and dependent on God, than to have plenty but to know it belongs to another.” He goes on to say that Christians should fear debt and flee from it—an injunction that sounds odd to our ears but one which Solomon would no doubt have approved.

Before you take out a loan, remember that the lender is on top and you are on the bottom. If you can’t make the payments, don’t take the loan. It’s as simple as that.

Lord Jesus, when I am tempted to live beyond my means, remind me that You owned nothing but the clothes on Your back. Amen.

How much money would it take to get you completely out of debt right now? Would you be embarrassed for your friends to know the answer to that question? If the answer is yes, what steps should you be taking to get out of debt?

Proverbs 22:26-27 COSIGNING A Really Bad Idea

Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge or puts up security for debts; if you lack the means to pay, your very bed will be snatched from under you. Proverbs 22:26-27

Casual readers are often surprised to discover how much the book of Proverbs has to say about the dangers of cosigning. What might seem to us a relatively minor issue obviously didn’t seem that way to Solomon. In order to help us get the big picture, here are some of the main verses on this topic:

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands in pledge for another, . . . go and humble yourself; . . . Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter. (Pr 6:1-5)

He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe. (Pr 11:15)

A man lacking in judgment strikes hands in pledge and puts up security for his neighbor. (Pr 17:18)

Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger; hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman. (Pr 20:16)

Why so many warnings? (1) Cosigning is easy to do. (2) It causes you to be financially dependent upon the actions of another person. (3) You may be taken in by an unscrupulous con artist. (4) It could actually encourage unfaithfulness on the part of the other person because he knows you are there to pay the debt if he defaults. (5) It can lead to public humiliation and personal bankruptcy.

These verses are not meant to ban generous giving to a friend in need. Far from it. But cosigning (or “striking the hands” in a promise) is more like gambling than giving. In many cases, a man may cosign a note, hoping to see some exorbitant return on his investment. Or he may do it because he wants to help his friend out of a difficult situation.

But the warning could not be clearer. Cosigning exposes you to unusual risk with no real return. If you pledge your fortune on behalf of a “neighbor,” you lack judgment; if you do it for a stranger, you deserve to lose your shirt; if you do it for a wayward woman, you may end up losing more than your sheets.

What about cosigning for a son or a daughter? Proverbs does not address that issue specifically. However, the general principle still applies. Giving is always better than cosigning. Many years ago I remember hearing a famous preacher tell of all the money he had loaned to young ministerial students, many of whom did not (or would not) repay him. He carried their IOUs around in his wallet, but every time he looked at those slips of paper, he felt a bit of anger at all the unpaid debts. Finally, one day he simply took all the slips of paper out of his wallet, tore them up, and threw them away. That simple act liberated him completely. No one owed him any money because the debts had been canceled. What had once been a loan was now a gift. If they chose to repay him, fine. If not, it didn’t matter. From that day forward he never again loaned money to anyone. If he had it to give, he gave it. If not, he refused to loan it. Thus he was able to be generous and have a clear conscience at the same time.

Solomon would approve of that attitude. Cosigning isn’t a sin, but it’s foolish and almost always unnecessary. Far better to be generous when you can and let God take care of your financial needs.

Lord, I pray for the gift of generosity so that I can give to those who have genuine needs. Amen.

Do you agree with Solomon about the dangers of cosigning? Why or why not? Do you agree that generosity is wiser than cosigning?

Have you ever cosigned a loan (or asked someone to cosign for you)? How did your experience turn out?

Proverbs 22:29 EXCELLENCE Doing Your Best All the Time

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men. Proverbs 22:29

Children and young adults need to memorize this verse because we are told over and over that it's not what you know, it's who you know. There is some truth to that. But a more fundamental truth is this: The key to success in life is finding out what it is that you like to do-your passion in life-and then becoming very good at it. Be skilled in what excites you, for once you have determined what God has gifted you to do, if you will do it well, you will not serve before obscure men. You will rise until you serve before kings.

Talent matters, and so does giftedness, and it certainly helps if you have friends who can open doors of opportunity for you. But woe to the man who thinks that is all he needs to get ahead in life. The people who rise to the top and stay there are those who pay the price in long hours of study, preparation, and practice. This principle is true in every occupation. The best doctors, the finest lawyers, the most respected business leaders, the skaters who win the gold medals, the managers who consistently push their departments to meet their quotas, the teachers whose classes are filled every semester-these all share a commitment to excellence that begins with hard work and dedication.

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. I find it encouraging that excellence doesn't depend on anyone else but me. Every day when I get up I have a new opportunity to perform with excellence. If I don't, I can't blame anyone else.

In this verse God promises us that skillful work will not go unrewarded. First Samuel 16:14-23 records the story of David playing the harp to soothe Saul's tormented soul. David was chosen because one of Saul's servants "happened" to know that he knew how to play the harp beautifully. Although he was probably only a teenager, and although he was the youngest son, and although he was "just" a shepherd, evidently he hadn't been wasting those long hours on the rocky fields around Bethlehem. He had gained a reputation as a gifted musician and a brave warrior-two qualities much admired in ancient Israel. Therefore, his father sent him to serve Saul, who liked him immediately. The rest is history. His music gave him an introduction to the leaders of Israel. Not long after that, he defeated Goliath, which meant he would never again be a lowly shepherd.

He was ready when his opportunity came, and he made the most of it. None of us orchestrate how or when our opportunity will come. But we can do something about being ready.

Find your passion. Sharpen your skills. Pay the price to be the best you can be. Take care of your part and God will take care of what happens next.

Spirit of God, help me to do my job well today so that I will be ready when my ship comes in. Amen.

What are the passions of your life? What are you doing to increase your skill level in each area?

Are you willing to wait for God to promote you to the next level?

PROVERBS 23

Proverbs 23:17-18 HOPE Future-Tense Living

Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. Proverbs 23:17-18

Envy makes sense if this world is all there is; it makes no sense at all if there is another world to come. If you believe you have "future hope," you won't waste time envying sinners, for their present prosperity won't last forever. Soon enough, they will be judged, but those who fear the Lord have a "future hope" that can never be cut off. In the meantime, believers are to look up to the Lord and look ahead to the promised reward.

The word hope in Hebrew means first to wait, then to wait expectantly. The concept is very close to our English word confidence. An expanded definition would be “to wait on something because you know that the thing you are waiting for will happen because the person you are waiting on is trustworthy.”

You have a choice to make. Either you choose to live like everyone else or you choose to wait on the Lord. What credit is it if you trust God because you have a mate, a house, a job, a happy home, a secure future, and good health? What will you do when you lose your mate, your job, your home, your family, your security, your reputation, your connections, and your health? When life tumbles in, what then?

That’s what hope is all about. It’s choosing to put your confidence in God alone. It’s believing that He has answers to questions you can barely understand. It’s coming to the place where you don’t measure your spirituality by your prosperity. It’s finding rest in your soul because you discover that the things you used to crave aren’t so important anymore.

I think it’s important to remember that this hope has both a present and a future component. In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus reminded His disciples that “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.” God will be no one’s debtor. Even in this life, even amid suffering and persecution, we will still find that it was worthwhile to follow Jesus. That’s an important perspective to keep in mind when we see the wicked apparently prospering while the righteous are overlooked. But our blessing is a hundredfold greater because we know the Lord and the wicked don’t. And we are surrounded by fellow believers who are like family to us.

Don’t worry about evildoers. Let them enjoy their little moment in the sun. And don’t waste a moment wishing you could be like them. Put your hope in the Lord and keep on moving ahead. We’ve got it better now, and this is only the beginning.

Father, forgive us for doubting Your promises about the future. Help us to live in the light of eternity. Amen.

Name four ways the wicked prosper today. List several reasons that God doesn’t judge them right now.

Can you think of an area of your life where you are being forced to put your trust in God alone?

PROVERBS 24

Proverbs 24:10 ENDURANCE Hanging Tough in Hard Times

If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength! Proverbs 24:10

I have a couple of friends who love to run marathons. I have listened with amazement as they described the months of rigorous training necessary just to survive the twenty-six-mile ordeal. You must run hundreds of miles in preparation, follow a special diet, forego many of life’s normal pleasures, and focus like a laser beam on the appointed day when you will punish your body almost to the breaking point. If others laugh, if they do not understand, if they think you have lost your mind, well and good; let them think what they will. You have committed yourself to running the marathon, and nothing can stand in your way.

My friends tell me that many of those who start out to run a marathon never make it. Most falter and drop out somewhere in the months before the race begins. Others start the race but never finish. A few will come agonizingly close to the finish line and then fall exhausted on the track.

Times of trial reveal what is in us. We grow faster in hard times than we do in good times. Romans 5:3-5 describes the process God uses to develop godly character in our lives. In fact, Paul says that “we also rejoice in our suffering” (v. 3). That may appear to be a misprint, but it isn’t. He isn’t suggesting that we should become masochists who rejoice in the hard times as if we enjoyed the pain. That wouldn’t even be a Christian idea. He doesn’t say, “We also rejoice because of our sufferings,” but rather, “We also rejoice in our sufferings.” Even in the most difficult moments, God’s people can rejoice because He is at work doing something important in us. The next few verses explain the process. Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, character produces hope, and, verse 5 says, “Hope does not disappoint us.” Why is that, Paul? “Because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” What starts with suffering ends with the love of God. This is a wonderful progression, but you can’t get to the love of God without starting in the place of suffering.

More than one person has said to me, “I wouldn’t trade my pain for the things God has shown me.” If that doesn’t make sense to

you, it's only because you haven't been there yet.

I can testify that the most beautiful Christians I know are not the young, the rich, the educated, the successful, or the influential. Those may be happy but their lives are shallow, for the sculptor has not yet picked up the hammer and the chisel.

The most beautiful Christians I know are those who have been through suffering and come through it with their faith in God intact. They may not laugh as much as others and their faces may be lined with care, but the beauty of Christ is in their eyes, and their voices testify to God's amazing grace.

The main thing is not to collapse under the pressure. Don't stop short of the finish line. Better days are coming if you just keep running.

Lord of all grace, I look to You for the strength I need to keep on going, for without Your help I will certainly fall. Amen.

In what areas of your life are you tempted to stop running the race? What would help you press on to the finish line?

Who are the most beautiful Christians you know? What makes them so special in your eyes?

Proverbs 24:11-12 INVOLVEMENT You Can't Pretend You Didn't Know

Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done? Proverbs 24:11-12

Picture thousands of people being herded into railroad cars bound for the death camps. None of them will return. They are heading for mass murder. You are there, you see it, you know what is happening. What will you do? It is the Corrie ten Boom question.

Here is a solemn word from the Lord. It's a warning against those who make excuses for not getting involved. It's too messy. People won't understand. I can't risk my reputation that way. What if someone sees me? I might get arrested. It's not my place to say anything. I can't change the whole world. Why bother trying? On and on you go, arguing against personal involvement. Slowly the train chugs out of the station. It is too late to do anything now.

This passage is often raised when Christians discuss their response to the abortion crisis. In this age when abortion has almost become a national sacrament, it's good to be reminded that lives are saved and hearts changed one by one. A moving scene from Schindler's List comes to mind. At the end of the film, Oskar Schindler is filled with remorse that he saved so few people. But you saved 1,100, he is reminded. Yet I could have saved more, he cries. Knowing his pain, the survivors present him with a gold ring inscribed with a saying from the Talmud: "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire."

Last year a friend sent me an Advent calendar with the title "Do You Have Room?" It's built around Luke 2:7, "And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." As you open the calendar there are tear-off strips of paper containing various contemporary excuses the innkeeper might give today:

"Sorry. It's dinnertime. Don't interrupt me."

"Totally frazzled. I can't handle more company."

"Sorry! Christmas pageant tonight. God bless you. Bye."

"Not now! I'm listening for tonight's Lotto numbers."

"Can't afford to put up company. Sorry."

"Can't. At this point I don't know which end is up."

It was a not-so-subtle reminder that for those who prefer to sit on the sidelines there are always plenty of convenient excuses.

For Corrie ten Boom there really was no option. When she saw the Jews being herded off to the concentration camps, her Christian faith propelled her to action. One by one she took them in, hiding them in her attic. Eventually the authorities discovered what she was doing and sent her to one of the camps herself. There her sister died, but she lived to tell the story.

When asked why she got involved, she replied very simply, "I had no other choice."

Take a look around you. You can't do everything, but you can do something. If you are a Christian, you have no other choice.

Lord Jesus, You cared enough to get involved in this sinful world. Help me to do the same. Amen.

Name three people you know who got involved in helping others in need.

Where could you make a difference right now? What are you going to do about it?

Proverbs 24:11-12 Justice: The Real American Dream

September 1994 – I'd like to begin by telling you something that I ran across in a bookstore. I think you might be interested in this. When I started these sermons on Proverbs, I challenged you to take the Book of Proverbs and read it through in a month. There are 31 chapters in Proverbs, 31 days in most months, so you would read one chapter per day. A lot of people add to that and take the book of Psalms, which has 150 chapters, and read five Psalms a day. That way in a month they have read through the whole books of Psalms and Proverbs. If you're like me, you forget where you were or where you ended. The other day at Logos Bookstore I picked up a neat little booklet entitled 31 Days of Wisdom and Praise. What this book does is divide the Psalms up according to the days of the month, five Psalms for each day of the month, and they have added a chapter from the Book of Proverbs. They have done it for all 31 days, according to the days of the month. I would like to encourage you to go to your Christian book store and get a copy of this. It will cost about \$4.00. It is a great way of getting into reading the Bible every day, and let God's word begin to build into your life.

Our theme for today may seem a little unusual to you. It is Justice: The Real American Dream. Justice is something that is very American. It is something that we as children learned when we learned to say the following words: I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Every time you say that, you're pledging to be part of a nation that will provide justice for all. And yet I recall the words of Thomas Jefferson who said, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just." In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "The arm of the universe of long, but it bends toward justice."

This week I got in the mail the monthly mailout from Dr. James Dobson's organization Focus on the Family. You know what he was talking about in his letter this month? It was about justice, about the sad state of the justice system in America today. He begins by talking about O.J. Simpson, then he talks about Eric and Lyle Menendez, the strange case of Lorena Bobbitt, he quotes at length from a lawyer who writes that if you are a very good lawyer and know how to work the system, you can get the guilty off if you find the right judge and if you say the right things. At the very end of his letter, this is what Dr. Dobson says, "The way justice is dispensed in society is a function of its moral values, especially in a government of the people, for the people and by the people. If a majority of citizens understand and are committed to fundamental principles of right and wrong, based on the Ten Commandments and the natural law of God, then the judges and juries will render decisions based on those values. But if people become confused about what they believe, then the legal apparatus will also lose its focus. It stands to reason, doesn't it, a system of justice can be no better than the value system it represents?" Then Dr. Dobson says this, "Perhaps that explains what we are witnessing in our beloved nation. Because we've lost our concepts of right and wrong, justice is disappearing. Maybe that's why hundreds of people line the road to cheer a man accused of killing a young mother and her friend. 'Run, O.J., run,' they shouted as he fled from the police. It was great fun, but it was also tragic."

Last Sunday's Ann Lander's column was very interesting. The headline read "Justice can be elusive in the courtroom." Then she quotes a number of cases of obvious miscarriages of justice in America.

But probably the best example is the current issue of Time Magazine. There is a shocking picture on the front of a young man by the name of Robert "Yummy" Sandifer, 11 years old. He's the young man who was accused of murdering that girl a couple of weeks ago, and then was shot to death in what appeared to be a gang slaying. It says, "The short, violent life of Robert Yummy Sandifer, so young to kill, so young to die." When you open the magazine, there is a picture of him in his casket. The parents are bringing the neighborhood kids by to touch his face, in hopes that the kids would learn the lesson: don't end up there yourself. "He was called Yummy because of his love of cookies and Snickers bars. Seemed like a nice kid, yet somebody said he was always in trouble. No one is sorry to see him gone." Chicago's authorities have known about Yummy for years. He was born to a teenage addict mother and a father now in jail. Says Cook County Public Guardian Patrick Murphy, "What you've got here is a kid who was made and turned into a sociopath by the time he was three years old." By the time he was 11, Yummy averaged a felony a month for the last year and a half of his life—23 felonies and five misdemeanors in all at 11 years of age.

The next article is related to it. Entitled "When Kids Go Bad," it is about the decline and collapse and the problems of the juvenile justice system in America. They note that in the last six years there has been a significant increase in juvenile crime in the most serious categories—murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. And one judge up in Washington said, "Now, among children,

youngsters used to shoot each other in the body, then in the head; now they shoot each other in the face.” When the journalists went down to talk to the people who lived in Yummy Sandifer’s neighborhood, they talked to the children. When they asked the children, “What could we do to make this neighborhood more safe?” the children, ages 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, said “Give us some guns so we can protect ourselves.”

The dictionary defines justice this way: moral rightness, equity, honor, fair play, due reward and due punishment. Edmund Burke said it this way, “Justice is the great spending policy of civil society.” Woodrow Wilson said, “Unless justice be done to others, it will not be done to us.” William Gladstone said, and this is perhaps the most frightening of all the quotes, “National injustice is the surest road to national downfall.”

So I ask the question: Is God concerned about justice? When he looks down and sees a world like this, does God care what’s going on? Does he have anything to say about it? If you want to know the answer to that question, you don’t have to take my word for it, just start reading your Bible. You will find the Bible is crammed with verses and stories and texts and passages where God expresses his concern for human justice. It’s a major theme of the Bible, especially a major theme of the Old Testament.

In the last couple of weeks I’ve looked back to see what the Bible has to say about the issue of justice. Let me just read some of those verses to you.

Amos 5:24 “Let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

Micah 6:8 “What does the Lord your God require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Exodus 23:1-9 gives us the laws of justice and mercy. 1. No false reports. 2. Don’t follow the crowd. 3. No favoritism in the law. 4. Give true testimony. 5. Show kindness to your enemy. 6 Justice to the poor. 7. No false charges. 8. No capital punishment for the innocent. 9. Don’t take bribes. 10. Fair treatment for foreigners.

Deuteronomy 10:17, speaking of God’s just character, says: 1. He shows no partiality. 2. The Lord accepts no bribes.

Deuteronomy 10:18 describes justice as is seen three ways. 1. Justice to the widows. 2. Justice to the orphans. 3. Food and clothes to the foreigners.

Deuteronomy 16:20 says, “Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.

In Deuteronomy 24:14-22 we have the four statements concerning what justice is. 1. Justice to the aliens. 2. Justice to the widows. 3. Fair pay to the poor. 4. Generosity to all. I stop here to make a point. If you want to read something that will blow your mind, go back and read the ancient book of Deuteronomy and see how specific God is about how human society ought to be organized. God doesn’t just say go out there and love each other. He gives specific direction on how we should treat each other. God was concerned that when his people went into the promised land, they would set up a society that would be qualitatively different from the heathen nations around them, that in the place of injustice and bloodshed there would be justice, love and mercy.

Solomon asked God to give him discernment in administering justice. This request pleased God. Solomon wanted to know how to distinguish right and wrong and because Solomon asked for justice, God added to him riches and honor.

Job 34:12: “It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.”

Psalms 33:5 says, “The Lord loves righteousness and justice.”

Psalms 82:2-4 give us four signs of justice: 1. Defending the weak and fatherless. 2. Maintaining the rights of the poor and oppressed. 3. Rescuing the weak and needy. 4. Deliver the weak from the hand of the wicked.

Do you see a pattern developing? Do you see certain things coming up over and over again? God keeps mentioning certain groups of people that he wants his people to be concerned about.

Psalms 97:2 “Righteousness and foundation are the foundation of his throne.”

Psalms 106:3 “Blessed are they who maintain justice, who consistently do what is right.”

Psalms 140:12 “I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.”

Isaiah 1:17 “Learn to be right. Seek justice; encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

Isaiah 5:7 “He looked for justice but saw bloodshed.” When God looks at America, what does he see? When God looks at South

Chicago, what does he see? When he looks on the West Side, what does he see? He who looks for justice all too often finds bloodshed.

Isaiah 30:18 "The Lord is a God of justice."

Isaiah 42:1 "He will bring justice to the nations."

Isaiah 61:8 "I, the Lord, love justice."

Jeremiah 21:12 "Administer justice every morning. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed."

Jeremiah 22:3 "This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place."

Ezekiel 18 lists the marks of the man who does justice. 1. He does not oppress anyone. 2. He returns the collateral for a loan 3. He does not rob. 4. He gives food to the hungry, clothes to the naked. 5. He does not charge interest. 6. He judges thoroughly between men.

Ezekiel 22:29 says, "The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery. They oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice, thus judgment comes from the Lord."

Amos 5:7 lists the sins of ancient Israel which brought on their judgment: 1. Trampling the poor. 2. Taking bribes. 3. Taking grain from the poor.

Zechariah 7:9 gives a summary statement: "Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other."

You may have noticed these verses are all from the Old Testament. How about the New Testament?

James 1:27 "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

When our Lord spoke to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, what did he say to them, the most religious people of their day? "You hypocrites, you whitened sepulchres! You are the ones who rob the widow's houses in the name of religion. You cheat the poor. You cheat the oppressed. In the name of your religion you trample on the rights of other people." No wonder he got angry.

Don't ever say justice is just an Old Testament theme. It's through the Bible, from beginning to end, that our God is a God of justice.

Twenty years ago I wouldn't have preached this sermon. Twenty years ago I would have thought this was a left-wing sermon. But the Bible hasn't changed. I've just grown up, started reading it from cover to cover. I have discovered God's concern about justice on the earth was there all along. He wants his people to be concerned.

Come now to the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 1:3 says the book was written to teach us to do what is right and just and true.

Proverbs 17:23 says, "A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice."

Proverbs 19:28 says, "A corrupt witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil."

Proverbs 21:3 says, "To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice." That is a key verse. It reminds me of I Samuel 15:16, "To obey is better than sacrifice." God is saying, "Don't come in here with blood on your hands, thinking you can sing and get your guilt washed away." Don't come in here having treated people like dirt and think God is going to be pleased because you pray and clap and get all excited. Don't come in here, having taken advantage of people, having assassinated people's character, having perverted the course of justice. Don't come in here having stood silently by while other people were oppressing the poor. Don't do these things and think you can get away with it, because God is not impressed.

Proverbs 21:15 says, "When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous, but terror to evildoers."

Proverbs 28:5 says, "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully." God expects us to know what justice is and to work for justice in the world.

Proverbs 29:4 says, "By justice a king gives a country stability. The one who is greedy for bribes tears it down."

Proverbs 29:26, "Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the Lord that a man gets justice."

What has struck me as I read these verses and pondered them is that there are certain things that God is really concerned about in my life. Maybe I have not thought much about this until recently. That bothers me. What I find as I read these verses is there are four forgotten groups of people that God remembers. 1. He remembers the widows. 2. He remembers the orphans. 3. He remembers the poor. 4. He remembers the foreigners. You just can't read the Old Testament without seeing that God cares what happens to these four groups of people. By the word widow I have also written down "single parents," by orphans I have written down "latch-key kids," by the poor I have written down "homeless," and by the foreigners I have written down "despised ethnic and racial minorities." What strikes me is how amazingly relevant God's word is today. If you take the Chicago Tribune, the Wednesday Journal, USA Today or any newspaper, you'll find out that the Bible is addressing the very problems that are tearing our society apart. God is showing us that he cares about these people and wants us to care about them too.

God sees the displaced peoples of the world. He sees the refugees of the world. He sees the homeless, the hurting of the world, and he cares about them. He wants his people to care about them too.

Here are the four character qualities I think God really values when it comes to justice:

1. Fair play.

Remember all those verses that talk about the unjust scales. That's like the old story where you go to the butcher and you think you're buying two pounds of meat because he puts his thumb on the scale. So you really only get a pound and a half, but you don't discover it until you go home. God tells us not to rig anything, not to cheat; truth in selling, truth in merchandising, truth in advertising, fair play toward other people. No favoritism, no pulling strings, no secret bribes, nothing done under the table or behind closed doors. Everything open and above board; all the cards on the table face up. That's what God wants.

2. Fair pay.

God talks about robbing widows' homes. He talks about people who extort money from the poor. How about some of those people on the west side of Chicago, not all of them, but those rich people, those slum lords, who go into depressed areas and buy a building. They let the poor come in and charge them a little bit of rent and never fix it up. They never intend to, because they live some place else and they don't care. It's an abomination to Almighty God and the people of God ought to stand up against it. If you want to know why it's so hard to bring some of these neighborhoods back, it's because some of the people who own these buildings, living here in Oak Park or Oak Brook or Winetka, way out in the suburbs, don't ever come into the city. They just get their monthly check and take it to the bank. God hates it. Fair pay means no getting rich at the expense of others.

3. Absolute honesty.

Truth in speech. Keeping your promises. What you say you're going to do, that's what you're going to do.

4. Compassion towards the needy.

Turn to Proverbs 24:11, 12: "Rescue those being led away to death. Hold back those staggering towards slaughter. If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" In that verse God is saying that when you see suffering, you're supposed to do something about it. Do something! You can't do everything, but you can do something.

Remember the story from nearly 30 years ago. I believe her name was Kitty Genevise. The setting was the streets of New York City, in the evening, but not too late. She was assaulted by a man and began to scream. He told her to shut up but she kept on screaming. She screamed for about fifteen minutes until he dragged her off to the side and killed her for her money. And when the police investigated, they asked the neighbors in the apartment houses, "Did you hear anything?" It turned out that 36 people heard Kitty scream and some of them even opened the window, looked out, saw her being assaulted, and yelled, "Shut up, we're trying to sleep." When asked that if they saw it happening, why didn't they do something, all 36 people said the same thing: "We didn't want to get involved."

That, brothers and sisters is why America is in such a mess today. We see the problems and we don't want to get involved. God says, "When you see the hurt, when you see the needy, you're going to have to do something. You can't just walk on by. You can't pretend you didn't see it, because God sees the heart." On what basis does God make his judgment? Not on the basis of what you thought. Not on the basis of what you said. Not on the basis of what you felt. God only judges on one basis, on the basis of what you actually did. Good intentions don't count. This is the reason for the pro-life movement. This is the reason for Circle Urban Ministries, for Inner City Impact, for Lawndale Community Church and Glen and Jane Fitzjerrell's work out on the street. This is the reason why we keep sending teams down to Mexico and Haiti. This is why next year we are already planning on sending a team down to Haiti again. I talked to Caleb Lucien this week and confirmed the dates. Next July we're going back again. There is so much poverty, how can you help those people? Well, if we don't do something, it can only get worse. The fact that we can't help everybody is no excuse

to not help somebody. God will not hold us guiltless if we stay in our safe, middle class lifestyle while people are suffering and dying all around us.

Justice matters to God and it ought to matter to us because of the following reasons:

1. Because God is a God of justice It is one of his attributes. He cannot help but be concerned because of who he is.
2. Because we live in an unjust world. We sing that song “This Is My Father’s World.” It sounds so sweet. “And to my listening ears, all nature sings and around me rings the music of the spheres.” You can almost hear the flutter of angels. You know what we ought to do when we sing that? We ought to put the sound of machine gun fire behind it. We ought to put on the screen the faces of the children of Chicago shot dead in the last year. This is my Father’s world but something terrible has happened. There is injustice on every hand. We ought to care because of the kind of world we’re living in.
3. We ought to care because justice is the reason Christ came. That’s why God sent his son, so that the penalty for sin could be paid and you could be set free
4. Because when we work for justice, we’re truly working for God. When you stand up for justice in the school, on the streets, in the workplace, in our neighborhood, when we stand up for justice, we are doing God’s work. Since we live in an unjust world, there is going to be plenty for us to do. There is so much injustice out there, you don’t have to do what I do and I don’t have to do what you do. There is so much out there, we could all be busy 24 hours a day and not correct everything. People of justice will rarely be rewarded because this is an unjust world, but we ought to treat each other fairly anyway.

My conclusion is this: it’s time for us to start making a difference as the people of God. Today we’re so far from the real American dream of liberty and justice for all. But we can make a difference. We can’t do everything, but we can do something. Here’s what I want to say to you. This week, stand up. This week, speak up. This week, when you see something evil going down, don’t just pass it by. Get in there and make a difference. Stand up this week for what is right. Stand up for justice and when you do, God will be standing with you. Amen.

Proverbs 24:11-12 Life: What a Beautiful Choice

January 1995 – Proverbs 24:11-12 says, “Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, ‘But we knew nothing about this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?”

This is Sanctity of Life Sunday. We join this morning with hundreds and thousands of churches across America in upholding the value of all human life from the moment of conception to the moment of death. This Sunday was not picked at random. Sanctity of Life Sunday is always observed on the Sunday closest to January 23, the day in 1973 when the Supreme Court handed down its infamous Roe v. Wade decision which legalized abortion on demand in America. Since that terrible decision was handed down some 22 years ago, over 30 million unborn babies have died legally in America.

We, as an evangelical church, join today not just to celebrate the value of life, but we join today to protest against the killing. We join today to raise our voices in one great call from ocean to ocean, from every corner of this nation, that enough blood has been shed, that enough babies have been killed, that it is time for the killing to end.

So this is Sanctity of Life Sunday. But all is not well in the pro-life movement. For our cause, this year is troubled. Our critics are many. People who were with us last year are not so sure they want to be with us this year. For it was about 18 or 19 months ago that a defrocked Presbyterian minister by the name of Paul Hill took a shotgun and outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida he shot Dr. David Gunn in cold blood, killing him and killing another person. Then, just a few weeks ago, a man by the name of John Salvey, or so the police say, entered two abortion clinics in Brookline, Massachusetts and opened fire, indiscriminately shooting at people. He didn’t kill any abortion doctors, but he got a receptionist and another person and wounded many more.

Since that time there has been an avalanche—and that’s the only word for it—an outpouring of negative publicity, the likes of which I do not think we have seen since the pro-life movement really came to its strength some 22 years ago. We have seen our point of view ridiculed, vilified, hated, mocked. We have been painted in the media as if everyone who is pro-life is a gun-toting fanatic who is ready to shoot to kill.

Though we are against abortion with all of our heart and all of our soul, and we as a church stand against it with all that we have, there is something else we need to say today. We really need to answer the questions: What does it mean to be pro-life? What is the true pro-life position and what is a false pro-life position? What should we do in light of the continued carnage inside the abortion

clinics? And what should we do and how should we feel in light of the shootings that are being carried on now in the name of God and of Jesus Christ?

I have done my share of abortion protesting. From the time that I really understood abortion, which was about 1979, I have always regarded abortion as an abiding evil. And I agree with those people who say that abortion really is the sin of America. At this point, it is the sin. There are many sins, but it is the preeminent sin of our society, because it is the official, sanctioned destruction of innocent human life.

You probably don't know this, but I have done my share of protesting outside abortuaries. When I was in Dallas, I spoke at a rally and I walked on the picket line outside the Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas protesting their policy of elective abortions. One of my good friends was arrested in an Operation Rescue protest in Dallas. The man who is now the head of Operation Rescue all across America, Flip Benham, back in the 80s when I pastored the Northeast Bible Church in Garland, Texas. Flip was the pastor of the Free Methodist Church of Garland, Texas and we were good friends. He has since gone on to head the Operation Rescue organization and I have spoken out publicly and in print in favor of the concept of non-violent protest to stop the killing of the unborn.

But that is really not what we are talking about right now. We are really talking about the case of the shooting of people who happen to work at abortion clinics. How should we feel about that, and how should our pro-life position be expressed? I'm going to give you four answers very briefly to that question.

I. We must continue, no matter what, to affirm the value and dignity of all life, born and unborn.

The Bible says that men and women are all created in the image of God. The Bible says in Psalm 139:13-16 that God himself takes responsibility for the formation of the unborn. He is the one who knits the babies together in their mother's womb. He is the one who sees their yet unformed substance. He is the one who takes note of them while they are still inside the womb.

Who is it that gives life? It is God Almighty. Who is it that causes that unborn baby to survive inside the womb? It is God Almighty. Who is it that gives life and brings life? Who is it that takes the little hands and feet and eyes and nose and lips and assembles them together, literally knits the bond together? It is God Almighty.

So if we believe the Bible, and we must, then I think we have to reaffirm our belief in the sanctity of all life, born and unborn. We have to say once again in clear tones that from the moment of conception there is a distinct individual who has come into being—an individual made in the image of God; an individual with a human soul; an individual for whom Christ died. We must say that; we must hold it up. We must continue to insist that when a baby is aborted it is not simply the termination of a pregnancy, it is not simply the expulsion of fetal material, but it is the killing of an innocent human being who is made in God's image.

But we live in a schizophrenic society. We live in a society where just last Sunday there could be this article in the Chicago Tribune—"Unborn child may give gift of life to sister with leukemia." A five year old girl in Detroit with leukemia needed a bone marrow transplant and couldn't find a match. She had a little sister who was about to be born. The baby was born this week and they took the blood from the placenta and transplanted it into the little girl in hopes of curing her of leukemia. So far she is doing fine. But notice what they called it—they called it an unborn child. But if that mother had decided to abort that baby, they would have said it was another fetus, the termination of another pregnancy. It's the moral schizophrenia of America that when we want to get rid of a baby we call it a fetus, but when we want to get blood from a placenta to give life to a sister with leukemia we call that child an unborn child.

Brothers and sisters, something has gone wrong. We've gone mad in America. We've sanctioned this kind of thing. You can say whatever you want to about that eighteen year old girl who had the baby a couple of weeks ago and then in a moment of fear and desperation threw the baby out the window, fracturing its skull. You can condemn her all you want to, and truly that was an awful thing to do, but when they put that girl in jail and put a \$500,000 bond on her, what they were basically doing was punishing her for not having an abortion four months earlier. If she had had an abortion four or five months earlier she wouldn't be in jail because that's not illegal.

There is a kind of moral schizophrenia that is shocked at what Susan Smith did, but is not shocked at the fact that she could have done it legally if only she had done it while the children were still in the womb.

So what I am saying is that we as a church must reaffirm the high value of all human life and go against the moral schizophrenia of this age. We must say that unborn children are just as valuable in the sight of God as those who happen to make it out of the womb. I will tell you the truth—the most dangerous place to be in America today is inside your mother's womb. You have a one in four chance of not making it out alive.

II. Though it may be unpopular, we must continue to speak out.

That's where Proverbs 24 comes in, rescuing those being led away to slaughter. One of the most nauseating things that has

happened in the last few weeks is how these self-righteous, pro-choicers have tried to tell those of us who believe in the value of the unborn how we should speak. They've told us we shouldn't use words like "murder" anymore, we shouldn't use words like "killing" anymore, because it just inflames people like Paul Hill and John Salvey. Understand, I am totally against what those men did. It was foolish, it was un-Christian, and it was wrong. But God forbid that the church of Jesus Christ, we who uphold life, should ever take our cues from the people who are on the side of the killing of the unborn.

Listen to what Joe Soberin says in his column, "The uproar surpasses the decent limits of hypocrisy." Horrors, killing in an abortion clinic! In all places! What do those lofty liberals think is going on in abortion clinics all day? Nurturing? These are killing centers. If you've got an unborn kid you don't want you can just walk in and have it killed like a cockroach, except when we kill roaches or bacteria, or even weeds, we call it killing, whereas killing a human embryo is swabbed in euphemisms like "terminating a pregnancy."

Note that the media has adopted the whole vocabulary of the pro-abortion side: terminate, fetus, choice, and abortion provided. Examine this last phrase. Joseph Mendela, Hitler's surgeon general, spent his last years in Argentina making ends meet by doing abortions. Would he qualify as an abortion provider? After all, he was an accredited physician.

Brothers and sisters, we must tell the truth to a generation who doesn't want to hear it. We must say that when you kill an unborn child, you have violated the sixth commandment which teaches us "Thou shalt not kill" or, in the newer translations, "You shall not murder." I know it is not politically correct to say that these days, and I know that those from the left have said, "No, you have to back off. If you're going to be pro-life you can't use words like kill or murder."

But brothers and sisters, when the Bible speaks, we must speak. And when the blood of the unborn has stained this nation to the tune of 30 million dead in 22 years, isn't it high time for us to stand up and start telling the truth? Please understand something. We are not in a popularity contest, we are in a truth contest. And we are on the side of truth, because we are on the side of life.

I know there are some people who say to me, "Pastor Ray, why don't you kind of slow down now? Back off and take it a little easier." No, no! In the name of God, I'm not going to slow down! I am not going to back off. In the name of God, I'm not going to say less than the truth. Somebody will say, "But you will offend the visitors." Maybe the visitors need to be offended. Maybe they need to know when they come to Calvary Memorial Church that we are different from the other churches on Lake Street. If they want to hear something else, let them go someplace else. But when they come here, they are going to hear the absolute truth about life and death and what God has to say. So we are not going to back down and I encourage you, when you go back to your schools, your place of work, your home, your streets, kindly, but honestly, please tell people the truth.

III. We must reject violence and violent people.

Let me tell you four things which are bad about the shooting of the abortion doctors.

A. It just turns thoughtful people against us. That great unconvinced, middle of the road crowd, sees the pictures of people who have been shot being carried out of the abortion clinic. They think, "It's just a bunch of rifle-toting fanatics." They don't want to listen to us anymore.

B. It is really questionable how many babies you can save that way. Maybe you cancel an abortion for a day, or another day, but really, if a person is going to have an abortion it is pretty easy in America to get one. You'll have to shoot a lot more doctors than have been shot so far to really make a difference. And you won't get away with it anyway, you'll just end up in prison. So, it's not really helping the cause.

C. But I'll tell you what is really wrong with it. It violates the spirit of Jesus Christ. You remember that on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and out from the walled city of Jerusalem came the men with torches to arrest him. Remember how Peter was there? Peter was fired up and when he saw the bad guys coming to get his Lord, he grabbed that sword and whacked off the ear of the high priest's servant. He thought he was doing Jesus a favor. He thought he would use a little violence to help the cause along. What did Jesus say? He put the man's ear back on and healed him. He told Peter to put down his sword and said, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Remember what else he said? Jesus said, "Why did you do that, Peter? If I had wanted to I could have called 10,000 angels down from heaven to rescue me. All of heaven is at my disposal. I don't need your puny help to do my work."

D. When you shoot those doctors what you are really saying is you no longer believe in God. You don't believe that God is sovereign and on the throne. You think maybe he has gone to sleep and now he needs your help. And the help you want to give him is a double-barreled shot gun. God does not need that kind of help.

Brothers and sisters, let's understand it again. We are to hate the sinning and love the sinner. If your hatred of the sin has also caused you to hate the sinner, you've missed the love of God. You've missed the example of Jesus Christ, because when our Lord

Jesus hung on the cross, the just for the unjust, looking at the very people who crucified him, what did he say? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When will we understand that violence only leads to violence, which leads to violence? But somebody says, "Pastor, it's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Well, I like what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said. He said, "Well, if I poke out your eye, then you're going to poke out mine. So I'm going to poke out your other one and then you'll poke out my other one. And after a while, we're all going to be blind." Violence just leads to violence, which leads to violence, which leads to violence. Somewhere the people of God just have to stop and say "enough is enough."

The real violence is being done inside the abortion clinics. Every time we shoot somebody outside we take the focus away from where it ought to be—what's really going on inside.

IV. There is only one way we are going to win this battle. It is not through killing our enemies. Through gentle persuasion and sincere prayer we must win this battle one heart at a time.

God has given us one weapon that the unbeliever does not have—the weapon of prayer. He's given us a weapon which is the mightiest, most powerful weapon in the world. It is the weapon which can change the world. Instead of getting angry, cursing, throwing things, and for goodness sake, instead of shooting people, we should be on our knees in tears and deep repentance praying for our nation and for those who are killing the unborn. Instead of shooting and killing them, we should be praying for them.

Slowly, but surely, we are winning the battle. Today there are 3000 crisis pregnancy centers in America and there were none 22 years ago. Every day hundreds of women are choosing life because somebody is out there gently persuading them not to have an abortion. Most women really don't want to do it. The studies show that most women have an abortion because they are backed into a corner by some awful circumstance of life and can see no other alternative or way out. We can win this battle, but it is going to take some spiritual weapons, not carnal ones.

Let me wrap up my message with seven steps we can take if we really want to be pro-life.

1. It is time we begin to fast and pray for America. After we get through being angry and bitter, it is time for the church to begin to fast and pray for President Clinton and his Cabinet, for Newt Gingrich and Congress, for the Supreme Court.

2. We need to speak out in the name of Jesus Christ

3. We need to reach out with the message of love to the women who have had abortions. I am very much aware that there are women here this morning who have had abortions. I know some of you, but most of you I don't know. You are under no obligation to divulge that information. I do know that abortion is not good, and most likely you know that, too. That may be why you are here. There may be a lot of pain in your heart. We are not angry at you. We're not mad at you. We love you in the name of Jesus Christ. You may have felt trapped or pressured into it, maybe you had a boyfriend who got you into trouble and then he walked away. Maybe you knew what you were doing but now you feel the moral ramifications of it. We do not condemn you. We love you and if we can we want to bring you to the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Abortion is bad, but it is not the unforgivable sin. We as a church have to reach out to women who have had abortions, put our arms around them and say, "We love you in Jesus' name."

4. We need to take our pro-life convictions into the voting booth. If we would do that, America would change.

5. We need to support all those people who are on the right side of this issue. For example, the crisis pregnancy centers, adoption agencies, foster parents, people who are taking in unwed mothers, people who through gentle persuasion are helping in this area. We need to support the good guys instead of shooting the bad guys. Find the good guys and give them some help.

6. We need to get down to the root of the problem. We need to practice sexual purity and we have to teach it to our teenagers and children. That's where abortions are coming from. Because our young people don't know right from wrong, they are making foolish moral and sexual choices.

7. We must never give up. Turn off Phil Donahue. Turn off Larry King. Don't pay any attention to those guys. They have been wrong more than they have been right. Don't look to PBS or Gallup Polls to get your truth. God's truth is indeed marching on.

I remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, when he argued for non-violence in the civil rights movement against those who said, "Let's go shoot them. Let's go kill them. Let the blood run in the streets." Martin Luther King said it would never come that way. He said, "Our only hope is the way of love, the way of Jesus. What's wrong with violence is you can murder a murderer but you can't murder murder. It will remain."

After you've killed all the abortion doctors in America, murder will still remain in the human heart. You're going to have to change hearts if you want to see this country changed. So brothers and sisters, let's have done with violence and anger, and with grateful hearts let's keep following our Lord and keep believing in Jesus and keep lifting up his name. For Jesus is the one who said, "I have

come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.” Let’s hold up Jesus and in his name bring life back to our dying nation. Amen.

Proverbs 24:21 PATRIOTISM Fear the Lord and the King

Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious. Proverbs 24:21

It is often said that God only established three institutions—the home, the church, and the state. In so doing, He gave us explicit instructions on how all three were to operate. Most Christians know a great deal about what God has to say about the home and church. We know much less about what God says about the state and how we should relate to it. For instance, what does it mean to be a Christian living under a pagan government? Is violent revolution ever justified? Is it wrong to pay taxes to an unjust government? What about picketing abortion clinics? Under what circumstances should Christians disobey the law? What about the separation of church and state? Should Christians serve in the armed forces? How do you respond when those over you are corrupt?

These are all important questions, and none of them admits to a simple answer. Romans 13:1 tells us that “everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” The word authority is very broad. It means “right” or “privilege.” An authority is anyone who has the right to do something. If your job gives you the right to make certain decisions, when you are on the job, you are an “authority.” Seen in another light, an authority is anyone who has the right to make decisions that directly affect your life.

Then there is an explicit directive. “Submit to the governing authorities.” No ifs, ands, or buts. Just the word submit. Let me share a simple definition that may help you. Submission is believing that God is able to accomplish His will in my life through the people He has placed in authority over me. That’s a crucial definition because it focuses the attention on God, not on the person over you. We all have to contend at times with unsaved husbands, mean-spirited parents, cranky bosses, and teachers who can’t wait for the end of the semester. Sometimes we’ll work for people we can’t stand. Or live with people who treat us cruelly. Or suffer under a government that consistently promotes evil.

What do you do, then? Actually, you have many options. The most important thing is the attitude of your heart. You must submit to the one in authority, in the sense that you must believe God has put that person in your life for a purpose and that God’s will is somehow being done through that person, even if you don’t see it and don’t understand it.

This, by the way, is the basis for treating our leaders with respect. Christians ought to lead the way in showing honor to human authorities because we understand they are appointed by God. Whom God has appointed, I must not treat lightly.

If we believe what the Bible says, it will make us better Christians and ultimately better citizens. We may disagree, but we won’t resort to violence and we won’t join the ranks of the rebellious.

Heavenly Father, since I am a citizen of two realms, help me to represent You well by showing proper honor to those in authority over me. Amen.

In what areas of life are you in authority and in what areas are you under authority? What does it mean for you to show honor to those who are over you? When is it a struggle for you?

Proverbs 24:26 Honesty - The Best Defense for a Bad Memory

October 2004 – “An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (Proverbs 24:26).

This verse will suggest different things to different people. What exactly does it mean and what is the relationship between an honest answer and a kiss on the lips? I think there are three points of comparison:

- 1) Just as it is relatively rare to be kissed on the lips, even so it is relatively rare to hear a true and honest answer.
- 2) Just as a kiss on the lips means more than a kiss on the cheek, even so an honest answer is a mark of true sincerity.
- 3) Just as a kiss on the lips can be and should be deeply satisfying to the soul, even so an honest answer is satisfying to the soul.

We live in a cynical age when truth is in short supply.

The polls show we don't think our leaders are telling us the truth.

Our motto seems to be: "Tell the truth as long as it is convenient."

When an election rolls around, it's open season on the truth.

One campaign has a "Truth Squad"; the other has a "Department of Defense."

"If you lie about me, I'm going to lie about you."

In the process, truth is first devalued, and then lost altogether.

Proverbs 6:16-19 tells us the seven things the Lord hates. Two especially deal with the lack of honesty: a lying tongue and the false witness who pours out lies. Proverbs 14:25 tells us that "A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful." According to Proverbs 12:19, "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment."

I read about a man who told a lie at work. "I got in trouble and I told a lie to cover up what I had done. But then I found that I needed to tell another lie to cover up for the first lie. But then I had to tell a third lie to cover up the first two lies I told. Then I had to tell another one to cover up the third lie, a fifth lie to cover up the fourth lie, and I kept on until I finally sat down and counted up and realized that I had to tell 42 lies in a row to cover up for the first one."

Another man was fired from a high-level executive job. The reason was simple: lying, bending the truth. It wasn't out-and-out scheming as much as ignored opportunity to come clean. When challenged, he covered up and was discovered. He was the company's rising star personally changing the face of a multimillion dollar business. He lost his job because he couldn't tell the truth.

If you lose your money, you can always make some more. If you lose your integrity, you may never get it back. Tell the truth the first time and you won't have to worry about having a bad memory.

Proverbs 25:15 Tact: Making a Point Without Making an Enemy

May 1999 – "Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone." Proverbs 25:15

Someone noted that tact is like a girdle. It enables you to organize the awkward truth more attractively. A Chinese proverb says it this way: Do not use a hatchet to remove a fly from a friend's forehead.

Both those statements remind us that often we are called to say "hard truth" to others. Sometimes that means risking the love of those we hold most dear. We must tell them the truth or they will not get better. Perhaps they simply don't see it, or don't want to see it. They may have a bad habit that is holding them back or it may be an unseen character flaw that causes them to lose the respect of others. You know it, you see it, and you care about them. Do you care enough to tell the truth? Do you also care enough to speak with tact?

Proverbs 25:15 spells out two strategies you can use. The first is patience. That means waiting till the right moment to speak your mind. Timing is everything. If you embarrass someone publicly, they aren't likely to respond favorably. Likewise, if you ambush them the moment they walk through the door, they will regard your words as a personal attack. So before you speak, take your time. Think. Pray. Ask God to give you an open door. When it comes, then you are ready for the second strategy.

Second, use a gentle tongue. Just as a gentle answer turns away wrath (cf. 15:1), even so a gentle tongue can break a bone. Here is the picture of a hardened bone being softened bit by bit by the touch of a gentle tongue. It won't happen quickly, but in most cases gentleness accomplishes far more than threats or intimidation.

So what exactly is this gentle tongue that can break a bone? It is the ability to say the right thing at the right time in the right way without saying anything you didn't want to say and that didn't need to be said. A tactful person seeks to find a private place and a fitting moment. It means you refuse to dump all your frustrations on another person. You say what needs to be said in the quickest, kindest, most direct way possible. Then you move on.

Tact is really nothing more than wisdom applied to the "girdle moments" of life. Remember, when you have to speak the awkward truth, don't use a hatchet to get rid of a fly.

Proverbs 24:29 REVENGE Let God Get Even

Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did." Proverbs 24:29

There is a man in the Bible who had every right to be angry at the way he was treated. He was a good man, a teacher of God's law, a man who helped those in need and got angry only when he saw injustice in the world. When he started his ministry, the powers that be at first found him a nuisance and later a threat. Eventually, they decided that he must be killed. But because he was popular with the common people, they couldn't arrest him haphazardly. They had to find a plausible excuse that would give them a cover for their dirty deeds.

The day came when he traveled to the capital city for a public celebration. That's when the leaders made their move. They had found a man among his followers-his treasurer, no less-who was willing to sell him out in exchange for a handful of money. The deal was struck, the time set, the plan made. It all went like clockwork, and the good man was arrested.

Outside the city walls, near a limestone quarry with the strange face of a skull outlined on the side of a cliff, the good man was put to death. He didn't say much that day, only about seven or eight sentences. But, oh, what words they were. What power! What truth he spoke!

Do you remember the first words he said from the cross? How could you ever forget them? He looked down, his chest heaving, the sun beating down on his fevered, bleeding brow, his face a mass of blood and tears, his hands and feet dripping blood from the nail holes. He saw the laughter, heard the jeers, and knew that they were laughing at him.

He had done nothing wrong. Nothing to deserve this.

He closed his eyes, as if in prayer. Then he looked again at the howling, wild mob. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Forgive them? But they were guilty of the greatest crime in all history.

Forgive them? But he was innocent-and they knew it.

Forgive them! But they had twisted the truth, made up lies, slandered his name, bribed his treasurer, rigged the trial, and guaranteed his death. It was murder, pure and simple. They meant to kill him-and they did.

Forgive them? How could it be?

But that's what he said. "Father, forgive them." He was a good man, the best man the world has ever seen. He came to show us how to live, and he came to show us how to die. He came to save us while we were yet sinners. He even came to save those who put him to death.

"Father, forgive them." I'm so glad Jesus said that, because it shows us that forgiveness is always possible. If He could forgive, then anything is possible. If the Son of God could rise above revenge, if He could find a way to forgive His enemies, then so can we.

Lord Jesus, thank You for showing us how to forgive the unforgivable. Now please help me to do it. Amen.

Name three people you'd like to get even with right now. Can you think of anyone who would like to get even with you?

What would need to change in your heart before you could truly and sincerely forgive your enemies? Are you willing for God to make that change?

PROVERBS 25

Proverbs 25:8 CAUTION Look Before You Leap

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way. Proverbs 19:2

What you have seen with your eyes do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame? Proverbs 25:8

The key word in both verses is hasty. Zeal for God by itself is a noble quality. A zealous person is one who has made a commitment to a particular course of action and, having made that commitment, bends all his energies to carry it out. In a passage made famous by Handel's Messiah, Isaiah speaks of the great things the Lord Jesus will accomplish by His coming to the earth. He will establish His kingdom, ruling over the entire earth from David's throne in Jerusalem. That great future, yet future to us, will happen because

“the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:7c). God has spoken it, and, at the right moment, He will bring all His divine energy to bear to bring it to pass.

But Solomon warns us about “zeal without knowledge.” What does he mean? God’s zeal is guided by His perfect knowledge of all things. Because we do not have the luxury of perfect knowledge, we often face the temptation of acting too fast or speaking too soon.

The meaning is clear: Don’t open your mouth until you have something to say. Get all the facts, get them straight, think things through, and then take action. But what if you think your neighbor has cheated you? Should we simply let others take advantage of us? The answer, of course, is no. Solomon isn’t suggesting that we become punching bags for the neighborhood bully.

Just remember, though, that there are always two sides to a story. In fact, there are at least two and sometimes more sides—"my side, your side, and the right side." Just because you think you’re right doesn’t mean you are. Or at least it doesn’t mean the judge will see it your way.

These are wise words in this litigious age where even Christians are quick to threaten lawsuits against those who have wronged them. It ought to be difficult for a believer to say “I’ll sue you,” especially to another believer (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). You may end up losing every-thing-the case, your money, and your reputation.

Take your time. Get the facts. Don’t be quick to pass judgment. You don’t have to answer every question or pursue every grievance against you. It has been well said that God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we would listen twice as much as we talk. That’s good advice for all of us, especially for those who talk first and listen later.

Zeal is good, but zeal without knowledge can get you in a heap of trouble.

Lord, give me the wisdom to know when to take action and the courage to wait until the time is right. Amen.

When was the last time you made a major decision you later regretted? Looking back, how could you have avoided making that mistake?

What are the current major issues in your life? Which ones need more study before making a decision?

Proverbs 25:15 TACT Making a Point Without Making an Enemy

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone. Proverbs 25:15

Someone noted that tact is like a girdle. It enables you to organize the awkward truth more attractively. A Chinese proverb says it this way: Do not use a hatchet to remove a fly from a friend’s forehead.

Both those statements remind us that often we are called up to say “hard truth” to others. Sometimes that means risking the love of those we hold most dear. We must tell them the truth or they will not get better. Perhaps they simply don’t see it, or don’t want to see it. They may have a bad habit that is holding them back, or they may have an unseen character flaw that causes them to lose the respect of others. You know it, you see it, and you care about them. Do you care enough to tell the truth? Do you also care enough to speak with tact?

Proverbs 25:15 spells out two strategies you can use. The first is patience. That means waiting till the right moment to speak your mind. Timing is everything. If you embarrass someone publicly, he isn’t likely to respond favorably. Likewise, if you ambush someone the moment he walks through the door, he will regard your words as a personal attack. So before you speak, take your time. Think. Pray. Ask God to give you an open door. When it comes, then you are ready for the second strategy.

Second, use a gentle tongue. Just as a “gentle answer turns away wrath” (15:1), even so a gentle tongue can break a bone. Here is the picture of a hardened bone being softened bit by bit by the touch of a gentle tongue. It won’t happen quickly, but in most cases gentleness accomplishes far more than threats or intimidation.

In making a plea for tact, I am asking for nothing more than that we “[speak] the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Jesus did it, and is remembered today as the supreme embodiment of love. Yet no one ever spoke the truth like He did. He wasn’t afraid to speak truth to power, to challenge the rulers of His day. And when necessary He didn’t hesitate to take a whip and clean out the temple-which doesn’t sound like a very tactful thing to do. But He did it, and since He was the Son of God it must have been the right thing to do.

So what exactly is this gentle tongue that can break a bone? It is the ability to say the right thing at the right time in the right way without saying anything you didn’t want to say and that didn’t need to be said. A tactful person seeks to find a private place and a

fitting moment. It means you refuse to dump all your frustrations on another person. You say what needs to be said in the quickest, kindest, most direct way possible. Then you move on.

Tact is really nothing more than wisdom applied to the “girdle moments” of life. Remember, when you have to speak the awkward truth, don’t use a hatchet to get rid of a fly.

Lord Jesus, I pray for Your Spirit to fill my lips so that I might speak as You did. Amen.

Do you have trouble with tact? If in doubt, ask a friend and you’ll get a quick answer.

What is the difference between tact and flattery? Between boldness and brusqueness? Why do we so often confuse them?

Give an example showing how tact helped you deal with a difficult situation. Or, looking back, you wish you had shown more tact than you did.

Proverbs 25:16 OVERINDULGENCE Too Much of a Good Thing

If you find honey, eat just enough-too much of it, and you will vomit. Proverbs 25:16

Perhaps this doesn’t seem like a life-changing issue, and it might not be-until you begin to vomit. You don’t realize the problem until it has overwhelmed you. As Derek Kidner has remarked, there is a fundamental difference between a healthy appetite and greed.

In some ways this desire to always have more goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where God offered Adam and Eve their choice of the fruit set before them. “Look in any direction,” God seemed to say. “Do you like peaches? Nectarines? Pears? Plums? Grapes? Would you like a fresh orange or possibly a nice fruit salad for lunch? Whatever you see, you can have. It all belongs to you.”

There was only one restriction. “Don’t touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Thousands of trees were theirs for the taking. All the fruit they could ever want and more besides. They were in paradise and God offered them enormous freedom. “Pick your fruit and eat to your heart’s content. Just don’t touch that one tree. Everything else is yours for the taking.”

Not surprisingly, that’s exactly where the serpent attacked (Genesis 3:1-6). He questioned God’s goodness and implied that God was holding out on them. “He doesn’t want you to be happy and fulfilled. He’s keeping the best for Himself. He was lying when He said you would die.”

Someone was indeed lying, and he hasn’t stopped lying since. The serpent still whispers in our ear that we’ll be happy if only we spend more, buy more, move up to a larger home, take a new job, move to a new city, get on the fast track, loosen up our rigid standards, learn to move with the movers and shake with the shakers.

His greatest feat may be in convincing unhappy spouses that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. So husbands have affairs and wives file for divorce-or vice versa. At its heart, the current divorce craze is driven by the belief that human happiness and God’s will must be identical. “How can God be pleased with a marriage where we are so miserable together?” Will the God who said “I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16) be more pleased when you are no longer married?

Ever since Eden, men and women have sought to find happiness by pushing beyond the limits established by God. Deep down we doubt God’s goodness and we think that if a little is good, a lot must be better. So we overeat, overspend, and overindulge all our appetites. If it feels good, we do it, even if God has said it is wrong. Something in us makes us push the limits, hoping to find happiness. Or peace. Or satisfaction. Or joy.

When will we learn that there is no fulfillment out side of God? His ways are always best. When we break the rules, we pay the price of a seriously upset stomach.

Lord God, save me from the folly of thinking that I need something besides You to be truly happy today. Amen.

In what areas of your life are you tempted to overindulge? When does it happen most often? What one thing would make you happy right now?

What does it mean to you to be satisfied with Jesus?

Proverbs 25:21-22 KINDNESS The Ministry of Burning Coals

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. Proverbs 25:21-22

Let's begin by defining who the "enemy" is in this passage. The "enemy" is almost always a friend, a colleague, or a family member who has hurt me in some way. My enemy by definition will almost always be someone close to me. Here's a working definition: An enemy is any person God uses to reveal my weaknesses. An enemy is like a chisel God uses to chip away at the rough spots in my life. That's why, if you are married, your husband or your wife will be your enemy sometimes. No one knows your weaknesses like your spouse. Spouses know hidden blemishes, secret sins, and bad habits the rest of the world never sees. They know because they live with you every day.

Can a husband be your enemy? Yes, and you can still love him even when you can't stand him. Can a wife be your enemy? Yes, because she constantly, often accidentally, exposes your weaknesses. She sees the real you that no one else ever sees. You may put on a front at church, but your wife knows the real story. Yes, your wife can be your enemy. If she loves you, she'll have to be your enemy from time to time. Otherwise, how are you ever going to get better?

That's why you have to feed your enemy. You can't let your wife or your husband starve to death. It wouldn't look good in the newspaper. That's why you have to give your boss or your teacher or that obnoxious person in the next office something to drink. These are people who are close to you, and because they are close to you, God is using them to expose the weak areas of your life.

But there's a happy result from treating your enemies this way. You heap burning coals on their head. Through deeds of love shown to those who have hurt us deeply, we may actually change their hearts. In that case, our enemy has now become our friend.

What would qualify as "hot coals"? A kind word, a phone call, a brief note, a flower, a meal, a small gift, a letter of recommendation, running an errand, offering a ride, helping them complete a project, rewriting their report, stepping in to save a project that was failing, putting in a good word with their superiors, helping them clean the classroom, going bowling with them. The list is endless, because "hot coals" refers to any act of kindness you do for an enemy. Your only limit is your creativity.

Then there is the reward: "And the Lord will reward you." But the principle is true, nonetheless. God will be no man's debtor. God rewards those who show kindness to their enemies. How will He do it? It's hard to say. One obvious answer might be to cause your "hot coals" to turn your enemy into a friend. Or He might promote you or pour out new blessings or grant you answers to your prayers or give you new spiritual growth.

Not to worry. If you do your part, God will do His. You can count on that.

Father, I confess that it's difficult to love my enemies. And it's even hard to believe You want me to. I need Your help or I'll never be able to do it. Amen.

Name three "enemies" in your life right now. List at least three "hot coals" you can pour on each one.

What kind of "reward" would you like from the Lord in each case?

PROVERBS 26

Proverbs 26:4-5 INSIGHT A Time to Answer and a Time to Walk Away

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. Proverbs 26:4-5

Critics have sometimes seized on these verses as proof that the Bible contradicts itself. But a moment's reflection shows how absurd that is. The very fact that these verses are put back-to-back proves that they are not meant to contradict each other. Rather, the writer put them together to press home an important point. Sometimes you answer a fool; sometimes you don't. What you do depends on the person you're talking to.

In some cases, answering a fool will cause you to be lowered to his level. Oftentimes someone will offer an argument simply to hear

the sound of his own voice. Or perhaps someone will engage you in an argument with no other purpose than to cause you to lose your temper. The wise person senses when the motive is other than a fair-minded search for the truth and doesn't bother to enter the fray. He simply walks away. Better to say nothing than to descend to the level of gutter talk.

Other times, if you don't answer him, he'll simply conclude that you don't have an answer and thus will become "wise in his own conceit." This often happens in discussing issues relating to apologetics. Sometimes you simply must open your mouth and defend the truth that the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that this world did not evolve but was created by the hand of God, that there is such a thing as absolute morality, that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ.

Are not these propositions controversial? Indeed they are. But by responding you are providing reasons for the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15). And the Lord may use your answer to win your adversary (2 Timothy 2:24-26). At the very least, you will have given him food for thought. Perhaps the seeds you plant will bring forth a harvest of eternal life.

I have a simple rule I follow for deciding whether or not to enter a discussion. If it's a personal issue with me, I walk away. That is, if I feel myself needing to win an argument instead of persuading another person, then for me it's time to back off. The same thing applies if I feel myself getting angry at the other person.

Perhaps the Lord Jesus is the best example of both proverbs. When He stood before the high priest, Jesus refused to answer the false charges brought against Him (Matthew 26:62-63). But when Pilate questioned Him, He readily entered into a dialogue (John 18:28-19:16). One gets the feeling that Jesus sensed Pilate's combination of confusion and curiosity and, therefore, answered his questions.

Ecclesiastes 3 tells us that there is a time for every purpose under heaven, including "a time to be silent and a time to speak" (v. 7). Insight means understanding the difference, sensing the need of the moment, listening carefully, and acting accordingly.

Lord Jesus, grant me the wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent. Amen.

Have you ever answered a fool only to regret it later? Or have you wished later that you had spoken up instead of remaining silent?

Why did Jesus answer Pilate but not the high priest? What lesson do you draw from that fact? How can we learn the same kind of wisdom?

PROVERBS 27

Proverbs 27:1 BOASTING The Loud Sound of an Empty Mind

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. Proverbs 27:1

This is one of the most famous verses in the book of Proverbs and one of the most often quoted. In tones that are darkly ominous, it reminds us of a truth no one can escape. Life is uncertain. No one knows what tomorrow will bring.

Think of what you would know if you knew the future. You could invest in the stock market and make money every time. You could pass every test because you would know the questions in advance. You would never be surprised by a sudden snowstorm or an unexpected visitor. Every business plan would succeed because you would have perfectly planned for every contingency. Nervous suitors would never pop the question until they knew in advance the answer would be yes.

There are at least three reasons it is good that you don't know your future. Number one, if you knew the future, you wouldn't be able to understand it. So many factors play into what is going to happen six months from now that we couldn't comprehend them all. Most of us want simple answers: "Will the stock market go up or down?" "Should I take that new job?" "If I ask Jill to marry me, will she say yes?" God says, "I can't really answer it that way. I have to show you the big picture." But if He showed us the big picture, we wouldn't understand it.

Number two, if you knew the future, it would make you either lazy or arrogant. Someone has said that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. It's true that hard work doesn't guarantee success. But hard work creates the climate in which success is more likely to take place. One reason we work hard is precisely because we don't know the future. If you knew how the stock market was going to do next year, it might tend to make you take it easy. Why work hard when you already know what tomorrow will bring? That same knowledge might tend to make you arrogant because you would be privy to inside information. Either way-whether lazy or arrogant-you wouldn't be a very nice person to be around.

Number three, knowing your personal future would eventually lead to despair. Suppose someone handed you a manila envelope and told you it contained a detailed account of your next ten years. Would you open it? The temptation would be almost irresistible. But suppose the envelope contained news of a forthcoming tragedy that you could not avoid. Knowing the future would then be a curse, not a blessing. We think we want to know the future, but really we don't. It's better not to know, for then we're forced to take life as it comes-moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day.

Boasting is foolish because it makes us think we control the future when we don't even control the present. At its heart boasting is a subtle form of idolatry in which we attempt to push God off the throne.

If you want to boast, boast that you know the Lord. That's the only thing that matters. And leave the future in God's hands. He can handle it just fine by Himself.

Lord, when I am tempted to boast about my plans, please remind me that You can run the universe without any help from me. Amen.

Suppose you were given the opportunity to discover the next ten years of your life in advance. Would you take that opportunity? Why or why not?

If you could know just one fact about your own personal future, what would it be? How would knowing that fact change the way you live today?

What is the essential difference between making wise plans and boasting about the future?

Proverbs 27:5-6 REBUKE Caring Enough to Tell the Truth

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Proverbs 27:5-6

The King James Version says it elegantly: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Being a man or woman of integrity means that you don't walk away from a problem. It means that when you see a problem you hit it head-on, even though it would be easier and more convenient and pleasant just to walk away.

When someone asked General Norman Schwarzkopf the secret of his success, he replied very simply, "I never walk past a problem." Another friend put it this way: "Just remember, when it comes to solving problems, the first price you pay is always the cheapest." We ignore problems, hoping they will go away, but that rarely happens. And the price of solving them goes up, not down.

That last bit of advice came from a pastor who stayed in the same church over thirty years. He said, "I learned years ago when I was just starting out in the ministry that my tendency when I saw a problem was to just walk away. I discovered that I had to fight that tendency. I discovered through hard experience that the first price you pay is always the cheapest." The reason we don't want to get involved in solving problems we see around us is that we think if we just wait, the problems will solve themselves. That is rarely the case. Problems never get better when you ignore them. You may think you love someone too much to say anything. No, if you really loved them, you would speak the truth. You would speak it in love, but you will speak the truth he needs to hear. Integrity does not ignore the problems of life.

This truth has two sides. We are to love each other enough that we are willing for our brothers and sisters to hurt us if necessary. What does that mean? It means that in the body of Christ we are to have some friends gathered around us who are close enough to hurt us from time to time.

Does that sound like a shocking statement? It might seem that way. Nobody wants to be hurt by his friends. We all want to be surrounded by people who will make us feel better about ourselves. The very idea of having friends who will hurt us seems absurd. Friends don't hurt each other. Friends build each other up.

But that's not the whole story. If you want to live in a world where no one will ever hurt you, you picked the wrong planet on which to be born.

Spiritual growth becomes possible when you let other people get close enough to you to say the things to you that you need to hear-whether you want to hear them or not.

Lord Jesus, give me the courage I need to speak hard truth to my friends and the grace to receive it if they need to speak it to me. Amen.

Which is harder for you-to speak hard truth or to have someone speak it to you? Why?

What “hard truth” do you need to say that you have been putting off? What do you plan to do about it?

Proverbs 27:8 RESTLESSNESS Running Away from Your Problems

Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home. Proverbs 27:8

This verse speaks to the desire we all feel from time to time to run away from our problems. The translators use various phrases to express this truth. The man in question “wanders far from home,” he “strays from where he belongs,” and he is “moved from his place.”

The point of the comparison is not hard to find. All birds leave the nest eventually. But a bird that “strays” from the nest is abandoning its responsibilities and may end up never finding the way back home again. Even so, a man who “strays from where he belongs,” especially from his home, loses touch with the most important realities of life. God gave us families so that we would have roots. In the words of Robert Frost, “Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” But where will a man go if he strays from the “nest” God has given him?

This certainly applies to men and woman who leave their mates and children in search of happiness. But it also applies to the general temptation to believe that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Thus we hop from job to job, looking for the one place where we (and our careers) will blossom. We migrate from church to church, stopping only long enough to see the blemishes in each congregation but not long enough to make lasting friendships. In the same vein, we move from house to house and town to town, flying like a stray bird farther and farther from our roots. Sometimes we ditch our lifetime friends in favor of new ones.

One important point must be emphasized. Leaving is not wrong, nor is changing jobs, starting over, moving to a new community, or finding a new church. Sometimes we must break a friendship for our own spiritual well-being. But motive is all important. Leaving and changing and making a new start can sometimes be nothing more than a convenient excuse for running from our problems.

Often we stray because we expected to be happy, and when we aren't, we pack up and leave. But marriage is tough at times, even the best friends get on your nerves, no job is perfect, no church is always harmonious, and life in general can be boring and unpredictable.

So what? If you cop out and drop out, do you really think things will get better? If you are running from your problems, running away won't make things better. One mark of maturity is that you can face your problems head-on, without flinching, without making excuses, without complaining, and without running away.

God has a purpose in allowing us to struggle with the temptation to run away. He is developing character in us, and to do that, adversity is essential. That's why life isn't easy, why nothing works the way it's supposed to, why we struggle so hard to get ahead. God's agenda and His timetable are often quite different from ours.

Do not despair. The road is hard and the journey long because God made it that way. But there's a crown and a throne at the end for those who persevere.

Lord, help me to stay in my nest until You tell me it's time to leave. Amen.

When are you most tempted to run away from your problems? From your perspective, what is the difference between responsible leaving and running away?

What situation, person, or problem are you most tempted to run away from right now?

Proverbs 27:14 COURTESY The Milk of Human Kindness

If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse. Proverbs 27:14

There is a bit of mystery surrounding this particular proverb. Is the man in view simply a gregarious friend who is just a little too happy early in the morning? Or is there a sinister implication here, that this man is being falsely friendly in order to gain a personal advantage? Is he too friendly too early because he wants to take you off guard while you are still waking up? The New Living Translation evidently inclines to the first view, translating the verse this way: “If you shout a pleasant greeting to your neighbor too

early in the morning, it will be counted as a curse!"

So what's the problem? At the very least, your gregarious neighbor is showing a deplorable lack of common courtesy. Even if he means well, his timing is off by about two hours. Harry Ironside calls this behavior "utterly obnoxious." Such a person is tone-deaf to the delicate sensitivities of friendship. There is a proper time for everything-including hearty greetings-but this man evidently doesn't know or doesn't care.

Proverbs contains several other examples of this boorish behavior. Overfamiliarity can be a problem (25:17), as can an overused sense of humor (26:18-19). Sometimes the problem is simply making inappropriate comments (25:20). All of us may be guilty of such things occasionally. Wisdom senses the problems before they arise and finds a graceful alternative.

John Henry Newman commented that "it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say that he is one who never inflicts pain." Because he possesses a keen understanding of human nature, he knows when to speak, when to be silent, when to drop in for a visit, and when to go home. He doesn't wear out his welcome, and he doesn't use humor as a tool to hurt others. To use an old expression, he "wears well."

First Corinthians 13:4-5 tells us that "love is kind" and "is not rude." Courtesy is nothing more than the practical application of Christian love to the ordinary affairs of life. The dictionary calls courtesy "excellence of manners" and "polite behavior." It is a combination of tact, timing, sensitivity, and kindness. Courteous people are known not only by what they do and say, but also by what they don't do and don't say.

Admittedly, this virtue may not seem as noble as courage or as important as integrity. But when analyzed, courtesy is impossible without a whole host of other virtues, including patience, forgiveness, self-control, and humility. When someone spreads rumors about you, are you strong enough not to retaliate in anger? If a gregarious neighbor knocks at your door at 6:15 A.M., will you be gracious enough not to pour hot coffee down his pants?

In a very real sense, the test of courtesy is the bad manners of others. Anyone can be courteous to nice people. It's how you respond to the cads and louts of the world that makes all the difference.

"Life is short," said Ralph Waldo Emerson, "but there is always time for courtesy." That's a good thing to remember the next time your neighbor knocks at your door.

Lord Jesus, You were the epitome of courtesy toward friend and foe alike. Give me the grace to treat others as You would. Amen.

List four or five examples of common courtesy and rate yourself in each area.

How do you normally respond to discourteous treatment by others?

Proverbs 27:17 Accountability How to Reach Your Full Potential

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17

Anyone who has ever owned a knife understands this proverb. When iron becomes blunt, another piece of iron is used to sharpen it. That process necessarily involves heat, friction, and very close contact. You can't sharpen an ax from a distance. You have to get close enough to make the sparks fly.

Even so, one man may "sharpen" another, but you have to get close enough to let the sparks fly. That implies openness, honesty, vulnerability, and the willingness to receive constructive criticism.

Howard Hendricks says that every man needs a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy. Paul represents that person in your life to whom you look for spiritual leadership. He (or she) is that person who keeps urging you to "press toward the mark" of God's high calling in your life. This person could be a husband or a wife. More often it will be a close friend or a co-worker; very often it might be an older person you greatly admire. Your "Paul" is that one key person you look to when things begin to fall apart, when your back is against the wall, when you find yourself confused about the next step you should take. You'll grow faster if you've got someone around you who can give you good counsel when you really need it.

Barnabas represents that person in your life who is probably your best friend. He (or she) is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. You may not get much advice from this friend (except indirectly), but your "Barnabas" is that person who brightens your life by his very presence. Your "Barnabas" could be a husband or wife, but often will be a very close friend who can weep over your defeats and cheer your victories. This person is a true "Son of Encouragement" to you, lightening your load simply by being there for you.

We all need a “Barnabas,” for life is tough enough as it is.

Timothy represents that person in your life to whom you are a “Paul.” He (or she) may be a new believer or a younger Christian. He (or she) will be a person in whom you sense great potential for Jesus Christ. As you spend time together, you share your heart, your understanding of God, your daily walk with Christ. You let this person get close enough to see you, warts and all. Why? So that you can develop your “Timothy” into a strong soldier for Jesus Christ. This may be done in a formal way, by meeting weekly for prayer and Bible study. Or it may happen as you check in with each other to see how things are going. You need a “Timothy” in your life so that all the things God is teaching you don’t stop with you.

So . . .

- Who is your “Paul”?
- Who is your “Barnabas”?
- Who is your “Timothy”?

You need a mentor (DISCIPLER), you need a close friend, and you need someone who looks up to you for guidance. Or to say it another way, follow Paul, be a Barnabas, find a Timothy.

Lord, I see too many blunt edges in my life. Sharpen me that I might be a useful tool in Your hands. Amen.

How do you answer the three questions above?

Who is currently holding you accountable for your own spiritual growth? If the answer is “no one,” what do you plan to do about it?

Proverbs 27:23-27 THOROUGHNESS Taking Care of Business

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations. When the hay is removed and new growth appears and the grass from the hills is gathered in, the lambs will provide you with clothing, and the goats with the price of a field. You will have plenty of goats’ milk to feed you and your family and to nourish your servant girls. Proverbs 27:23-27

Some things in life are so simple as to defy any attempt to make them complicated. This passage brings before us one of those self-evident truths. Take care of your business today and you will be in good shape tomorrow. Simple, easy to understand. Focus on the task at hand, do it to the best of your ability, and don’t worry about the future.

The reason is easy to understand. Since the future is always uncertain (“riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure”), the most you can do is to take care of business so you can tip the scales a bit in your favor. Even after you’ve done the best you can, some unexpected calamity may come, throwing your life into a tailspin. The best way to prepare for the unexpected is simply to be thorough in what you do today.

That leads to a profound insight: 99 percent of life is ordinary. It’s just the same old stuff day after day. You get up in the morning, take a shower, put your clothes on, eat breakfast, get the kids ready for school, go to work, hope the kids are OK, come back from work dead tired, read the paper, watch TV, try to be nice, eat supper, play with the kids, flop into bed dead tired, get up the next morning, and then do it all over again. That’s the way life is.

Where do you begin in discovering the will of God? You begin by doing what you already know to be the will of God in your present situation. So many of us live for those high, mountain-peak experiences, for those times when the clouds part and God seems so close to us. If you are a student, the will of God is to do your homework. If you are a lawyer, the will of God is to study the law. If you are a banker, the will of God is take care of the money entrusted to you. If you are a teacher, the will of God is to be prepared every time you step into your classroom.

The will of God always begins with the ordinary, the mundane, the usual. But that’s a hard fact for a generation seeking something spectacular. Often when we say “God, show me Your will,” what we really mean is, “Lord, give me some feeling, some insight, some spiritual revelation.” And God says, “I have already shown you My will. Now just get up and do it!”

So many of us want to live only on the mountaintop. That’s not where you discover God’s will. You discover God’s will in the nitty-gritty of the valley every single day. The Bible says, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Why should God show you His will for the future if you aren’t doing the will of God in the present?

Help me to be busy doing the work You have given me to do, O Lord. Save me from the folly of thinking that tomorrow is somehow

more important than today. Amen.

How well have you been “taking care of business” lately?

Considering that “99 percent of life is ordinary,” what is the will of God for you today?

What have you been putting off that needs to be done before you go to bed tonight?

Proverbs 27:18 DEPENDABILITY How Old Faithful Got Its Name

He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who looks after his master will be honored. Proverbs 27:18

It has been well said that the greatest ability is dependability. The word itself means “able to be relied upon.” It’s the one quality every boss prizes in his workers. Talent counts and education matters, but they don’t mean as much as dependability. Find a man who can take a job and carry it through to the end. Mark that man, note his name, jot it down so you won’t forget it. Sooner or later he will rise to the top. He will “eat the fruit” of his own labor. Second Timothy 2:6 says it very plainly: “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.” Dependability always brings its own reward. If you can do the job and do it well and do it without having to be reminded or cajoled or promised or bribed or threatened; if you simply show up day after day and do your job, you will eventually “eat the fruit” of your labor.

So many of us make excuses for nonperformance. We were too busy; we didn’t understand; it didn’t seem very important; we had other things to do; our desk was so cluttered that we lost the file; we never learned that particular computer program; we weren’t feeling well, so we decided to go home early; we had a better idea; the guys in top management are goldbricks; the boss doesn’t appreciate us, so why put ourselves out for him? On and on we go, making excuses for what we didn’t do.

Meanwhile, the man next to us steadily goes about his work. He’s not flashy or especially clever; in fact, we could probably work circles around him if we tried. But while we’re frittering away the day, he’s sitting at his desk, working on the phone, writing the report, fixing the machine, seeing the patients, calling his contacts, preparing his lesson plans. He doesn’t overpromise and underdeliver. If he says he can do it, you can take it to the bank.

Like Old Faithful, he simply shows up on time and does his job. Guess who gets the promotion? Or the bonus at the end of the year? Guess whose job is safe when downsizing hits your department?

It’s not you. You’ve been too busy finding reasons not to do your job. Meanwhile, he’s been plugging away day after day.

God bless that man and give him his due. Because he tended the fig tree, he gets to enjoy the harvest. His master is pleased and gives him a raise.

There’s nothing magical about this. He was dependable and was rewarded. That ought to be your story. If it’s not, you’ve got some explaining to do.

Father, You always keep Your promises. Help me to keep mine. Amen.

Bottom line: Are you a dependable person? What would your spouse say? Your friends? Your boss? Your fellow employees? If you don’t know the answer, ask them.

What steps do you need to take to become more dependable?

PROVERBS 28

Proverbs 28:1 COURAGE How to Face Down Your Fears

The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion. Proverbs 28:1

The dictionary defines courage this way: The ability to face and deal with a dangerous or difficult situation. There are two parts. First you must face difficulty; then you must deal with it.

Most of the popular images of courage have to do with men fighting on a battlefield. The soldiers coming ashore at Omaha Beach. The defenders of Bastogne holding out against the Nazis. The Marines landing on Iwo Jima. Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. President Kennedy standing strong during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I have thought much about the many faces of courage—most of them ones you never see on a battlefield. Courage is a family dealing with terminal cancer. It is a single mother struggling to raise her family. It is a widow who faces the last years of her life without her beloved husband by her side. It is a child of divorce, struggling with his self-image, with doubt and anger, and with feelings of rejection. It is a single person who chooses purity over promiscuity. It is an engaged couple who will wait even though the world says go ahead. It is former President Reagan telling the nation that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. It is a newly-minted MBA who moves into an inner-city community. It is an employee who sees corruption and has the courage to blow the whistle. It is a dad facing a difficult surgery.

What do these things have in common? I see four qualities that are evident in people with courage:

Bravery in the face of danger: "I won't be afraid."

Steadfastness in the face of opposition: "I won't give up."

Action in the face of resistance: "I won't be intimidated."

Optimism in the face of despair: "I won't lose heart."

Where does this courage come from? Proverbs 28:1 tells us that "the righteous are as bold as a lion." The righteous are bold, not the wicked. The wicked are scared to death. If you are a Christian, the first step to courage is to remember who you are in Jesus Christ. You are victorious, accepted, justified, redeemed, saved, and completely forgiven. Your sins are washed away. You are seated with Jesus Christ in the heavenlies. You were born for courage, not for fear. Second Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-discipline. If you have a controlling spirit of fear, timidity, or anxiety, it didn't come from God, for He does not give His people a spirit of fear.

There is an old Italian proverb that goes this way: Better to spend one day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep. Better to spend one day with courageous faith in God than a whole lifetime cowering in fear.

You will never win until you rise up and confront the thing that is dragging you down. God put courage in you the moment you came to Christ. Use the courage God has given you, and you will be able to face your fears and come out victorious.

Holy Spirit, I ask that You fill me with love, power, and self-discipline, so that I can face the future without fear. Amen.

Name the three greatest fears in your life. How would your life be different if you began to face your fears?

Proverbs 28:1 Courage: How to Face Down Your Fears

November 1994 – How much courage do you have? Would your friends, co-workers and family members call you a courageous person?

My text this morning is one verse of scripture: Proverbs 28:1. "The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion."

The dictionary defines courage this way: the ability to face and deal with a dangerous or difficult situation. There are two parts—first to face, and then to deal with.

It is interesting to read modern writers on the subject of courage because they give you some interesting definitions. For instance, one that is often quoted goes this way, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." General George Patten defined it this way: "Courage is fear that holds on for one more minute." Franklin P. Jones said it this way: "Courage is the ability not to let people know how scared you are on the inside." Captain A. Riddenbacher put it this way: "Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. Where there is no fear, there is no courage."

Think about the definition. It is the ability to face and deal with a dangerous or difficult situation. I ask you again: how much courage do you have? Would your friends call you a courageous person?

It is interesting to think about the images of courage. Most of the popular images of courage have to do with men fighting on a battlefield. It's the soldiers coming ashore at Omaha Beach. It's the defenders of Baston, holding out against the opposition. It's the

Marines landing on Iwo Jima. It's the Blue and the Grey battling at Gettysburg or it's President Kennedy standing strong during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Those are the popular images of courage. They have to do with warfare and bloodshed and the crash of armies on the battlefield.

I don't deny or doubt in the least that those things are part of what courage is all about; however, if that is all that courage means, most of us are left out because most of us won't ever literally be on a battlefield.

I have been pondering about the many faces of courage. This is what I think courage is. It is a family dealing with terminal cancer. It is a single mother, struggling to raise her family. It is a widow who faces the last years of her life without her beloved husband by her side. It is a child of divorce, struggling with his self image, with doubt and anger and feelings of rejection. It is a single person who chooses purity over promiscuity. It is an engaged couple who will wait even though the world says go ahead. It is somebody who moves into the Austin community. It is an employee who sees something wrong, greed or corruption, and has the courage to blow the whistle. It is a mother facing a difficult surgery. It is what President Reagan showed yesterday. Did you hear the announcement that came late yesterday afternoon? Former President Reagan announced to the nation that at the age of 83, he's been diagnosed with having Alzheimer's Disease, an irreversible, incurable disease, a disease that will not only take his life, it will take his health, his rationality, everything from him. Courage is a man like that saying something when he didn't have to. He could have decided to keep it quiet for years. But he wanted to help other people.

What do those things have in common? Four things:

1. Bravery in the face of danger.
2. Steadfastness in the face of opposition.
3. Action in the face of resistance.
4. Optimism in the face of despair.

The first one says I won't be afraid. The second one says I won't give up. The third one says I won't be intimidated. The fourth one says I won't lose heart.

It is amazing how much the Bible has to say on this subject. Joshua 1:6-7 says, "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go," Joshua 1:9 says, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." There is a familiar passage in Psalm 27:1-3. "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident." II Timothy 1:7 says, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." I John 4:18 says, "Perfect love drives out fear."

You ought to read your Bible sometime and count the number of times God says, "Fear not." The people who count such things have counted the fear notes in the King James version of the Bible. They tell us that there are 365 fear notes, that is, there is one fear note for every day of the year.

I want to give you the four steps to dealing with fear. These four steps will help you move from fear to faith, from cowardice to courage.

I. Remember your position.

Our text says, "The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion." The righteous are bold, not the wicked. The wicked are scared to death. The first step to courage is to remember who you are in Jesus Christ, to remember that in Christ you are strong, victorious, accepted, justified, redeemed, saved, and completely forgiven. Your sins are washed away. You are seated with Jesus Christ in the heavenlies. You are justified, therefore you are righteous. You were born for courage, not for fear. II Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, of power and of a sound mind. If you have a spirit of fear, timidity or anxiety, it didn't come from God. God does not give to his people a spirit of fear.

You may remember the story of the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. It is the story about the American Hockey Team, basically made up of men barely out of their teens. Some of them just out of college, some of them still in college, all basically amateurs. They were given no chance of winning the gold medal because to win it, they would have to defeat the mighty, awesome, unbelievably talented Russian hockey team, a team that we have not beaten in Olympic competition in 20 years, a team that was considered to be invincible. In 1980 the American team won the first game, the second and third games, and moved into the medal

round. There they were to face the Russian team in the semi-finals. Almost nobody thought they could win that game. Gathered in the locker room before the game, the coach, Herb Brooks, looked at the faces of his players and knew that he had just one chance to say something to them. He said one sentence, "Men, you were born to play this game." As one man, they arose and went out on the ice and defeated the mighty Russian team and went on to beat Finland to win the gold medal against all odds. Brothers and sisters, I will say the same thing to you. You were born to play this game. You were born for courage, for bravery, for strength, to be an overcomer. God has given you his Spirit. You were not born to be a loser. You were born through Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit to be victorious over the problems, struggles and trials of life.

II. Confront your fears.

Remember the text. "The wicked flee when no man pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion." You will be gripped with fear until you decide to confront it. Fear will win every day until you stand up, look that fear straight in the face, and say, "You are not going to win over me anymore. By the help of God and with the power of the Holy Spirit, I am going to win against you." You will never win until you rise up and confront the thing that is dragging you down.

Courage is nothing more than seeing the fear and taking action against it. How many of you know the 95% Rule of Worry? It goes like this: 95% of the things you worry about won't happen. Some of you may be surprised to know this, but I tend to be a worry-wort. At least once a week my wife will say, "Stop worrying about that. You're worrying about something that is never going to happen, and even if it does happen, we'll deal with it when it happens."

God has given us a sound mind so that we can look at our problems. He's given us power so we can overcome, and he's given us love so we can respond in his character. There is no reason for a child of God to be gripped and destroyed by fear.

I was reading this week and came across a very interesting story. This is the story about Jackie Robinson, the first black man to play in the major leagues. A man by the name of Branch Ricky, the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, tried to sign Jackie up back in the 1940's. No black man had ever played in the major leagues, and Jackie wanted to, but was scared of the reaction. Here is the story of their encounter, as Branch was trying to recruit him to be the first black player.

"Mr. Ricky," I said, "It sounds like a dream come true. Not only for me, but for my race. But there will be trouble ahead for you, for me, for my people and for baseball."

"Trouble ahead," Branch Ricky rolled the phrase over his lips as though he liked the sound. "You know, Jackie, I was a small boy when I took my first train ride. On that same train was an old couple also riding for the first time. We were going through the Rocky Mountains. The old man was sitting by the window. He looked ahead and saw that just ahead of us there was what looked to be a sheer drop off. He said, 'Trouble ahead, Ma! We're high above the precipice and we're going to run right off.' To my boyish ears, the noise of the wheels repeated it, 'Trouble ahead, trouble ahead, trouble ahead.' I never hear train wheels to this day but what I think of this. But our train course bent at the last moment into a tunnel right after the old man spoke, and we came out on the other side of the mountain. That's the way it is with most trouble ahead in this world, Jackie, if we use the common sense and courage God gave us. But you've got to study the hazards and build wisely. God is with us in this, Jackie. You know your Bible. It's good, simple Christianity for us to face realities and recognize what we're up against. We have to fight our problems together with tact and common sense."

You have to confront your fears. You think you're going to go over the edge. You're never going to know until you get out there and confront it.

III. Censor your input.

A healthy mind is absolutely essential to getting free from fear. The Bible says, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." There is a negative side to this and a positive side. The negative side is that you have to cut the negative people out of your life, those who are dragging you down. You probably have people telling you that you can't, it can't be done, it won't work. They tell kids you can study all you want, you can work as hard as you want, you still won't make an A. You can save all the money you want, you still won't buy that house. You can apply for that job, but will never make it. They are just a bunch of can'ts and ain'ts and naysayers who pull you down and feed your fears. Sensor your input so you're not listening to people who are feeding your fears. The positive side is Romans 12:2. "Be not conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Colossians 3:2 tells us to set our mind on things above where Christ dwells with God in heaven. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Psalm 119:165 says, "Great peace have they which love your law, and nothing can make them stumble."

This will work for you, but you have to make it work. Put the word of God in one ear, and the fear will go out the other ear. Fill your mind with the Word of God, and you won't have time to dwell in the depths of overcoming fear.

I have a dear friend who is going through a difficult experience. A terrible thing is happening to her and it's hard because it's not her fault. I saw her about a month and a half ago. I asked her how she was doing. She poured out her story. It was awful. I didn't know what to tell her because there was another person involved. There was no magical formula I could give her. You can change your own heart, but you can't change somebody else's heart. That's in the hands of God. I told her that I didn't know how to change the situation, but I did know what she ought to be doing personally. I told her, "You can take care of yourself, you can handle yourself without regard to the other person. I want you to start memorizing scripture." She looked at me like I was the man from the moon. She said, "Where do I start?" I said, "Psalm 121: I will lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." She said, "I don't know if I can." I said, "I know you can. Do it." I saw her the next week and asked her how it was going. She told me her story. It had only gotten worse. I asked her how she had done with the Scripture memory. She said, "I haven't done too well on it. I memorize a verse then my mind goes crazy on me and I start thinking about all the other stuff." I told her to keep working on it. I didn't see her again for two or three weeks. When I asked her how she was doing, she said her personal situation was worse, but she had Psalm 121 memorized. I told her to let me hear it. She said, "I'm not ready for that yet, but I'm doing better. What should I do now?" I said, "Go to Psalm 91; that's like the NFL of Psalms. It has a lot of images in it. You have to think hard if you are going to memorize it." I didn't see her for five or six weeks. I saw her this week and asked, "How is it going?" "Not much better in personal ways. But," she said, "I've been memorizing Psalm 91." I looked at her and noticed she is doing great. In the midst of a great catastrophe she has decided to censor her input and build her life around the Word of God and build it into her mind so that in the midst of what ought to be a fearful situation, she can be strong because she is standing on what God has said. She has literally built it into her mind. You have to censor your input in a time of crisis so the Word of God becomes not just something you read on Sunday, but literally the stuff that you live on.

IV. Cultivate your love.

You have to live in such a way as if the fear didn't exist. I John 4:18 says, "Perfect love casts out fear." You can either have the love of God or you can have fear generated by Satan, but you can't have them both dominating your life at the same time. Either fear will push the love out, or the love of God will push the fear out. How do you do that?

A. Thank God for the thing that is causing you to fear.

Have you ever done that, thanking God for the very thing that is causing you trepidation? Lord, I didn't want this, I didn't need this, I'm not sure I deserve this, but I thank you for sending it into my life.

B. List the blessings that have come into your life because of the thing that you fear so badly.

Now you're praying, you're reading your Bible, asking your friends to help you pray, you can't wait to come to church because you're dying during the week. And best of all, at long last, God has got your undivided attention, which is what he wanted all along.

C. Each day share one of those blessings with one other person.

I've talked before about Fred Hartman, a member of this church, the Deacon over Awana with his wife Erlene. Fred's been in a two-year battle with cancer. I think he's one of the most admired and loved men in this church. This week I had a little chance to spend some time with Fred, Erlene and Danny. Things aren't good right now. The cancer is roaring on. But when I went into their house on Friday night, I felt the spirit of peace in that house. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit filling that house where a man is struggling against cancer. I asked myself, "How can it be, here at the end of the battle, they can still smile, they still believe in God?" Erlene is still going on. And through the tears there is joy. I was reminded of something yesterday. Over two years ago when Fred first got the cancer, the first time I went to see him Fred said something to me that nobody else has ever said. He said, "You know, when people get cancer they want to ask 'why me?' I have never done that. I have asked the Lord 'why not me?' All my life I have known God's blessings. He's been so good to me. He has watched over me, brought me back, given me a wonderful wife, a son, a business, a wonderful home, a church, more friends than anybody should ever be allowed to have. I have received so many of God's blessings, if this happens to other people, why shouldn't it also happen to me?" I thought to myself, "When you go in with that attitude, that is why when you come to the end of the road you're still smiling, still rejoicing and believing in God."

Brothers and sisters, that is what courage is. It is facing and dealing with the impossible situations of life and still believing in God, still rejoicing in his goodness.

I don't want you to add courage. You already have courage. God put it in you the moment you came to Christ. Use the courage that God has given you. You already have victory in Jesus Christ. Now live in that victory. You already have power. Use the power that God has given you. What is courage? It is facing and dealing with dangerous and difficult situations of life.

This is what I want you to do:

1. Name your fear. You already know what it is.

2. Make a decision this week to confront it and not run away from it.

What would your life be like if that fear didn't exist? It is possible. There is an old Italian proverb that goes this way: Better to spend one day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep. Better to spend one day with courageous faith in God than a whole lifetime cowering in fear.

3. Go out and the Lord will be with you. Lift up your head with hope and confidence in Almighty God, that whatever he throws your way, you can face. Take courage, be strong and courageous, for the Lord our God is with you. Fear not, children of God.

Proverbs 28:13 "All I Said Was..."

September 1999 – It is a fundamental mark of spiritual health to be able to say, "I was wrong." If you want a verse to go with my thesis, take a look at Proverbs 28:13, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

When we sin, Solomon says we only have two options. Option 1 is to conceal it. That means to cover it up, to make excuses, to rationalize, to pass the buck. When that happens, we do not prosper. We go through the internal hell of living with a guilty conscience.

Option 2 is clear. Our other choice is to confess our sins and to renounce them. Both those words are important. To confess means to own up to what you did. When you confess your sins, you are saying, "Yes, I did it and I know it was wrong." When you renounce your sins, you are saying, "I've been walking in the wrong path and now, with God's help, I'm not going to walk in that path anymore. I'm going to change the direction of my life."

Sometimes we make our excuses so subtly that we don't realize what we're doing. Let's say that a husband is describing an argument he had with his wife. He justifies himself this way: "All I said was, 'Is your mother coming again?'" Now you don't have to be an Einstein to figure out that you're in trouble the moment those words come out of your mouth.

Whenever we preface something with the four words, "All I said was," we're in big trouble. Those are four of the most destructive words in the English language. They imply that you are sane, logical and loving and the other person is a nut. When you use those four words, you're really saying, "It's not my fault. I don't have a problem. Somebody else has a problem."

In one of his books Bruce Larson mentions visiting a halfway house in Western Ontario. It was a place where people with severe emotional struggles might come and find healing. The main meeting room was the living room of an old farmhouse. A beautiful sign above the fireplace caught his attention. It read, "Do you want to be right or well?"

What a great question. Each one of us faces that same choice. As long as you demand that you be right all the time, your life will never change. Once you learn to say, "I was wrong," then you begin to get well.

Proverbs 28:23 Too Much Sugar for a Dime

March 2002 – TOO MUCH SUGAR FOR A DIME by Ray Pritchard "He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue" (Proverbs 28:23). The key to understanding this verse lies in the phrase "in the end." Some things that seem good at first leave a bitter taste later, and some things that are hard to take prove to be good for you, like the proverbial castor oil that our parents threatened to make us take if we didn't straighten up. As I think about it, I don't believe I ever had castor oil and I'm not really sure what it is or what it does, but I do remember that it was supposed to taste bad, which of course meant that it was good for you. In the olden days most medicines were that way—bad taste, try not to gag, but if you can get it down, it will do you some good. Flattery comes from the opposite end of the spectrum. It's light and fluffy and fun and makes you feel good, sort of like cotton candy. And like cotton candy, there's really not much to it. The dictionary defines flattery as "excessive or insincere praise." The thesaurus lists a number of synonyms, including "soft soap," "snow job," "blarney," "bootlicking," and a word you don't see very often, "obsequiousness." Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once remarked that "blarney is flattery laid on so thick it cannot be true, and blarney is flattery so thin we love it." While it may be true, as Jane Russell remarked, that "flattery will get you anywhere," it is also true that "between flattery and admiration there often flows a river of contempt" (Minna Antrim). When someone lays it on too thick, something in us wants to ask, "What do you want?" During a recent trip to Word of Life Florida, I met Randy Ray, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Tallahassee, Florida. Over lunch one day he was talking about the man who coaches their high school football team. Whenever the coach (whose teams have won five state championships in the last six years) suspects he's being flattered and

not complimented, he'll say, "That's too much sugar for a dime." The other side of this verse reminds us that an honest rebuke will do us more good in the long run. It usually takes a lot of courage to say to a friend, "I think you're making a bad mistake" or "Your life is messed up." In the course of a normal day, we'd all rather be praised than rebuked. But honest friends prove their love by speaking the truth we don't want to hear. Their words are like castor oil to the soul—hard to take but good for what ails us. Flattery is fun for a moment but only the truth will set us free.

Proverbs 28:13 CONFESSION Telling the Truth About Yourself

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13

The last words of each clause contain the most important truth. If you conceal your sin, you will not prosper. If you confess it and forsake it, you will find mercy. How hard it is to believe these words and to take them at face value. When we sin, everything within us screams out, "Cover it up. Turn off the lights. Bury the evidence. Destroy the tapes. Make up an alibi. Leave the scene of the crime. Run! Run! Run!"

Something in our spiritual bloodstream causes us to run from the pain of confession. When God confronted Adam with his sin, the first man made the first excuse in history: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). Not a very noble answer. In the end he grudgingly confesses, but not before blaming Eve and, by implication, God.

Two key words deserve special attention. The first is confess, which means "to tell the whole truth." When we confess, we are not only admitting our sin; we are also agreeing with God's assessment of what we did. True confession begins with the notion that God is God and that we have knowingly violated His standards. The second word is renounce, which means "to abandon, forsake, desert, turn away from." True confession always leads to renunciation. If after confessing our sin we quickly return to it, or if we long to return to it, then we have missed the teaching of this verse and we will not find God's mercy.

Several years ago one of my brothers sent me some material from a Christian counselor. On one of the sheets he had done a takeoff on the words of Jesus in John 8:32, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The counselor had added the phrase: "The truth shall make you free . . . but it will hurt you first."

That strikes me as an extremely important insight. This explains why so many people struggle with their problems for years. They don't want the truth to hurt them . . . so they avoid the truth at all costs.

Do they want to get better? Absolutely.

Do they know the truth? Intellectually, yes.

Then why don't they get better? Because they won't let the truth get close enough to hurt them. Instead, they erect a thousand defense mechanisms that deflect the truth before it hits home.

Which explains why you can go to church for years, listen to sermons for years, read the Bible and pray for years—and still not get better. "The truth will set you free, but it will hurt you first." When you are finally willing to be hurt by the truth about yourself, then—and only then—will you be set free.

Most people don't enjoy confessing their sins, so they avoid it whenever possible. But when we dare to take God at His word, we discover the joy of forgiveness. If you are willing to tell the truth about yourself, you can be set free.

Heavenly Father, give me the grace to tell the truth so that Your grace might make me clean. Amen.

Is it getting easier for you to say, "I was wrong"?

Why is confession such a crucial part of the spiritual life? What happens when we refuse to confess our sins? What sin do you need to confess right now?

PROVERBS 29

Proverbs 29:7 JUSTICE The Real American Dream

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. Proverbs 29:7

The Pledge of Allegiance ends with these four words: "and justice for all." Every time you say that, you're pledging to be part of a nation that will provide justice for all. And yet I recall the words of Thomas Jefferson who said, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just."

Is God concerned about justice? If you want to know the answer to that question, just start reading your Bible. You will find the Bible crammed with passages where God expresses His concern for human justice.

The Hebrew word for justice is mishpat. Often in the Old Testament this word is applied to God's own character. God is just-He is absolutely fair and righteous in all His dealings. He gives to each person exactly what he deserves. The command to care about justice means "treating people right because you know God." In the Bible, this concept is applied in some very concrete ways: caring for the poor; remembering the widows and orphans; not plowing the corners of your field so that the hungry can get food; speaking the truth; paying a fair wage; having honest scales; not cheating; not engaging in extortion; and refusing to take advantage of the less fortunate.

As I read the Old Testament I am struck by what God says about four forgotten groups of people: the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the foreigners. God cares what happens to these four groups of people. By the word widow, I have also written down "single parents"; by orphans, I have written down "latch-key kids"; by the poor, I have written down "the homeless"; and by foreigners, I have written down "despised ethnic and racial minorities." It's amazing how relevant God's Word is. If you read any newspaper, you'll find out that the Bible is addressing the very problems that are tearing our society apart.

God sees the displaced peoples of the world. He sees the refugees of the world. He sees the homeless, the hurting of the world, and He cares about them. He wants His people to care about them too.

What does justice look like?

1. Fair play. God tells us not to rig anything or to cheat. He expects us to exercise truth in selling, truth in merchandising, truth in advertising, and fair play toward other people. He requires that there be no favoritism, no pulling of strings, no secret bribes, nothing done under the table or behind closed doors.
2. Fair pay. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for robbing widows' homes. This speaks directly to the slumlords who take advantage of the poor in our major cities.
3. Absolute honesty. That means telling the truth and keeping your promises.
4. Compassion toward the needy. That simply means seeing the need and caring enough to get involved.

When we work for justice, we're truly working for God. Since we live in an unjust world, there is going to be plenty for us to do. We could all be busy twenty-four hours a day and not correct everything. People of justice will rarely be rewarded, for this is an unjust world, but we ought to treat each other fairly anyway.

Stand up for justice, and when you do, God will be standing with you.

Lord Jesus, may I not be ashamed to follow Your lead in standing up for what is right. Amen.

List several examples of injustice you have either seen or personally experienced.

What good things happen when Christians begin to care about justice in the world? What steps could you take in this area?

Proverbs 29:22 ANGER A Warning for Hotheads

An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins. Proverbs 29:22

Here is a simple fact: Either you learn to control your temper or your temper will control you. How many of us have undergone tremendous heartache because at a crucial moment we lost our temper and spouted off when we should have been silent?

We all know that anger is a powerful emotion that can be used for good or for evil. Anger isn't always wrong. We know, for instance, that anger is one of the attributes of God. Did you know that the Bible speaks over a hundred times of the anger of God? We know that God never sins, yet the Bible speaks repeatedly of His anger toward sin and disobedience. We know also that there are times when anger is justified and even righteous. Ephesians 4:26 says, "In your anger do not sin."

When we see people hurting other people, when we watch the wholesale slaughter of the unborn, when we see children being lured into drugs and prostitution, when we see families torn apart by sin, that ought to make us angry. If we sit idly by while the world goes to hell, if we don't get angry, if we don't weep, if we don't care, then something is wrong deep inside us.

So then, anger can be a very useful and even Christian emotion. However, righteous anger can quickly lead us in the wrong direction. The same verse that says, "In your anger do not sin," adds this phrase, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." That is, don't go to bed angry. Even if your anger is justified, don't go to sleep that way. Deal with it, talk it out, pray it out, walk it out-but don't try to sleep it out. That won't work.

What happens when you don't deal with your anger? It settles deep in your heart, it hardens like concrete, it distorts your personality, it squeezes out your joy, it oozes the smelly black gunk of unhappiness over every part of your life. That's why the very next verse in Ephesians offers this warning: "Do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:27).

All rock climbers understand that verse. In order to get up the side of the mountain, you've got to get a firm foothold. That's what Satan wants to do in your life-he wants to use your anger (even your legitimate anger) to get a foothold in your heart.

The first step is admitting you have a problem. So many of us have a public face that looks good and a private face we keep behind locked gates and stone walls, a face of anger and hatred.

Next, share your struggles with a trusted friend. If you have someone who will hold you accountable, you're much less likely to say or do something foolish.

Third, ask the Lord Jesus to give specific help in the area of your anger. Name the sin, confess it, and claim the power of the indwelling Christ.

Jesus has shown us the way. You don't have to live in anger and bitterness over the way people treat you. Through the power of the Holy Spirit your life can be different.

Lord Jesus, thank you for showing us how to live. May Your love replace any anger in my heart. Amen.

When was the last time you got angry? What happened? Are you satisfied with the way you handled the situation?

What are your own personal warning signs that you have crossed the line from righteous to unrighteous anger?

Proverbs 29:25 CONVICTION Do Right Though the Stars Fall

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe. Proverbs 29:25

The dictionary defines conviction as "a fixed or strong belief." It is the moral certainty that some things are right and others are wrong. A conviction is not the same thing as a preference, which is a personal opinion about the way things ought to be. Preferences often change; convictions rarely do.

Almost every day we are faced with a question such as this: Shall I do what I know to be right, in order to please God? Or will I neglect my convictions and do what I believe to be wrong, in order to please men? One hundred years ago William Arnot pointed out that while the knowledge of the truth is almost universal, the practice of what is right is rare. "Few act the answer which all agree to speak." If anything has changed in the last century, it is that we can no longer say that knowledge of the truth is almost universal; today it seems to be almost nonexistent.

In our day, we Christians are urged to tone down our language for fear that we might offend someone. Indeed, sometimes the followers of Christ appear to be so agreeable that we have completely lost the offense of the Cross.

In truth, I do not believe our problem today is that we are too offensive. With few exceptions, our problem lies almost entirely in the opposite direction. We aren't offensive enough. Or we aren't offensive about the right things.

What exactly is meant by the phrase the fear of man? Since most of our rewards in this life come from others, it is natural that we should want to please them. That tendency, while noble in some areas-such as doing good work, keeping our promises, and acting with compassion-is deadly in the spiritual realm. We may begin to think that discretion is the better part of valor in discussing eternal truth, and so may pass up opportunities to speak a word for the Savior. I heard recently about a top-level employee of a huge corporation who said that if you want to rise to the top, it would be better not to be outspoken about your Christian faith. Be discreet, don't say much, don't rock the boat; and when you get to the top-if you ever make it-then you can speak out.

But is that not what the fear of man is all about? When you finally make it to the top, you've grown so accustomed to not rocking the boat that it's easier to keep your mouth closed and sail on toward retirement.

The fear of man is a snare because it keeps us quiet when we ought to speak up. It's also a snare because we end up valuing the approval of the world over God's approval. Worst of all, it tricks us into thinking that this world is more important than the world to come.

Against all that are the simple words at the end of the verse: "Whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe." God Himself will take up your cause if you are not ashamed to take up His. You may not make it to the top, but you'll enjoy the journey much more because you'll know the Lord is on your side.

Lord Jesus, give us Your perfect balance of truth and love so that we may stand for the truth without embarrassment. Amen.

Name a time when the fear of man kept you from being bold for the truth. What would you do differently next time?

Who is the most courageous person you know? Would anyone give your name as the answer to that question?

PROVERBS 30

Proverbs 30: 7-9 MODERATION A Happy Middle-Class Life

Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. Proverbs 30: 7-9

This is a prayer by a man who has seen too much. With his own eyes he has seen men lie and cheat to get to the top, only to be toppled by their own dishonesty. So he asks to be kept from the slightest hint of falsehood. He has also watched poor men steal in their desperation and he has seen the rich say, "God? If there is a God, I don't need Him." So he asks instead for what we might call a happy, middle-class life: "Give me only my daily bread."

This recalls the famous fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." Bread in Scripture is more than just literal bread; it's also a symbol for all the physical and material needs of life. The Small Catechism by Martin Luther contains a section on the Lord's Prayer. This is what he says about "Give us today our daily bread":

What does this mean? God gives daily bread indeed without our prayer, and also to all the wicked. But we pray in this petition that he would lead us to know it and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.

What is meant by daily bread? Everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

"And the like" means anything he leaves out of the list. Which means that everything physical or material is contained in the expression bread. You are not just praying for physical bread; you are praying for all the physical and material needs of life.

By praying this way we learn the importance of moment-by-moment, 100 percent dependence upon God for the things that we need. By praying for something as humble as a loaf of bread we are learning that God cares about the tiniest details of life. As Matthew Henry says, this really means that the followers of Jesus Christ are to have "a hand to mouth existence."

We should pray for godly character and to be preserved from any circumstance that would keep us from achieving that character—whether poverty or riches. Since we don't know which would be to our ultimate advantage, a happy, middle-class life will be about right for most of us.

Heavenly Father, I'm trusting You to know what I really need. Please help me to be delighted with the decisions You make. Amen.

What two things would you like to ask from the Lord before you die? Could you sincerely pray this man's prayer from your heart?

What specific aspect of Christian character would you most like to develop in your own life over the next three months?

Proverbs 30:24-28 PERSEVERANCE The Lost Art of Stick-to-it-ivity

Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces. Proverbs 30:24-28

Ants. . . coney. . . locusts. . . lizards. What do they have in common, and why did the wise man (named Agur in 30:1) group them together? For one thing, they are all small and often overlooked. Yet even the tiniest of God's creatures have big lessons to teach us. Ants prepare for the future, coney survive in hostile environments, locusts fly in swarms, and lizards were caught and then placed in the palace to find and eat bugs and insects. Perhaps the central fact is simply that these creatures accomplish great feats without the benefit of any other earthly advantage save their own God-imparted wisdom. Despite their small size, they accomplish huge feats. They are small but smart.

Ants are singled out because they overcome their small size by working together to prepare for the future. No excuses here. Just teamwork in the hot summer days to lay up food for the cold winter to come. Coney are rock-badgers who thrive among the rocks of the wilderness. Few animals dare to venture where the coney call home. Most of us have seen pictures of huge swarms of locusts darkening the skies as they prepare to descend on a field to strip it bare. One locust could never do the job, but because they move "in ranks," there is nothing left when they are finished. Lizards may be harmless pets but they also serve the king's purpose. The lizard goes where others never enter-not even with bribes or force of arms.

Taken together, these four examples suggest several important lessons: First, even the tiniest creatures have a purpose in God's plan. Although we may not personally appreciate locusts or lizards, they have a purpose no less than we do. This is part of God's providence that extends to the tiniest details of life. Second, since we all have limitations of one kind or another, success comes to those who discover what they can do, and then do it. Some of us aren't even as "successful" as the ants and the lizards because we focus on what we can't do instead of what we can. Third, just be yourself and you'll turn out all right. Let the ants be ants; the lizards, lizards; the snakes, snakes; and the hippos, hippos. Can you imagine a huge hippopotamus trying to sneak unseen into a king's palace? It's not likely to work. But when you need a huge, lumbering animal to cavort in the water, you won't call a lizard either. A hippo is what you need.

Be yourself and do what God has called you to do. Just keep on doing it day in and day out. That's what perseverance is all about.

Lord, give me the grace to keep on doing what You called me to do. And save me from the folly of making excuses for not doing my job today. Amen.

Name one positive character quality associated with ants, coney, locusts, and lizards. Now rate yourself in each one of those qualities.

Where do you most need perseverance right now?

PROVERBS 31

Proverbs 31:10 NOBILITY The Legacy of a Godly Wife

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Proverbs 31:10

The final section of Proverbs is an acrostic, a poem in which each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One commentator calls this "an alphabet of wifely excellence." The phrase of noble character translates a very common word (used 246 times in the Old Testament) that in various passages refers to strength, courage, valor, ingenuity, and wealth. Perhaps the last meaning was on the author's mind when he wrote that a godly wife is worth "more than rubies." Just as a good name is more desirable than great riches (Proverbs 22:1), so also is a wife of noble character a greater treasure than the riches of the world.

This wife has many admirable traits. She is trustworthy (v. 11), a blessing and not a burden (v. 12), fully committed to her husband (v. 12), hardworking (v. 13), industrious (vv. 13-15), well organized (v. 15), shrewd in business (v. 16), confident (v. 18), diligent (v. 18), a self-starter (v. 19), compassionate (v. 20), prepared for future contingencies (v. 21), well dressed (v. 22), a strong boost to her husband's career (v. 23), active as a businesswoman in her community (v. 24), a woman of honor (v. 25), both wise and kind (v. 26), and a homemaker in the best sense of the word (v. 27). As a result, her children and her husband praise her (vv. 28-29) because

she does not depend on charm or beauty but instead fears the Lord (v. 30). Her fame spreads throughout the city and she enjoys the reward she has earned (v. 31).

Throughout the centuries, women have marveled at this depiction of the ideal wife. She is a wife, a mother, and a very successful businesswoman. If on first reading this seems more like Superwoman than a real woman, it may be that the author is describing not one particular woman, but the life of any godly woman who supports her husband, loves her children, takes care of her family, and uses her gifts and talents to bless others.

She is the kind of wife a woman should be and the kind of woman a man should choose to marry. Although we are not told who she was, we know what she was—a woman who feared the Lord and put her faith into practice. That is the key. Because she revered God, everything else in her life stayed in balance. Because she loved her husband, she supported him and used her gifts to increase the family's resources. As she found her fulfillment in the mundane tasks of life, God blessed the entire family and gave her honor throughout the whole community.

It is no accident that Proverbs closes with this lengthy portrait. The wife of noble character stands in sharp contrast to the contentious woman (19:13) and the immoral woman (chaps. 5-7). In the end those who know her best give her the praise she deserves. In her husband's eyes, there is no other woman like her. Her children call her blessed. Everyone who knows her praises her.

Here is a worthy model for every wife and for every woman who hopes to be married one day. Study this passage; learn these principles; ask God to make you a woman of noble character. The praise she received is also meant for you.

Lord God, may I be worthy of praise by those who know me best and love me most. Amen.

Which attributes of this noble woman most impress you? How does your life stack up against hers? How would your friends answer that question? Which of her qualities would you most like to develop over the next few months?

Proverbs 31:2-5 LEADERSHIP Paying the Price to Lead the Way

O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows, do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel—not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Proverbs 31:2-5

There are many verses on leadership in Proverbs. Why choose this passage? Because it points out an often-overlooked truth about leadership in any arena. Since leaders have influence over the lives of others, their responsibility is enormous. Issues that may not matter to others must matter to them. "Like priest, like people" is still true.

During my college years I attended a church pastored by a man who stayed at the church forty-two years. Although he has since retired, he is remembered by those who knew him for one statement, repeated over and over: "Everything rises or falls on leadership."

You could read a thousand books on management and not find a more important principle. In some ways, it is the story of every human endeavor. Every success and every failure can usually be traced back to one ultimate source—leadership. It matters not whether you are talking about the corner grocery store or a multinational corporation. Leadership makes the difference. It applies just as much to a seven-year-old-boys' soccer team as it does to the New York Yankees. Leadership makes the difference.

The higher you go in leadership, the greater your personal responsibility. James 3:1 seems to say this directly: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." That's a very solemn statement. All believers will be judged, but teachers face a stricter judgment. Why? Because they occupy such a powerful position in the local church. They either lead people toward God or they lead them astray. Teachers literally hold the souls of their students in their own hands. What an awesome responsibility! What an incomparable privilege!

This principle is put another way in Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." This applies to the highest level of leadership: To the elders of the church and to the pastor of the church. The top leaders of any church have a fearsome obligation: To someday answer for the souls of those under their care. They are even above the teachers in their obligation to God and to the congregation.

It is against this background that the words of Proverbs 31:2-5 come into focus. Any man wishing to be king must discipline himself. He must set aside any thoughts of sexual promiscuity and resist any temptation to dabble in alcohol. In the former case, promiscuity leads to moral and spiritual ruin; in the latter, alcohol may cloud the leader's judgment and cause him to make decisions that hurt

others.

To whom much is given, much is required. Leaders have great privileges, but they pay a higher price. Many eyes are watching you. Don't let them down.

Lord Jesus, help me to remember that others are watching me all the time, and help me to live in the light of that knowledge. Amen.

Think of the people who look to you every day. Who are they? What are their names? Why are they looking to you? How does that make you feel? What do you think you owe them? If these verses were written to you personally, what other warnings would they include?

Proverbs 31:30 BEAUTY Enjoy It, But Don't Bank On It

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Proverbs 31:30

If you had the power to change your body, would you use it? Suppose you could instantly change the way you look. Would you do it? For most of us the question is not, Would you use that power? but rather, Would it be a simple repair or a complete makeover? Would you say, "Lord, let's just start all over again"? Would we even recognize you?

Our bodies wear out, they sag, they expand, they wrinkle, the joints get creaky, the arteries harden, the heart slows down, the eyes grow dim, the teeth fall out, the back is stooped, the arms grow weary. Our bones break, our muscles weaken. The body bulges in the wrong places. It happens to all of us sooner or later.

There is coming a day when your body won't need changing. You won't grow old and you won't get cancer. Jesus Christ will give you a brand-new body. Until then, we live in hope, waiting patiently for that day to come.

That perspective explains so much that happens to us. God is weaning you away from putting your hope in the things of this world so that your hope will be in Him alone. The only way He can wean you away from the things of this world is through suffering and difficulty. He brings you to the place where you must say, "Lord, it's You and You alone." He's teaching you to wait on Him. Right now you're trying to scheme your way into a better situation. But eventually you'll say, "Lord, if it takes forever, go ahead. Take Your time. My hope is in You."

None of this should suggest that beauty is useless. It is, however, "fleeting" and can be misleading. Both Saul and David were handsome men, yet one man came to a very bad end while the other, though not perfect, was a man after God's own heart. Beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder, it is also only skin deep. Beauty is fine, but character is better. The only other reference to beauty in Proverbs comes as a warning about the immoral woman in 6:25: "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes." Likewise, the only New Testament references to human beauty speak of "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4).

Note also that "charm is deceptive." The word charm carries with it the idea of being attractive, fascinating, and slightly mysterious. This is not a warning against good manners and good grooming, but against relying on outward appearance to gain favor with others. Such a person relies on good looks, a nice wardrobe, a knowing laugh, a radiant smile, and general self-confidence to carry him wherever he wants to go.

Against all this we have the simple statement that "a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Because she has relied on the Lord all her life, she is more beautiful at the end than at the beginning. Her beauty will never fade because it comes from the inside out.

Lord, may I have the inner beauty that comes from knowing You. Amen.

If you could change anything about the way you look, what would it be?

Which do you think about more—the state of your soul or the state of your wardrobe? What steps have you taken recently to improve your "inner beauty"?

Ecclesiastes 2:17 I HATED LIFE

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the

wind.Ecclesiastes 2:17

"Sometimes I get so lonely it's unbelievable. Life has been so good to me. I've got a great wife, good kids, money, my own health- and I'm lonely and bored... I often wondered why so many rich people commit suicide. Money sure isn't a cure-all." Those were the words of O. J. Simpson in 1978.

More people than we know have said with Solomon, "I hated life." Not all of them have thought about suicide, but many have and more than we'll ever know have taken at least one step in that direction.

What happens to those who commit suicide? Does God automatically send them to hell? I believe the answer is no. Romans 8:38-39 contains Paul's triumphant statement that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He lists a succession of extreme opposites: height or depth, length or breadth, things present or things to come. He includes "neither death nor life." By life he means all the various experiences of life: No matter how difficult our circumstances, how discouraging our defeats, how frustrating our days may be, how badly others may mistreat us-nothing in this life can separate us from the love of God.

It's true. You may lose your wealth, your health, your happiness, your friends, your influence, your job, and everything you have worked for. But no one can take Jesus away from you. You are saved and saved forever. God's love is secure despite the discouragements of life.

But note that the apostle writes "neither death nor life." That can only mean one thing. Death itself cannot conquer the child of God. The grave has lost its victory; death has lost its sting.

Death separates us from many things-from our loved ones, from our friends, from our conscious life on this earth, from all that we have said and done and accomplished-all of that vanishes when we die, but death cannot win the one battle that matters. It cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But what about suicide? Surely you don't believe that suicide is stronger than God's love. A man or a woman may, in a desperate, sad moment feel so trapped, so oppressed, so discouraged, so angry, so despondent that they may take their own life. Can that act, you wonder, separate us from the love of God? No.

Do some people who commit suicide go to hell? Yes, but not because of the death they died, but because of the life they lived. Suicide doesn't send people to hell. Sin sends people to hell, especially the greatest sin, the sin of saying "No" to Jesus Christ.

The real issue of life and death is this: What have you done with Jesus Christ? The issue isn't suicide; it's Jesus Christ. What have you done with Him? That's the one decision that determines where you go when you die.

Lord, may I not count my life so important that I forget to look beyond it to eternity. Give me eyes to see what lies beyond the river. Amen.

SHINING THE LIGHT

* Have you ever felt like saying, "I hate my life"? If so, what did you do about it?

* How do you handle times of discouragement in your own life?