

Proverbs Sermons

PORTABLE WISDOM Proverbs

All sermons are from Robert Morgan - Donelson Fellowship

The reputation of the University of Tennessee football program has been marred by the misbehavior of some of its players off-field. In the last few months, Tennessee football players have been involved in at least twenty incidents, including cases of shoplifting, assault, gun possession, motor vehicle citations, drug and alcohol problems, and disturbing the peace. In an effort to help solve the problem, the university has come up with an idea. Football players have been given an orange card, small enough to fit in their billfolds, on which is printed the word THINK in large letters, followed by a series of questions designed to help the player assess his behavior and make a wise decision in various circumstances. For example—Is this a risk I can afford to take? How will this affect my future? How will my parents feel about this? How will this reflect on my team and coaches? How does this represent the University of Tennessee? On the back of the card are the home and cell phone numbers of the Tennessee coaching staff so players can call for help.[1]

You might call it “Portable Wisdom.”

That’s the way I like to think about the book of Proverbs. It’s portable wisdom.

One of my favorite commentaries on the book of Proverbs was written by William Arnot and published in the mid-1800s. In it, he defines proverbs as “Laws from Heaven for Life on Earth,” and he describes the book of Proverbs like this: “Much matter is pressed into little room that it may keep, and carry. Wisdom, in...portable form.”[2]

I have a theory that God created us with sixty-six different emotional, mental, and spiritual needs; and each of the Bible’s sixty-six books is intended to meet a different need in our lives. The Lord could have given us one unbroken narrative, weaving together history, philosophy, theology, and practical instruction. Instead He choose to give us a small, portable library of over five dozen books—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. Every book is different from all the others, and each has its own unique purpose.

The book of Proverbs is one of the few books in the Scripture that hangs its key on the front doorpost, so to speak. The very first paragraph of Proverbs gives us its author, purpose, and theme. Proverbs 1:1-7 is the perfect prologue to the whole book, and if we can grasp the prologue we can understand the whole book.

To Be Wise, Ask God For Wisdom

Proverbs 1:1

The first verse of the book, Proverbs 1:1, identifies the author—Solomon, the man who asked God for wisdom: The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel. Solomon is the most fitting person in history to have written this book, for he was given a special gift of insight and knowledge by God in answer to a very specific prayer he once offered. Shortly after Solomon had ascended the throne of David, he went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices to the Lord. Gibeon was a city about six or seven miles northwest of Jerusalem, and here the ancient tabernacle of Moses and the original bronze altar were still standing. As Solomon prayed at this site, the Lord spoke to him audibly with these astounding words: “Ask for whatever you want Me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5).

Now this is a question that has intrigued humanity from ancient times. One of our favorite children’s stories is the ancient Persian tale of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp in which a genie appears and offers him wishes. That story has given rise to a whole industry of jokes in the United States. For example, a recent story says that a man walking along the beach spotted a bottle and pulled out the cork, releasing the genie in a billowing cloud of smoke. To thank the man the genie offered him one free wish.

“Well,” said the man, “I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii, but I’m afraid to fly and just thinking about going by ship makes me queasy. Would you mind building a road to Hawaii?”

“Oh dear,” replied the genie, “That’s a lot of work. I’ll have to build pilings going down to the ocean floor and bring in tons of material and concrete. And the distance is over 2000 miles. Do you have another wish instead?”

The man nodded and said, “Yes, I’ve always wanted to understand women better. Why do they laugh and cry and what makes the tick? Do you think you help me figure out women and how they think?”

The genie said, "Would you like two lanes or four?"

Well, I think we're intrigued by stories and jokes and speculations like that because we ourselves sometimes wonder what we really want in life. If we could have any one thing we desired, what would we ask for? How would you answer if the Lord spoke as He did to Solomon: Ask for whatever you want Me to give you.

Solomon's answer was remarkable. He said, "O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:7-9, NIV).

According to the Bible, God was pleased that Solomon had asked for this, and the Lord replied, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be" (1 Kings 3:11-12).

And that's how Solomon became the wisest man in history. Look at the rest of the record:

- All Israel...held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice (1 Kings 3:28, NIV).
- God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man... and his fame spread to the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs [there are about nine hundred of them recorded in the book of Proverbs—only about a third of his total number of compositions], and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34, NIV).
- When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan...she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon... she was overwhelmed (1 Kings 10:1-5).

It'd be a good idea just to pause to read the entire first ten chapters of the book of 1 Kings. Try to visualize the splendor of Solomon's reign—the Golden Age of Israeli history. Think of him lecturing in the royal university, administering wise decisions in the national counsels, and providing sound advice to individuals who came to him with their problems.

Oh, to be wise like that!

Oh, to be given the same opportunity to ask for wisdom!

Well, we do have such a privilege. One of the greatest prerogatives in the Bible is found in James 1:5, which says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (TNIV).

God issues to us the same invitation He gave Solomon. Ask Me for wisdom! I am the omniscient God who gives generously, and I will grant you wisdom if you will but ask Me. Include this earnest prayer request when you come before My throne: 'Wisdom, Lord! Give me the wisdom to think rightly and act wisely in any given circumstance. Teach me Your way.'

There are two times in the Bible in which we find a wonderful four-word prayer request: "Teach me Your way." The first is in Psalm 27:11 when the Psalmist prayed, "Teach me Your way, O Lord, and lead me in a smooth path because of my enemies" (NKJV). The second occurrence is in Psalm 86:11 where David prayed, "Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth. Unite my heart to fear Your name."

Among my favorite hymns is one based on these verses. It was written in 1919 by a music teacher named Benjamin Ramsey near the end of his life:

Teach me Thy way, O Lord, teach me Thy way!

Thy guiding grace afford, teach me Thy way!

Help me to walk aright, more by faith, less by sight;

Lead me with heav'nly light, teach me Thy way!

When I am sad at heart, teach me Thy way!

When earthly joys depart, teach me Thy way!

In hours of loneliness, in times of dire distress,

In failure or success, teach me Thy way!

Long as my life shall last, teach me Thy way!

Where'er my lot be cast, teach me Thy way!

Until the race is run, until the journey's done,

Until the crown is won, teach me Thy way!

One of the interesting things about the special offer God gives us in James 1 is that it's found within the context of trials and troubles. James 1:2-4 is a great passage on handling difficulties. In the Holman Christian Standard Bible, it reads: "Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." James then proceeds to tell us that if in times of difficulty we do not know how to handle things, we should ask God for wisdom.

Samuel Logan Brengle, a Salvation Army evangelist of an earlier era, was to American Christians what Redwoods are to Western forests. He towered above the landscape, preaching and writing with intense spiritual power. His secret was in his attitude. When he grew old and infirm, he wrote to a friend, saying, "My old eyes get dimmer. The specialist says the light will fade altogether. So I gird myself for darkness, quote James 1:2 to 4, shout Hallelujah and go on!"[3]

In times of testing and trial, we need the wisdom to see things from God's perspective and the ability to trust Him enough to shout Hallelujah and go on.

We don't need wisdom as badly when life is easy and we aren't faced with problems, pain, perplexity, and uncertain times. Sure, we want to act wisely all the time; but it's the trials of life that demand the greater wisdom. And that's the arena in which God has promised to provide it for those who ask Him.

In my own case, there have been times when I've faced heavy decisions without knowing what to do. In such times, I've found that if I retire to a quiet place to walk and pray and think, I can usually come to an understanding as to the wisest course of action.

Some time ago, for example, I was facing a dilemma, and I just had to check into a lodge at a state park for a couple of days to mull over the problem, beseech God for wisdom, think through the matter in His presence, and arrive at a decision that reflected His wisdom. It was a pattern I had learned years ago when I was facing a major vocational decision. I took a few days at the beach and walked for hours along the shoreline, praying, thinking, pondering, considering the implications, asking God for wisdom. I came home knowing what I should do.

In fact, I've never withdrawn to a quiet place for the purpose of praying and thinking through a decision without returning with a clear sense of God's will in that particular matter; and I've never known such moments of guidance to have later been proven wrong. My mistakes have always come when I have "leaned on my own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). God wants us to seek His wisdom, and we have just as much access to it in prayer as did Solomon.

To Be Wise, Search the Scriptures Proverbs 1:2-6

Proverbs 1:1, then, gives us the author of the book, the man who teaches us the importance of asking God for wisdom. The next set of verses, Proverbs 1:2-6, tell us that God answers that prayer largely by conveying His wisdom to us in His Word. The book of Proverbs in particular is a treasure trove of divine wisdom. God's purpose in putting this book in His Bible is recorded for us right here. The book of Proverbs is liquid wisdom for the mind, a mental and moral tonic that makes several claims for itself. In the opening paragraph of Proverbs, we're told what a careful study of this remarkable book can do for its readers. God included Proverbs in the cannon of Scripture:

- ...so we'll know how to live well and right, to understand what life means and where it's going (Proverbs 1:2, the Message).
- (so) an ordinary person can learn to be smart (Proverbs 1:4, CEV).
- To grasp wisdom and discipline (Proverbs 1:2, God's Word Translation).
- For acquiring a prudent and disciplined life (Proverbs 1:3, NIV).
- To live intelligently (Proverbs 1:3, GNT).

- To teach the inexperienced the ropes and give our young people a grasp on reality (Proverbs 1:4, the Message).

When I was in college in the 1970s, a man named Bill Gothard was conducting popular week-long seminars across the country, and a bunch of us students took our Spring break to go to Philadelphia and attend his conference. I still have the notes, and many of Gothard's insights had a big impact on me. The thing I remember most clearly was his definition of wisdom. Wisdom, Gothard said, was seeing life from God's point of view. And then he went on to emphasize the importance of Scripture memory and meditation. Gothard said that meditation is the practice of memorizing, visualizing, and personalizing Scripture. And as we faithfully memorize and meditate on Scripture, the Holy Spirit will gradually remold our minds until we see things and evaluate life increasingly from God's point of view—and that's the very essence of wisdom.

This is why the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs are essentially a series of essays on the importance of wisdom and the procedure for acquiring it. Look at how this message is emphasized in these chapters:

- Proverbs 1:8-9: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching [this isn't just Solomon talking to his son; it is God speaking to us. The nature of Scripture is that it is humanly authored by divinely inspired. The Lord is speaking, telling us to listen to His instruction and not to forsake His teaching]. They will be a garland of grace to your head and a chain to adorn your neck" (NIV).
- Proverbs 2:1ff: "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you [God doesn't just want us to read His Word, or even to merely study it. He wants us to memorize and meditate on it—to memorize, visualize, and personalize it—to store it up in our hearts], turning your heart to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (NIV).
- Proverbs 3:1: "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart (NIV).
- Proverbs 4:1-2: "Listen, my son, to a father's instruction [to the instruction of the Heavenly Father]; pay attention and gain understanding. For I give you sound learning...." (NIV).
- Proverbs 5:1: "My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight" (NIV).
- Proverbs 6:20-23: "My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life" (NIV).
- Proverbs 7:1: "My son, keep my words and store up my command within you" (NIV).
- Proverbs 8:1, 33-35: "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway [what a great description of our daily devotional time in Bible study and prayer!] For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord" (NIV).
- Proverbs 9:6: "Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding."

It's amazing to me that the actual proverbs section of Proverbs doesn't really begin until you get to chapter 10, which opens with a heading saying, "The proverbs of Solomon:" The first nine chapters of the book are a series of images and arguments, telling us how vitally important it is to seek God's wisdom by drinking in His Word like dehydrated shipwreck victims who discover a freshwater spring on their deserted island.

There is no abiding wisdom apart God's Word, but as we store up His commandments within us and begin looking at life's events through the prism of His precepts, we begin maturing into people of sanctified common sense—which is another definition of wisdom.

Dr. Paul Tournier once wrote, "The Bible... is a book in which [a person] may learn from his Creator the art of healthy living."^[4]

This has certainly been true in my own experience. So many times, I've found the best decisions and the right answers have come as I've thought through problems in the light of the truths of Scripture. Often a simple verse of Scripture will come to mind and resolve the issue in my thinking.

I've also ran across multiple stories illustrating this pattern in virtually all the biographies of Christian leaders in my library.

Some time ago, for example, I read the life story of Oswald Chambers, author of one of the most famous devotional books of the

Twentieth Century, My Utmost for His Highest, and I was impressed at how this worked out in his life. Chambers was born and raised in Scotland, and as a young man he became a widely-traveled preacher among Methodist and Holiness groups. He eventually worked with the YMCA among soldiers in Egypt during World War I.

On one occasion while in Cairo, British military authorities interrogated him regarding his evangelistic endeavors among the troops and for a while it looked as though he and all his fellow-workers would be detained, stripped of their status, and returned to England. Many of his colleagues were frightened and upset, but Chambers said, "I refuse to worry," and he thought through the situation with an open Bible before him.

His reading that day was in 1 Samuel 8, the story of the Israelites impetuously demanding a king. This is what Chambers wrote in his diary: "The reading of 1 Samuel 8 struck me impressively, viz. (that is to say) that in any dilemma produced by providential circumstances, the temptation is to yield to ordinary common sense rather than wait for God to fulfill His purpose. God's order comes to us through the haphazard."

The message to Chambers in this instance was—stay calm, don't do anything rash, give God time to work, and wait to see what happens. To a friend, Chambers said, "Let us keep very near Him and wait."

The situation soon resolved itself to his benefit.[5]

One of my favorite preachers for many years has been the inimitable Warren W. Wiersbe, author of many fine books and the former pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. In his autobiography; I was struck with Wiersbe's accounts of how on many occasions when he has been faced with various decisions, he has discerned God's will while in the atmosphere of his personal Bible study. He himself pointed this out in a wonderful little paragraph in his book, writing, "In the course of these memoirs, you'll find that often the Lord gave me and my wife guidance through our daily systematic reading of the Bible. I'm not talking about 'religious roulette' where you open the Bible at random and point to a verse. I'm talking about the daily reading of Scripture in a systematic way, with hearts open for the Spirit of God to teach us." [6]

I'm not saying there will always be specific Bible verses to tell you what to specifically do in every particular situation; but I am saying that as we pour ourselves into God's Word, our thoughts begin to change, our mind begins to grow, our maturity increases, and we increasingly think through things as God Himself does because we are being transformed by the renewing of our thoughts (Romans 12:2). Our thinking is molded by the Word of God that dwells in us richly, and we grow in wisdom. Out of that biblically-sanctioned wisdom comes the ability to do the right things, say the right words, and make the right choices for a judicious and joyful life.

If you want to wise up, ask God for wisdom and search the Scriptures, learning to think through issues in the light of His Word.

**To Be Wise,
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Proverbs 1:1**

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Solomon’s answer was remarkable. He said, “O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong” (1 Kings 3:7-9, NIV).

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- Proverbs 2:1ff: "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you [God doesn't just want us to read His Word, or even to merely study it. He wants us to memorize and meditate on it—to memorize, visualize, and personalize it—to store it up in our hearts], turning your heart to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (NIV).
- Proverbs 3:1: "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart (NIV).
- Proverbs 4:1-2: "Listen, my son, to a father's instruction [to the instruction of the Heavenly Father]; pay attention and gain understanding. For I give you sound learning..." (NIV).
- Proverbs 5:1: "My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight" (NIV).
- Proverbs 6:20-23: "My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life" (NIV).
- Proverbs 7:1: "My son, keep my words and store up my command within you" (NIV).
- Proverbs 8:1, 33-35: "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway [what a great description of our daily devotional time in Bible study and prayer!] For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord" (NIV).
- Proverbs 9:6: "Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding."

It's amazing to me that the actual proverbs section of Proverbs doesn't really begin until you get to chapter 10, which opens with a heading saying, "The proverbs of Solomon." The first nine chapters of the book are a series of images and arguments, telling us how vitally important it is to seek God's wisdom by drinking in His Word like dehydrated shipwreck victims who discover a freshwater spring on their deserted island.

There is no abiding wisdom apart God's Word, but as we store up His commandments within us and begin looking at life's events through the prism of His precepts, we begin maturing into people of sanctified common sense—which is another definition of wisdom.

Dr. Paul Tournier once wrote, "The Bible... is a book in which [a person] may learn from his Creator the art of healthy living." [4]

This has certainly been true in my own experience. So many times, I've found the best decisions and the right answers have come as I've thought through problems in the light of the truths of Scripture. Often a simple verse of Scripture will come to mind and resolve the issue in my thinking.

I've also ran across multiple stories illustrating this pattern in virtually all the biographies of Christian leaders in my library.

Some time ago, for example, I read the life story of Oswald Chambers, author of one of the most famous devotional books of the Twentieth Century, *My Utmost for His Highest*, and I was impressed at how this worked out in his life. Chambers was born and raised in Scotland, and as a young man he became a widely-traveled preacher among Methodist and Holiness groups. He eventually worked with the YMCA among soldiers in Egypt during World War I.

On one occasion while in Cairo, British military authorities interrogated him regarding his evangelistic endeavors among the troops and for a while it looked as though he and all his fellow-workers would be detained, stripped of their status, and returned to England. Many of his colleagues were frightened and upset, but Chambers said, "I refuse to worry," and he thought through the situation with an open Bible before him.

His reading that day was in 1 Samuel 8, the story of the Israelites impetuously demanding a king. This is what Chambers wrote in his diary: "The reading of 1 Samuel 8 struck me impressively, viz. (that is to say) that in any dilemma produced by providential circumstances, the temptation is to yield to ordinary common sense rather than wait for God to fulfill His purpose. God's order comes to us through the haphazard."

The message to Chambers in this instance was—stay calm, don't do anything rash, give God time to work, and wait to see what happens. To a friend, Chambers said, "Let us keep very near Him and wait."

The situation soon resolved itself to his benefit.[5]

One of my favorite preachers for many years has been the inimitable Warren W. Wiersbe, author of many fine books and the former pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. In his autobiography; I was struck with Wiersbe's accounts of how on many occasions when he has been faced with various decisions, he has discerned God's will while in the atmosphere of his personal Bible study. He himself pointed this out in a wonderful little paragraph in his book, writing, "In the course of these memoirs, you'll find that often the Lord gave me and my wife guidance through our daily systematic reading of the Bible. I'm not talking about 'religious roulette' where you open the Bible at random and point to a verse. I'm talking about the daily reading of Scripture in a systematic way, with hearts open for the Spirit of God to teach us."[6]

I'm not saying there will always be specific Bible verses to tell you what to specifically do in every particular situation; but I am saying that as we pour ourselves into God's Word, our thoughts begin to change, our mind begins to grow, our maturity increases, and we increasingly think through things as God Himself does because we are being transformed by the renewing of our thoughts (Romans 12:2). Our thinking is molded by the Word of God that dwells in us richly, and we grow in wisdom. Out of that biblically-sanctioned wisdom comes the ability to do the right things, say the right words, and make the right choices for a judicious and joyful life.

If you want to wise up, ask God for wisdom and search the Scriptures, learning to think through issues in the light of His Word.

To Be Wise, Fear the Lord

Proverbs 1:7

The final verse of Solomon's prologue to the book of Proverbs states the theme of the book: To be wise, fear the Lord. Here in Proverbs 1:7 all 915 verse of proverbs are summed up in this one sentence: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

I like to define the fear of the Lord as a wonderful sense of terror at the greatness of our God—not an unhealthy fear but fitting feelings of awe in the face of who God is and what He is like. Without that, there is no foundation for clear thinking about any subject in the universe.

Dr. A. W. Tozer defined it this way: "The fear of God is... astonished reverence. I believe that the reverential fear of God mixed with love and fascination and astonishment and admiration and devotion is the most enjoyable state and the most satisfying emotion the human soul can know."[7]

Without the fear of God, we cannot understand the truth of God, the character of God, or the graciousness of God. If you want wisdom, learn to reverence, honor, respect, fear, and stand in wondrous awe at the greatness, the goodness, the graciousness, and the glory of your God.

Conclusion

The Asian Tribune recently reported the development of a beverage that claims to produce smart-thinking children in developing nations. It's a milk-added fruity drink being distributed throughout Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and it contains certain vitamins and minerals which, according to the newspaper, will "help develop quick smart thinking in children." [8]

If only we had such a beverage for adults! Potable, portable, drinkable wisdom! Our generation is the best educated in history, but not the wisest. One computer chip can today contain more information than the ancient library of Alexandria. We now award doctorates in areas of data processing and information management. But our wisdom hasn't kept up with our intelligence. We live in a world of foolish behavior, foolish arguments, foolish trivia, foolish investments, and foolish wars. It isn't innocuous foolishness; it can ruin our lives.

But God is omniscient, a God of wisdom who has promised to give smart thinking to those who ask Him for wisdom, seek it in the Scriptures, and fear Him with reverent awe in their hearts. We can learn to think smart in a foolish world. We can be wise. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction

PROVERBS 1:7, 15:1

One of the challenges of being a pastor in the 21st century is keeping up with the rapid changes in the world of everyday communication. Preachers and Bible teachers are communicators by profession, and communication technology is changing so constantly and so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. For example, I'm amazed at how many text messages people send and receive every day on their mobile telephones. I've learned to compose and send text messages reasonably well, but I can't do it as fast as our teens. They can shoot off an entire message while I'm still trying to punch out the first word.

The other day I noticed that the words "text message" do not occur on my phone. It says SMS. I didn't know what those letters stood for, and so I looked it up. It stands for "Short Message Service." The idea of text messaging is that it's composed of brief, spontaneous bursts of communication.

The same thing is true for Twitter. With Twitter, you have 140 characters to send your message or sum up what's going on in your life. These little messages are short bursts of communication. When you read a tweet—a Twitter message—you are reading a burst of truth about that person's life or activities or observations or even philosophy, summed up in 140 characters or less.

Well, there's nothing new about that. That is exactly what we have in the book of Proverbs. That is the genius behind this book of the Bible. I don't want to sound irreverent, but we can almost say that book of Proverbs is a collection of divine tweets. It is God giving advice to us in short bursts of communication, usually 140 characters or less per verse. Look, for example, at the first several verses of Proverbs 10:

1. The proverbs of Solomon: A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.
2. Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death.
3. The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but He thwarts the craving of the wicked.
4. Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.
5. He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.
6. Blessings crown the head of the righteous, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.
7. The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.
8. The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.

These eight verses give us a sample of the contents of the whole book of Proverbs. As you can readily see, the Proverbs are short, twitter-sized, messages – SMS messages – from the God who inspired the Bible, addressed to you and me. The subject is everyday wisdom. The book of Proverbs tells us how to apply God's infinite wisdom to our daily walk.

One of the neat things about the Proverbs is that they are so short that it's easy to memorize the ones we need. Back in 2005, I preached a series of sermons from the book of Proverbs; and during that series a man in our church asked to see me. To my amazement, he told me that during his high school years he had been challenged by a teacher to memorize the entire book of Proverbs. He had taken up the challenge and he had done it—all 31 chapters. By taking one verse after another and one chapter after another, he had committed the entire book to memory. He said that in memorizing the book of Proverbs, he had come to understand the importance of fearing God in the everyday matters of life. He had stocked the pantry of his mind with the most practical, portable wisdom that God has made available to us for daily living, and he had drawn insights from those verses many

times. And I will have to say, I consider this man to be one of the wisest men I know.

Well, not many of us will memorize the entire book of Proverbs, but every one of us ought to have certain verses from the book of Proverbs inscribed on our minds. In our year-long endeavor to memorize 100 Bible verses, we've already committed two of them to memory. Proverbs 3:5-6 say: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

Now today we are coming to two additional Proverbs that we want to commit to memory. At first glance, these Proverbs deal with two very different things—but on reflection, they are tightly connected. Here they are—our two subjects for today, and our two verses. The two Proverbs are 1:7 and 15:1; and the subjects are:

FEAR OF GOD TONE OF VOICE

Proverbs 1:7: Wisdom Results From the Right Fear of God

The first verse is Proverbs 1:7, and it's important to know this verse because verse 7 is the foundation stone for the entire book. It's the key to understanding the whole book of Proverbs, including Proverbs 15:1: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

There is one common denominator to all the Proverbs, a single thread that runs through each one of them, and here it is: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Each one of the Proverbs found in this book of the Bible tells us how we will respond to life if we have a healthy fear of the Lord, or how we will mess things up if we don't.

The secret to developing the wisdom we need for everyday living is learning to fear God. Now, let's define the fear of the Lord. It doesn't mean an unhealthy or dysfunctional or debilitating fear. It means a healthy, functional, appropriate respect, reverence, awe, and wonder.

I want to give you some biblical examples of the fear of the Lord.

- Genesis 17:1-3: When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless. I will confirm My covenant between Me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown.
- Leviticus 9:23-24: Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions of the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.
- Ezekiel 1: 26-28: Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be His waist up He looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down He looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded Him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around Him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.
- Matthew 17:5-8: While He was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown on the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," He said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

Notice two phrases here. They fell facedown on the ground in terror, but Jesus told them to not be afraid. There's a powerful spiritual principle here: We have a God who is great enough to fear—and good enough so we are not afraid of Him. He can say, "Fear Me," and "Don't be afraid" in the same passage without contradiction.

- Revelation 1:15-17: His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand he held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last."

In the pages of the Bible, when someone was given a glimpse of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, it struck terror into their hearts, and it caused them to fall on their faces in awe and reverence and fear. It wasn't an unhealthy or dysfunctional fear. It was the godly fear that comes from seeing the majesty of the Eternal God.

We need to have an experience like that. It might not be as empirical or as vivid as what Abraham or Ezekiel or John saw. It might

not be an actual visual appearance of the Lord or even an officially heaven-sent vision. But as we study the Scriptures, as we look at the wonders of God's creation, and as we contemplate on Him who is our Savior and our God, we should be more deeply impressed with His majesty than we are. We should reverence Him with a holy sort of terror. Sometimes we're too casual, too informal and cavalier in our relationship with God. It's true that we can address Him as "Abba Father" and it's true that He is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. But He is also awesome in power, blazing in holiness, and infinite in time and geography. To our amazement, Proverbs 1:7 does not say:

- The love of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
- The grace of our God is the beginning of wisdom.
- The joy of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
- It says: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Dr. A. W. Tozer wrote: "The fear of God is... astonished reverence. I believe that the reverential fear of God mixed with love and fascination and astonishment and admiration and devotion is the most enjoyable state and the most satisfying emotion the human soul can know." (A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), pp. 30-31.)

This is the secret and the source of wisdom for daily life. Now, we can see that more clearly by following this theme through the book of Proverbs.

- The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline—Proverbs 1:7
- Since they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes—Proverbs 1:29-31
- Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones—Proverbs 3:7-8
- To fear the Lord is to hate evil—Proverbs 8:13
- The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding—Proverbs 9:10
- The fear of the Lord adds length to life—Proverbs 10:27
- He whose walk is upright fears the Lord—Proverbs 14:2
- A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless—Proverbs 14:16
- He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life—Proverbs 14:26-27
- Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil—Proverbs 15:16
- The fear of the Lord teaches a person wisdom, and humility comes before honor—Proverbs 15:33
- Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the Lord a person avoids evil—Proverbs 16:6
- The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble—Proverbs 19:23
- Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life—Proverbs 22:4
- Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord—Proverbs 23:17
- Blessed is the person who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble—Proverbs 28:14
- Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised—Proverbs 31:30

So if you put all these things together, you can get a reasonably good working definition for the fear of God. The fear of God is our logical response to those aspects of God's character that are terrifying to behold. We are changed by the experience. And this fear of the Lord:

1. Determines our morality
2. Develops a clear sense of what life is about

3. Repels bad habits from our lives
4. Hates evil
5. Provides confidence and contentment
6. Leads to healthiness in body, mind, and soul
7. Enriches our lives
8. Lengthens our lives
9. Protects our children
10. Keeps us from being foolhardy and reckless
11. Gives us timeless beauty and strength.

That's why Solomon says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Proverbs 15:1: Wisdom Results in the Right Tone of Voice

Let me conclude by showing you one way this can be applied to our lives right now. When we fear the Lord, we look at things from a higher perspective and we begin to govern our own responses to life in a way that better reflects His glory. The book of Proverbs shows us how this works out in human relationships. Proverbs 15:1 applies this to the tone of our voice. Proverbs 15:1 says: A gentle or soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

The tone of our voice is often as important—or more so—than the words we say. Now, there are other verses in Proverbs that govern the contents of what we say—the words we use. But Proverbs 15:1 is devoted to our tone of voice. If we really fear the Lord, we will reflect His wisdom and graciousness and patience in our relationships with our husband, wife, children, workmates, schoolmates, friends, and with the server at the restaurant or the teller at the bank. It will affect the way we talk to our teachers and to our students. It will make a difference in relationships at church.

Last week, I had the opportunity of speaking to a group of worship pastors. There were several of us on the program, and one of the other speakers told of a time when he was hired to be Minister of Worship at a very traditional and historic church. This church had been in existence for well over 100 years, and they had a very traditional routine, which included singing the Doxology every week. Well, this young man was ready to change things and bring in some newer music and some innovations, and one day shortly after his arrival he omitted the Doxology from the order of service.

Afterward a woman approached him. "Young man," she said, "I am 83 years old and I have gone to this church since I was a little baby and I have missed very few Sundays in 83 years. And this is the first Sunday in my 83 years that I have not sung the Doxology."

He looked her and smiled and said very kindly, "Yes, and don't you think it's about time we changed things a little? There are other ways of singing a doxology or song of praise to the Lord."

She looked at him a moment, and then she smiled and said, "Yes, I guess you're right."

Now, I know churches in which a moment like that has literally split the church and done lasting damage. But both the young worship leader and the church veteran practiced Proverbs 15:1, and Satan lost the war.

I read about a counselor in Utah who was dealing with a very angry client. This person was aggressive and hostile, and the counselor found himself reacting to her anger. He was becoming more agitated on his side of the conversation. Then he thought of Proverbs 15:1 and silently quoted it to himself. He lowered his voice and spoke in a way that was deliberately softer than the woman's voice. She erupted in another burst of anger. He let her go until she finished her sentence and then he repeated his advice very softly. She erupted again. For a third time he spoke the same words and this time she looked at him and suddenly smiled and actually laughed. He said, "She quietly took my advice and I gave it to her without antagonizing her. Having once been an angry person, I found this marvelous! The Bible came alive. I saw what Proverbs 15:1 looked like." (<http://www.ucg.org/un/un0711/treasuredigest.htm>.)

I read the other day about former Boston Red Sox Hall-of-Fame third baseman Wade Boggs. He used to hate going to the old Yankee Stadium because there was one fan who was very hostile. This guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town he would spend all this time shouting obscenities and insults at Boggs. One day before the game, as Boggs was warming up, the fan began his typical routine and Boggs decided he'd had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands with his friends, and said, "Hey fella, are you the guy who's always yelling at me?"

The man said, "Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?" Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to continue his pre-game routine. The man never yelled at Boggs again; in fact, it was said that he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

Is it possible that your tone of voice has made a situation worse recently? Has it damaged a relationship? I know this is an area that in which I need continually improvement and the same may well be true for you, too.

Wisdom results from the fear of the Lord, and it results in the right tone of voice. If we have the right fear of the Lord in our hearts and the right tone of voice on our lips, the whole world around us will only have one thing to say: "There goes a wise, wise person."

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...

A soft answer turns away wrath...

STAYING MORAL IN AN IMMORAL WORLD Proverbs 7

A couple of weeks ago, TV Guide ran a cover story entitled "Has Network TV Gone Too Far?" focusing on the amount of sex, violence, and profanity on the tube. I wish I could read from the article, but I can't. It's just too lurid and very troubling. What it said basically was this: There are virtually no remaining restraints on sex, profanity, and violence on television. The floodgates are open, and it's only going to get worse and worse. The cable stations have sunk to new depths of sleaze, and network television feels it must follow suit if it wants to maintain its share of the audience.

Katrina and I have two or three programs that we videotape and watch. One has been Ed, a program about an attorney who moved back to his small hometown and opened a bowling ally. For the last two seasons, we've been wondering if Ed and his childhood sweetheart would get together. In this years opening episode, they did. But the success of this relationship, as it turned out, depended on how successful they could be at fornication—and that's what the entire show was about. Ed is among the "cleaner" shows on television, and we were very disappointed by that storyline.

But it brings up an important question for us. How can we stay moral in an immoral world? We live in a society that is sex-saturated. If you turn on the television or radio, if you peruse the magazines at the checkout counter, if you try to rent a video—everything is all about sex.

How can God's people remain pure? How can you develop a personal morality strong enough to withstand the seduction of this current age?

Today, I'd like to tell you about a man who once saw sex in the city. This man lived long ago, but just like us he had a window on the world. His window wasn't a television set, but a real window in a real city. And through that window he saw something that has served as a powerful lesson for the Lord's people for 3000 years.

This story is found in the Bible, in Proverbs 7. This is a longer passage than I usually read on a Sunday morning, but I think we need to hear the entire chapter. It is a remarkably relevant passage:

My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you. Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart. 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.

At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice. I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment. He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.

Then came out a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent. (She is loud and defiant, her feet never stay at home; now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks.) She took hold of him and kissed him and with a brazen face she said:

I have fellowship offerings at home; today I fulfilled my vows. So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you! I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let's drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love! My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took his purse filled

with money and will not be home till full moon.”

With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into the snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say. Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death.

There is a basic premise behind this chapter and it is this: Sex outside of marriage is a violation of the character and the laws of God. We don't know if this young man is engaging in premarital sex or extramarital sex, but in either case it's wrong. One of the Ten Commandments says: "Thou shalt not commit immorality." Ephesians 5 says, "But among you there should not even be a hint of sexual immorality." Sex itself isn't bad; it's a gift of God. But premarital sex, extramarital sex, post-marital sex, and homosexual behavior is a perversion of God's plan and a violation of God's holiness.

The devil wants us to think that immorality is desirable, good, pleasing, pleasant, upright, and the norm for human conduct. The entertainment industry is on a vast evangelistic mission to spread that propaganda and to shape our culture accordingly.

But the devil can never alter the character or the standards of a holy God. And so, as the writer of Proverbs 7 stood in the window of house and peered through the latticework, he witnessed a scene that has three storylines.

Seduction

The first is seduction. This young man was seduced, and it was a very powerful seduction. He was presented with a temptation so attractive and so powerful that he seemed unable to resist it. He is called in verse 7 a youth, a young man, so we would suppose that he was full of hormonal energy.

Proverbs 7:13 says that a woman met him, embraced him, and passionately kissed him. Then, having ignited this masculine hormonal energy, she said to him, "Let's go to my place."

Proverbs 7:21 says: "With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him..." The devil's in the same business today. He wants to seduce us with immorality. How does he do it?

He does it by plastering our television shows and movies with stimulating sexual images. He does it with men and women who don't dress modestly. He does it with magazines that scream sex at us all the time. He does it by getting us too involved with a platonic friendship at work. And he does it with pornography on the internet.

There was an article on this subject this week by Paul Strand, the Washington correspondent for CBN News. I'd like to read you a condensation of it:

Everyone is aware that it is easy to become addicted to cocaine or heroin. But how about pornography? A group of counselors and therapists is warning this addiction may soon become an epidemic. Pornography may be the new addiction of this new century. Researchers are finding that when people indulge in porn, they release powerful chemicals in their brain and body. Mark Kastleman, author of *The Drug of the New Millennium*, said, "There are a growing number of therapists and psychologists who are saying that this is as addictive as cocaine," or alcohol, or even heroin.

He explained that, when people view porn, "It causes the brain to release what we call endogenous drugs or endogenous chemicals. 'Endogenous' meaning 'produced from within.' So where cocaine or alcohol seek to mimic the brain's natural chemicals, pornography releases the real deal."

Pornography has always been around. But today, what once was a hidden, isolated problem, has become a widespread crisis. What's the reason? Blame the Internet, because of what Kastleman calls the three A's. It's accessible, affordable, and anonymous. And the anonymity is the real key, especially with religious people. They can do it without anyone knowing (Ed: Except Pr 15:3!). So you don't stagger around with a hangover the next day, you don't have needle marks in your arms."

Roughly 40 million people in the U.S. are said to be sexually involved with the Internet.

(One man) said, "I was a leader in my local church organization. I worked with youth groups. I served in the community. And yet I had this secret life."

(Another said) I developed a dual lifestyle. On one hand, we went to church every Sunday... Yet, on the other hand, I had this addiction."

Kastleman says we live in such a stressful time, and religious believers usually don't allow themselves typical stress-relievers like smoking and drinking. They want to avoid these vices and the appearance of evil. But Internet porn is secret. Kastleman said, "Now suddenly you have a little mouse where you hit a button, and instantly you get this flood of brain chemicals. No one knows you're doing it and it's completely affordable or no cost at all."

We have never seen anything like this in the history of the world, such a powerful tool as the internet for seducing men and women into immorality via pornography. Is the devil seducing anyone in this room today? Are we being seduced by an evil and corrupt culture? How many here are battling this temptation? It's as old as Proverbs 7:21 says: "With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him...."

Destruction

So there is the storyline of seduction; but the second storyline here is destruction. What began with pleasure ended horribly. This young man paid a very high price for his evening of pleasure. Look at Pr 7:22ff:

All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life...

Pr 7:27 says: "Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death."

Now we don't know what happened to his young man. Perhaps he caught a sexually transmitted disease that eventually took his life. Perhaps the woman's husband found out what had happened and it led to a fight. But more likely, what the writer is saying here is that this young man's immorality took him down a road that led him away from God, away from holiness, and away from eternal life. This young man's immorality put him on the broad road that leads to destruction, and right now—3000 years later—this young man is in hell because of the moral choices he made, beginning with that one-night stand in Jerusalem so very long ago. Do you think he would go back and do things differently if he had the chance?

The Bible says: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7-8).

Instruction

But there is a third storyline here, too. This is not only a story of seduction and destruction, but it is one of instruction. The whole purpose of Proverbs 7 is to instruct us, to warn us, to help us avoid the tragic mistake this young man made on that long-ago evening.

A careful reading of this chapter gives us three powerful weapons for staying moral in an immoral age.

First, we have got to store up God's commandments within us. Look at the way the chapter opens: My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you. Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.... They will keep you from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.

The Scriptures are a very powerful weapon. The book of Hebrews says: "For the Word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword."

The book of Psalms says, "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee."

When Jesus was tempted by the devil, three times He responded with Scripture. The devil doesn't have any tool as powerful as the pure, unbridled Word of God. And if you and I will fill our minds with the Word, we'll have the ammunition we need to fend off the attacks of the devil.

In other words, turn off that television and spend some time in personal Bible study. Forget about renting that movie, and spend the time instead memorizing a chapter of the Bible. Starve your immoral habits and feed your soul. Burn your pornography, and bury yourself in the Bible.

Second, whenever possible avoid the temptation.

Look at Proverbs 7:6: At the window of my house I looked out through the lattice. I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment.

How do we know he lacked judgment? Because of verse 8: He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the

direction of her house at twilight, as the day was fading.

This young man wasn't just an innocent victim. He was looking to be seduced. He was walking along in that direction. It might have been unconscious. Perhaps he had been fantasizing or thinking about sex, and his feet just took him in that direction. Or perhaps he very deliberately made up his mind to go into that part of town. In either case, he put himself in the line of fire. He opened himself to the temptation. He walked right into it because he lacked judgment.

Recently I read about something that happens every day in Huntsville, Texas. Approximately 100 male inmates from the Texas prison system are released daily. They are taken by bus from their various prisons and released at a particular location in Huntsville. They emerge through a gate from behind high brick walls, wearing lime-green shirts and carrying a laundry bag filled with their personal possessions. Each man has been issued a check for \$50 and a voucher good for one bus ticket out of town. Most of these released inmates cash their check in a nearby store, buy new clothes, and head toward the Greyhound station three blocks away.

But positioned there to meet them is a welcoming committee of prostitutes and drug dealers whose only goal is to ensure them and drag them back to their previous way of living.

Now that's like you and me. When we come to Jesus Christ we're set free from the prison of our old way of life. We take on a new identity. We're given a new lease on life. But the world and the devil gathers around us, trying to ensnare us all over again.

What do we do? We fill ourselves full of Scripture and head straight toward the bus stop, without glancing to the left or the right, without pausing, without hesitating. Here's my question: What change do you need to make in your lifestyle that will lessen the temptation you're under? How can you walk down another street, away from the seducer's neighborhood? What change do you need to make in your life today?

And then there is a third way of escape in Proverbs 7:24-25: Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say. Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths.

In other words, make up your mind that you are not going to sin against God in these ways. Make up your mind that you're going to stay moral in an immoral age. We have to set our standards in advance, before we face the temptation. If you're a young person here, a teenager or a college student, you need to determine in your heart that you are not going to cross certain lines of physical involvement with a member of the opposite sex.

Let's compare this young man to three other men in the Bible. Let's compare him to Joseph. Joseph was an attractive, muscular young single man in the book of Genesis. A married woman began fantasizing over him, tempting him, teasing him, wanting to sleep with him. One day, just like the woman in Proverbs 7, she grabbed him and tried to kiss him. Joseph's response was exactly the opposite of young man's in Proverbs 7. He turned and fled, leaving his cloak in her hands. He realized, as Charles Spurgeon put it, "Better to lose your coat than your character."

The second young man is Daniel. He found himself in a highly immoral society, but it says that he made up his mind that he would not be defiled. We have to make up our minds in advance that we aren't going to be defiled. You have to determine in your heart to live a clean and pure life.

The third young man is Jesus Christ Himself. The Bible says that though He was tempted in all ways as we are, yet He remained without sin. I mention Christ, because it all boils down to this: You and I don't have the strength ourselves to remain victorious. In our own strength alone, we can't stay pure. But Jesus Christ, who never sinned and who never sins, lives within us. He can strengthen us. He can live His life through us. And in Jesus Christ we can be more than conquerors.

Have you ever given Him your life? Have you received Him as your Lord and Savior. Have you received His forgiveness? No matter what you've done in the past, He can give you a new start and a new life.

There is a tremendous battle going on. Our culture is sinking into the sewer, drowning in filth, and the devil wants to drag us along as well. But we are God's people, and holiness becomes us. Purity is our lifestyle. The Bible says: Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.

Or as John put it: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and the lusts thereof. But whoever does the will of the Father in heaven lives forever."

Shortly after the election of Joseph Ratzinger of German to be the Pope Benedict, new head of the Roman Catholic, a Vaticananalyst wrote a book entitled *The Rise of Benedict XVI*, explaining some of the reasons why the 78-year-old German Cardinal was chosen as the new pontiff. One of the reasons is because Ratzinger has devoted decades to battling secularism in Europe, and Cardinal Francis George of Chicago summed it up like this: "In 1978, when Karol Wojtyla was elected as Pope John Paul II, the primary challenge to the Catholic Church came from the East, in the form of Soviet communism (John Paul came from Communist-dominated Poland and was ideally suited to combat this tyranny). Today the most difficult challenge comes from the West, and Benedict XVI is a man who comes from the West, who understands the history and culture of the West."

He's referring to the secularism that has descended like a godless fog over all of Western Europe and much of Eastern Europe and America.

Catholic observers say that Joseph Ratzinger is a brilliant intellect who has devoted many years of his life to combating what he calls a "dictatorship of relativism" in the West. Relativism is the belief that there are no absolute moral guidelines for this universe. Everything is relative to one's circumstances. This secular religion that has western civilization in its grip is nothing less than the abandonment of objective truth and the rejection of the Creator-God of Scripture.

I'm not Roman Catholic in my beliefs, but on this point I agree—at the core of the moral breakdown in the Western world is a rejection of the absolutes truths of an immutable God, and the book of Proverbs warns about this very thing in the sentence that serves as the key to the whole book: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7, NKJV). The church of Jesus Christ stands in the first half of that verse, and the rest of the world stands in the last half of the verse. This one verse slices the human race in two, and everyone alive is either on one side or the other side of that little conjunction but.

I devoted our last message in this *Wise Up* series of sermons to the prologue of Proverbs, the first paragraph of the book. Proverbs 1:1 gives us the author of Proverbs. Verses 2-6 give us the purpose for the book, and Proverbs 1:7 states the theme. These seven verses serve as a perfect foreword to the whole book.

This morning, I'd like to go back to verse 7, because this verse not only states the theme of the book, but it provides a paradigm for understanding the cultural shifts that are destroying the morality and immortality of an entire generation of American and European young people. This verse is so important that it's stated twice in the book, but with a slight difference:

Ø The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction—Proverbs 1:7

Ø The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding—Proverb 9:10

What does it mean to fear the Lord? Well, I think sometimes we try to water down this concept; and I myself have been guilty of that. We say, "Well, it doesn't really mean to be afraid of God. It means to respect and reverence Him, to stand in awe of Him."

That is true, yet in another sense I think it actually does mean to be afraid of Him. The Hebrew word *yar'ah* used in Proverbs 1:7 has a variety of applications, ranging from reverence and respect to panic and utter terror. It was the word used for the fear experienced by the sailors aboard Jonah's vessel when they were being battered by the storm.

After all, fear itself is not always a totally negative emotion. In its most basic sense, fear is the emotion that warns us of danger and that elicits from us responses that may save our lives. Well, the Bible teaches that our God is a consuming God. He is not a tame God; and in some sense, He is not a safe God, and being in His presence can be terrifying.

In Exodus 3, Moses was living in the interior of a vast desert, tending his father-in-law's sheep. One day he saw a bush ablaze on the slopes of Mount Horeb. When he decided to investigate this strange fire that he saw in the distance, he was surprised to find it mysterious and ominous. I think it was probably a larger fire than some of the drawings or paintings we've seen of it, and a large fire can be a terrifying thing. I remember one night, my son-in-law and I were driving back from Missouri and it was very late, in the wee hours of the morning. We were on a remote stretch of road, and there was no other traffic. It was dark and lonely. Suddenly we turned the corner and a farmhouse was on fire.

We veered into the driveway and jumped from the car, running toward the house, fearing that people were still inside for there was no one standing outside in the yard and no one trying to combat the blaze. But the flames were engulfing the building and we couldn't even get near it. We later learned that it was an abandoned house and no one was injured; but I remember how terrifying and staggering it was—the size and brilliance of the flames, the blast of the heat, the thunder of the crackling flames.

This fire in Exodus 3 was large enough to attract Moses' attention from some distance away, and I don't think it was a little hearthside flame; it was a terrifying blaze, for it represented the presence and the holiness of God Himself, and the Bible even states that our God is a consuming fire.

Out of the fire came the voice of God Himself like a thunderclap. And Exodus 3:6 says that Moses hid his face, “because he was afraid to look at God.”

Years later, Moses was back at that same mountain, this time as leader of the newly liberated slave-nation of Israel. Exodus 19 says, “There was thunder and lightening, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it with fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.” And the people were terrified at the majestic magnificence of the glory of God.

We have a similar picture in Isaiah 6 when the great prophet, the most intelligent and regal of all the prophets—Isaiah—was given an audience with the Shikinah glory of God. He saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were the seraphs, attending the throne and crying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.” And their voices made the temple shake and the building was filled with billowing smoke. And Isaiah was terrified and said, “Woe is me! I am ruined!”

The prophet Ezekiel had a similar experience. He opened his book by describing an incredible vision of the throne of God hurtling through the sky toward him, surrounded by bizarre angels and traveling on wheels within wheels over which arose a great expanse. Above the expanse was what appeared to be a throne of sapphire, and on the throne was a figure like that of a man, but He appeared on fire, illumined like glowing metal, surrounded by brilliant light, covered by rainbows and shimmering in glory. And Ezekiel said, “When I saw it, I feel facedown and I heard the voice of one speaking.”

The book of Revelation opens with a very similar image. John the Apostle, the author of the book, describes hearing a voice behind him saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last...” He turned to see the voice that was speaking, and there stood One like the Son of Man, clothed in a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and His hair were as white as snow, His eyes were like a flame of fire, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And when John saw Him, he fell at his feet like a dead man.

We see this all the way through the Bible. Let me quote some other verses:

Ø Then Abram (Abraham) fell on his face, and God talked with him—Genesis 17:3

Ø ...and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces—Leviticus 9:24

Ø Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation. And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “Separate yourselves from among the congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” Then they fell on their faces...--Numbers 16:19-22

Ø He said, “So as Commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and said to him, “What does my Lord say to His servant?”—Joshua 5:14

Ø It happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar—the Angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar! When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground—Judges 13:20

Ø Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they cried, “The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!”—1 Kings 18:38-39

Ø So I arose and went out into the plain, and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory which I saw by the River Chebar; and I fell on my face—Ezekiel 3:23

Ø And I heard a man’s voice between the banks of the Ulai, who called, and said, “Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.” So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face—Daniel 8:16-17

Ø Suddenly a voice came of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid—Matthew 17:5-6

Ø And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshipped God—Revelation 11:15-16

This is the fear of God. I think we can define it as a healthy sense of sanctified terror at the majestic holiness of the endless attributes of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus told us not to fear those who could kill the body, but to fear

Him who could cast body and soul into hell.

When we really recognize the fear of the Lord, all other fears fall from our lives and all other facts fall into place. When God Himself takes over the throne in the center of our thinking, all other realities align themselves in a cohesive structure that begins to produce within us the wisdom and knowledge and understanding that we need to think smart in a foolish world.

That's why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Without it, we have no basis for thinking eternal thoughts, no rationale for transcendent living, no foundation for absolute morality, no framework for piecing together the billions of bytes of data that make up this universe. Without it, there is no reference point for clear thinking and no abiding power for clean living. Without it, there is no ultimate hope, not one bit. There is no basis for healthy self-imaging. We can make no sense of the past and we have no plan for the future. Truth becomes whatever we want it to be, and that's why Fedor Dostoevski said, "If God is dead everything is justifiable."

Our society today has lost the wonder and majesty and fearsomeness of God's presence, and that's why we've abandoned respect for His Word and for the absolute standards that flow from His being like streams of light radiating from the sun. The book of Proverbs wants to restore that to us.

Perhaps you're saying, "How can I develop the fear of the Lord? Do I have to find a burning bush like Moses? Do I have to see fire fall from heaven like Elijah? Must I have a vision like Ezekiel or John the Apostle?"

No, visions in our current age are unreliable things. The Bible has been given in full, the canon of Scripture is clothed, and I don't believe God is issuing new extra-biblical revelation by means of dreams and visions. I realize that missionaries are telling us of many Muslims and Hindus around the world who are coming to Christ through vivid dreams, and I can accept that because a dream can be vivid without being equal to inspired Scripture. But we have to be careful with dreams and visions.

My father used to tell about a man in the mountains who refused to go to church. His wife nagged him so incessantly that he finally told her that, all right, he'd join the church. She said, "Well, to join our church you have to describe a vision you've had." There were some mountain churches that were emotional and they believed in visions.

So the man went to the deacons and told them he'd been walking through the field and a ball of fire had fallen from heaven and burst into flames at his feet, and a voice had told him to join the church. The deacons were mighty impressed and they admitted the man into the church.

When his wife heard about it, she was skeptical, and after arguing with him about it, she finally said, "Now, John, you tell me the truth. You didn't see a vision after all, did you?"

He admitted that he'd made up the story, and she made him go to the church and confess his fabrication to the deacons. They promptly threw him out of the church.

He left shaking his head. "This is the craziest church I've ever seen," he said. "You tell a lie and they let you in; and you tell the truth, and they throw you out."

Well, we do not have to have an esoteric, recondite vision like Ezekiel or John; we just have to study the Word of God and consider the qualities of God as described in the Bible. We have to take seriously the wrath of God, the holiness of God, the majesty of God, the omnipotence of God. We have to remember that our God is a consuming fire, that He is without beginning of days or end of life, that He is eternal in the heavens, that He is the absolute governor of the universe, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Look at the process for cultivating a heart that fears the Lord as it is laid out for us in Proverbs 2:1-5: "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God."

The God-fearing person saturates himself or herself with the Word of God. He accepts God's word. He stores up His commandments within him, like Mary who pondered all these things in her heart. He turns his ear to wisdom and applies his heart to understanding the truth of Scripture. God-fearing people search out the promises and commands and truths of God's Word like a man looking for silver or hidden treasure. They saturate their minds with the Bible.

When my children were small, I bought them some little capsules, which, according to the instruction on the package, they dropped them in a goldfish bowl. The capsules contained little sponges that began to absorb the water. Within a few days, the goldfish bowl was filled with large figures of fish and sea horses, dolphins and whales. Without water, they were just shriveled up pieces of compressed sponge. But as they absorbed the water they became what they were always meant to be.

Without the guidance of the life-giving Word of God we're spiritual and morally and even intellectually dehydrated. But as we soak in the Scriptures and saturate our hearts and minds with God's Word, we become what God has always designed and intended for us

to be.

The book of Proverbs has twenty references to fearing the Lord, and by looking up some of these twenty verses, we have a portrait of the God-fearing person.

1. To fear God is to avoid evil. Fearing God means that we are so awed by His holiness that we're fearful of violating it and zealous to honor it.

Ø Proverbs 3:7 says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil."

Ø Proverbs 8:13 says, "To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech."

Ø Proverbs 14:16 says, "A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil; but a fool is hotheaded and reckless."

Ø Proverbs 16:16 says, "Through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil."

2. To fear the Lord is to cultivate humility. Fearing God means that we are so awed by His majesty that we're afraid of usurping it and eager to reflect it.

Ø Proverbs 15:33 says, "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor."

Ø Proverbs 22:4 says, "Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life."

3. To fear the Lord is to live righteously. Fearing God means that we are so awed by God's righteousness that we're afraid of heading the wrong way in life, and eager to find the right way.

Ø Proverbs 14:2 says, "He whose walk is upright fears the Lord, but he whose ways are devious despises Him."

4. To fear the Lord is to live securely. Fearing God means that we are so awed by God's infinite reserves of omnipotent might that in fearing the Lord we realize we have nothing else to fear.

Ø Proverbs 14:26-27 says, "He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death."

Ø Proverbs 19:23 says, "The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble."

Ø Proverbs 23:17-18 says, "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."

5. To fear the Lord is to be content in life. Fearing God means that we are so awed by God's riches that we rejoice daily in the abundant life.

Ø Proverbs 15:16 says, "Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil."

6. To fear the Lord is to be praised by others. Fearing God means that we are so awed by God Himself that others are awed by us.

Ø Proverbs 31:30 says, "Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

The fear of God is the missing element in our society that now lives under the dictatorship of relativism. And it's the missing element in our individual lives. So if you want to be wise, here's where you begin. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

DILIGENCE: MATURITY MEANS PAYING ATTENTION TO THINGS LARGE AND SMALL Proverbs

Recently an innovative woman in London named Lorlett Hanson came up with a new way of encouraging under-achieving youngsters, especially those of black and minority ethnic heritage. Ms. Hanson was raised by her grandmother who taught her about life by continuously passing on wise sayings and Jamaican proverbs. Now Ms. Hanson has tracked down and preserved a wide collection of proverbs from Caribbean sources. "Some of the sayings I remembered myself as I was fed proverbs as a child. I had a whole diet of them," explains Ms. Hanson. She has collected and packaged fifty-two of these proverbs, and they have been printed

on a set of cards and published under the title, “Things Mama Used to Say.”

This product has been an award-winner in England, and it's being widely used by educators working with minority youth. The publisher says, “They provide food for thought, lessons for living and keen observations of how to successfully navigate your life journey.”[1]

Well, “Things Mama Used to Say” is a great idea, but not a new one. The Bible came up with the idea nearly 3,000 years ago, and the book of Proverbs gives us, not just 52, but over 900 verses that provide “food for thought, lessons for living, and keen observations about how to successfully navigate your life journey.” We can call the book of Proverbs: “Things Papa Solomon Used to Say,” or even better: “Things our Heavenly Father Wants to Say to Us Now.”

One of the most frequent themes in the book of Proverbs is the importance of being diligent in life, for maturity means paying attention to things both large and small. That requires a threefold commitment.

Improving Ourselves

First, we have to make a commitment to ourselves to improve ourselves. We have to tell ourselves, “God has created me to be special for Him, to live for Him in an abundant life, to be as effective as I can be during my temporary tour of duty on earth. I have to keep growing, to keep learning, to keep developing, to keep improving myself for the sake of Christ and His kingdom.” This is one of the underlying themes of the book of Proverbs. We should be growing in wisdom every day, in our ability to live with purpose and perspicuity. As I read through the book of Proverbs, one of the constant refrains is: You can be wiser. You can do better. You can learn to live on a higher level. Notice how this theme shows up in a single word that occurs several times in Proverbs:

- Proverbs 2:1-2 (NIV): My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding....
- Proverbs 22:17 (NIV): Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart....
- Proverbs 23:12 (NKJV): Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to the words of knowledge.
- Proverbs 24:30ff (NIV): I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; 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....

Apply your heart to understanding... Apply your heart... Apply your heart to instruction... I applied my heart....

There comes a point in which we have to be proactive and diligently take charge of our own lives, applying ourselves and doing whatever we need to do to improve ourselves so that we can live to our fullest potential.

- Proverbs 4:5ff (NIV): Get wisdom, get understanding... Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.... Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.
- Proverbs 19:8 (NIV): He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers.

As a preacher and public speaker, I've been encouraged by the example of Demosthenes, the most famous of the Greek orators. As a young man, so the story goes, he attempted to speak before the Assembly in Athens, which was made up of the greatest orators in the nation, but he was laughed off the stage and his attempt ended in humiliation. In his gloom and despondency, and he traveled to the Greek coast where a friend counseled him and told him that with enough effort he could become a great speaker. So Demosthenes shaved off the beard on one half of his face so that he wouldn't be tempted to go out in public. And there by the seashore he started practicing. He used the crashing of the ocean as a sounding board with which to strengthen his voice. He practiced speaking with pebbles in his mouth to improve his enunciation and diction. He would shout out his speeches while running uphill to improve his volume and his lung capacity. He would suspend a sword over his shoulder to correct a problem he had with his posture. He studied the speeches of Thucydides and wrote them word for word, over and over again to teach himself the construction of sentences.

The day finally came when he rose to speak again in the Athenian Assembly, and by the time Demosthenes had finished his address the entire audience was on its feet, shouting, “Yes! Yes! We shall follow this man! We shall do as he says!”[2]

Demosthenes was intent on improving himself.

Almost the same thing happened to Benjamin Disraeli, the famous Jewish Prime Minister of England during the days of Queen Victoria. As a young man, he rose to speak for the first time in the British Parliament, but his speech was so poor and so poorly received that he was literally shouted down. As he took his seat in humiliation, he said these words: “I sit down now, but the

time will come when you will hear me.”

He went to work on developing his positions on issues, his thoughts, his ability to communicate, his speech patterns, his delivery; and the day did come when the Parliament heard him and when the entire world listened to him.[3]

No matter what we are doing now, we can learn to do it better.

Whatever God has called you to do, you can learn to do it better than you’re doing it now. Whatever your profession, whatever your hobby, whatever your ministry, whatever your skill, whatever your gift, you can develop and improve and grow.

This is true of children who want to become all God wants them to be. This is true of teenagers who want to become men and women who God can greatly use. This is true of those in midlife who are wondering if they’re on the downward slide. This is true of older folks who think now they’ve reached an age where there’s little reason to keep plugging away at improvement.

There once lived a famous Japanese artist named Hokusai, one of Japan’s greatest painters who is best remembered for his historical scenes and landscapes including his Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji. Here’s what he once said on this subject: “Ever since the age of six I have had a mania for drawing the forms of objects. Towards the age of fifty I published a very large number of drawings, but I am dissatisfied with everything which I produced before the age of seventy. It was at the age of seventy-three I nearly mastered the real nature and form of birds, fish, plants, and etcetera. Consequently, at the age of eighty, I shall have got to the bottom of things; at one hundred I shall have attained a decidedly higher level which I cannot define, and at that age of one hundred and ten every dot and every line from my brush will be alive. I call on those who may live as long as I to see if I keep my word.”[4]

Well, as it turned out Hokusai died at the age of ninety, but he was still producing art when he died and his work became the inspiration for the great French Impressionists including Claude Monet who collected and studied his art.

The great novelist, Pearl Buck, was asked on her eightieth birthday if she wished to be young again. She replied, “Wish to be young again? No, for I have learned too much to wish to lose it. I am a far more valuable person today than I was 50 years ago, or 40 years ago, or 30, 20 or even 10. I have learned so much since I was 70.”

Norman Vincent Peale was an American clergyman who wrote a famous book in the middle of the twentieth century entitled, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Some of his theology is a little weak, but I’ve found his book very helpful, and so have a lot of other people. One day, Dr. Peale received a letter from a man thanking him for his book. The man was 93 years old. He said, “I have had an inferiority complex for 93 years, and it made me miserable for 93 years. But a friend gave me your book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. I read this book; I believed it; I practiced all your suggestions. And I’m writing to report that after 93 years I have lost my inferiority complex.”[5]

As long as we’re alive, we should keep growing. Maybe you need to muster your energy and get back into school. Finish your degree. Get into that Bible study. Start exercising and develop a work-out plan. Ask that Christian guy or girl out on a date. Join the choir. Listen to those Christian motivational tapes. Memorize that chapter of Scripture. Change your dietary habits. Just take charge and prayfully begin applying yourself to be all you can be for the Lord!

The apostle Paul wrote that outwardly we are perishing, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Proverbs 4:18 says: “The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine” (the Message).

Accepting Correction

A second application of diligence is seen in the way in which we accept correction. I’m not talking about responding to criticism, but receiving correction from those friends and family members—and from God Himself—for we need their insights if we’re to improve. This theme winds its way through Proverbs like an unbroken ribbon.

- Proverbs 3:11-12 (NIV): My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in.
- Proverbs 9:9 (NIV): Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.
- Proverbs 10:17 (NIV): He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.
- Proverbs 12:1 (NIV): Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.
- Proverbs 13:1 (NIV): A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.

The other day I picked up a book for a dollar at a used book sale. It was the memoirs of Priscilla Presley in which she told the bizarre story of her marriage to Elvis. In one chapter, Priscilla reveals how disturbed she was when she learned the Elvis was taking so many pills every night. His fear of insomnia and his family history of anxiety, coupled with his performance schedule, made it

difficult for him to sleep, a condition that just tormented him and led him to take handful after handful of prescription sleeping pills, sedatives, and tranquilizers at bedtime. Elvis didn't take kindly to anyone giving him advice, and so Priscilla was afraid to say very much. But one night she ventured to express her concern.

He bristled. Picking up a medical dictionary he always kept near at hand on his night table, he said, "In here is the explanation for every type of pill on the market, their ingredients, side effects, cures, everything about them. There isn't anything I can't find out."

"It was true," Priscilla wrote in her memoirs. "He was always reading up on pills, always checking to see what was on the market, and which ones had received FDA approval. He referred to them by their medical names and knew all their ingredients. Like everyone else around him, I was impressed with his knowledge and certain he was an expert. One would think he had a degree in pharmacology."^[6]

But of course, his vast knowledge of the subject did not represent the equivalence of wisdom, and his long-term abuse of powerful pharmaceuticals contributed to his tragic death at the age of forty-two. He wouldn't listen to the concerns of his friends. Out of selfishness or pride or stubbornness, he just wouldn't listen, and he died at the very time when he should have been coming into his most productive and mature years.

I've seen a lot of people like that. You try to help them, you try to tell them something, you try to admonish them, and all you get is angry resentment. In counseling married couples through the years, I've found that sometimes husbands just don't want to sit down for counseling and they resent it. They think they can solve everything on their own and they're irritable at the thought of marriage counseling. Sometimes the husband is eager, but the wife is the resistant one. People battling substance abuse are often in denial and don't want anyone telling them things they don't want to hear. They resent correction or counsel. But the book of Proverbs speaks very frankly and attributes that kind of response to fools. The wise person is eager for help and humble enough to accept advice and correction and counsel. Solomon wrote:

- Proverbs 13:18 (NIV): He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.
- Proverbs 15:5 (NIV): A fool spurns his father's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
- Proverbs 15:31-32 (NIV): He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.
- Proverbs 17:10 (NIV): A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.
- Proverbs 19:20 (NIV): Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.
- Proverbs 19:25 (NIV): Rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.
- Proverbs 25:12 (NIV): Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.
- Proverbs 27:6 (NKJV): Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.
- Proverbs 28:23 (NKJV): He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue.
- Proverbs 29:1 (NKJV): He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

Working Hard

Finally, being diligent in life means that we commit ourselves to working hard. The verses that speak to this in the book of Proverbs are almost too numerous to quote.

- Proverbs 6:6-8 (NIV): Go to the ant... consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provision in summer and gathers its food at harvest.
- Proverbs 10:4-5: Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.
- Proverbs 12:11 (NIV): He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.
- Proverbs 12:24 (NIV): Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.
- Proverbs 12:27 (The Message): A lazy life is an empty life, but "early to rise" gets the job done.
- Proverbs 14:23 (NIV): All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.
- Proverbs 26:13ff (NKJV): The lazy man says, "There is a lion in the road! A fierce lion is in the streets!" As a door turns on its

hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed. The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl; it wearies him to bring it back to his mouth. The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

- Proverbs 27:23ff (NKJV): Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds. For riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations. When the hay is removed, and the tender grass shows itself, and the herbs of the mountains are gathered in, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field; you shall have enough goats' milk for your food, and the food of your household, and the nourishment of your maidservants.
- Proverbs 28:19 (NKJV): He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows frivolity will have poverty enough!

When I was working on the book *Then Sings My Soul*, I came across the story of Sabine Gould, the author of "Onward Christian Soldiers" and the hymn "Now the Day is Over." He was an incredibly prolific man who pastored his village church, taught college, dabbled in archaeology, published travel guides, and for many years published a new novel annually. He became an authority on British folk music, and no one really knows how many other books and publications he penned. It was an astonishing number—at one time, he was responsible for more books in the British Museum Library than any other author.

Sabine Baring-Gould declared that he often did his best work when he felt least inclined to apply himself to the task. Rather than waiting for inspiration, he plunged into his work and plodded on until it was finished. "The secret is simply that I stick to a task when I begin it," he said. "It would never do to wait from day to day for some moments that might seem favorable for work."

It reminded me of another Englishman. Some time ago, I picked up an interesting book entitled *I Was Winston Churchill's Private Secretary* by Phyllis Moir who described how diligent her boss was at going about his work. Before he became Prime Minister during World War II, Churchill was fraught with worry about the Nazi threat, but he also had a series of demanding book deadlines. On the day that Prague was seized by the Nazis, he was hurrying to complete a 300,000 word history of the English people. He said to his son Randolph after supper on that tense and frightening day, "It's hard to take one's attentions off the events of today and concentrate on the reign of James II—but I'm going to do it."

And he did. Phyllis Moir said, "When a job of writing has to be done Mr. Churchill sits down to it whether he is in the mood or not and the effort generates his creative power." [7]

It reminds me of what basketball star Jerry West once said: "You can't get much done in life if you only work on the days when you feel good." [8]

I know there are times in life when we need to relax our minds and our bodies. We aren't machines that pound away twenty-four hours a day. Jesus Himself told the disciples to take a break, come apart, and rest awhile. But by and large, God didn't make us to waste our time, to sit around for hours and hours day after day watching television, devouring movies, or playing video games ad infinitum and ad nauseam.

Jesus said, "My Father works and I work."

In one of the most remarkable paragraphs I've ever read about this, Roland H. Bainton said in his biography of Reformer Martin Luther that God has called us to labor because He labors. God Himself works at common occupations.

- He is a tailor who makes coats for the animals, fur for the rabbit, and wool for the sheep.
- He's a shoemaker who provides paws and hoofs for the animals.
- He is a gardener who fills the earth with flowers and tress and shrubs.
- He is a school teacher who instructs us daily in the art of living.
- He's the best cook, said Luther, because the heat of the sun supplies all the heat there is for cooking.
- God is a butler who sets forth a feast for the sparrows and spreads a table in the wilderness.
- The Lord Jesus Christ worked as a carpenter and stone mason in the hillside towns of Galilee.
- And, said Luther, look at the Lord's friends and families. One of the most remarkable examples of humility in history is the Virgin Mary, who, after receiving the astounding news that she was to become the mother of the Redeemer Himself, went back and milked the cows, scoured the kittles, and swept the house like any homemaker.

We only have a few years to accomplish all that God wants us to do, and so the Bible tells us we should number our days that we may present to God a heart of wisdom. We should redeem the time, for the days are evil. We should occupy till He comes, because time is drawing short. We must be about the Father's business, so that one day He will look at us in glory and say, "Well done, thou

good and faithful servant.”

The very process of sanctification is that process whereby God perfects that which concerns us. He wants us to grow, to improve.

Not many of us are satisfied with the way we are right now. Sometimes I become very discouraged with myself, and I feel worthless and useless and like a colossal failure. Most of us have bouts with feelings like those. But God isn't finished with us yet. Through Jesus Christ He wants us to mature, to grow, to become all He intends for us to be and to do all He intends for us to do. But we have to cooperate, to be diligent, to pay attention to matters large and small. And that means improving ourselves, accepting correction, and working hard. As we do so, the God who has begun a good work in us will carry it to completion until the coming day

[1] <http://www.onehandcantclap.co.uk/echoes.html>, accessed on August 30, 2005. Also see <http://www.blackenterprise.co.uk/inbusiness/details.aspx?i=169&c=profile&h=Jamaican+Proverbs+Prove+a+Winner+for+Lorlett+Hudson>, accessed August 30, 2005.

[2] Richard Bewes, *Speaking in Public—Effectively* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1998), pp. 9-11.

[3] Hesketh Pearson, *Dizzy: The Life and Personality of Benjamin Disraeli Earl of Beaconsfield* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951), p. 66.

[4] Quoted by Robert Fulghum in *Words I Wish I Wrote* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1997), p. 55.

[5] Norman Vincent Peale, *The Tough-Minded Optimist* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1967), p. 19.

[6] Priscilla Beaulieu Presley, *Elvis and Me* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), pp.151-152.

[7] Phyllis Moir, *I Was Winston Churchill's Private Secretary* (New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc., 1941), pp. 100 and 164.

[8] Quoted by John Maxwell in *Success: One Day at a Time* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 2000), p. 9

DEMEANOR: MATURITY MEANS LEARNING THE FINE ART OF REFRESHING OTHERS

Proverbs

A very wise lady once told me during my college years, “Rob, learn to be a refreshing person, like the man named Philemon in the Bible. In writing to him, the apostle Paul said, ‘The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother,’ and Paul later added, ‘Yes, brother... refresh my heart in the Lord.’” (Philemon 1:7, 20).

She planted a desire in my mind and since that day I've wanted to be refreshing to others, like a fresh breeze on a sultry day. I've not been nearly as successful as I'd like, but I'm still trying; and as I study the book of Proverbs, I find some hints to help me along the way.

Proverbs 11:25 says, “He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”

Proverbs 18:4 says, “A person's words can be life-giving water; words of true wisdom are as refreshing as a bubbling brook” (NLT).

Proverbs 25:13 says, “Reliable friends... are like cool drinks in sweltering heat—refreshing!” (The Message).

Proverbs 27:9 says, “Just as lotions and fragrance give sensual delight, a sweet friendship refreshes the soul” (The Message).

I've found there are two kinds of people that come into my life. When I'm with the first kind, I go away happier and stronger; when I'm with the second kind, I go away drained and tired. The first kind I'm happy to see walk up the driveway or through my office door. The second kind, my heart sinks a little when I see them approaching although I try hard not to let it show. It reminds me of Oscar Wilde's quote: Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go.

How can we become people in the first category? Well, here's an idea for your personal study. It takes a couple of hours to read all the way through the book of Proverbs. One rainy day, pour yourself a hot cup of tea, sit in a quiet spot, and read through the book of Proverbs looking for any and all verses that describe someone who could be called “refreshing.”

Ask yourself: What makes for a refreshing person? What qualities are listed, and what verses list them? In my own study along these lines, I pinpointed five different qualities, all having to do with our demeanor, and from these verses I've concluded that maturity means learning the fine art of refreshing others.

[1] Projecting Friendliness

First, refreshing people project friendliness. Proverbs 15:26 says, "The LORD hates evil thoughts, but he is pleased with friendly words" (GNT). Proverbs 15:29 says, "A friendly smile makes you happy, and good news makes you feel strong" (CEV). And my favorite verse on this subject, one that I've known and loved since childhood, is Proverbs 18:24: "A man who has friends must himself be friendly."

Dale Carnegie must have been thinking of this verse when he wrote his famous maxim: "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." [1]

Let me give you two examples from my own experience—one negative and the other positive.

When I was about thirteen years old, our church in Elizabethton, Tennessee, renovated several rooms on one side of the building, and they provided a nice room for the teenage group. But it wasn't air conditioned, and even in the Tennessee mountains, the summers can be very hot. So a friend of mine, Myra Floyd, and I decided to collect money for a window air conditioner, and we decided we'd go up and down Elk Avenue, the main street of our little town, and ask the business owners to contribute. It took us several trips to see everyone, and some of the shop owners said they just couldn't give anything; others did, but everyone was sympathetic to us and seemed interested and were friendly.

All except the owner of a clothing store on the middle block of town. We walked into his store and we'd no sooner opened our mouths than he shot back, "Do you have a license from the city to solicit?"

I didn't even know what "solicit" meant, much less that I needed a license to do it. In front of the customers in his store he belittled us and scolded us and sent us on our way feeling we were the worst flotsam and jetsam that had ever floated to the top of humanity's surface.

Well, I know we're to be loving and forgiving people and I probably shouldn't carry a grudge and that poor man is probably dead by now; but that was decades ago and to this day I have not set foot in that store; and I think I'd probably rather die naked than to purchase a shirt there.

But now let me give you another example.

One day some time ago, I woke up tired and worried and in a foul mood. I dressed, got in the car, and left for the office. Along the way, I stopped at a fast food joint for a cup of coffee, and when I went in a young man behind the counter greeted me with a big smile and asked what I wanted. He was just naturally cheerful, and as he waited on me I can honestly say he gave me a new and improved attitude as I left that restaurant. I've often thought later of the power of his smile and of his warm personality; and sometimes I've rebuked myself because after decades of Christian growth I often don't display the same cheer and friendliness of that minimum-wage part-time high school student who climbed out of bed early one morning to serve coffee to grouchy people like me.

Success in life comes faster and easier if we're friendly people.

According to D. A. Benton in her book *Executive Charisma*, the ability to work well with other people accounts for eighty-five percent of our success in getting, keeping, and advancing in our jobs. Our technical skills account for the remaining fifteen percent. "In a thirty-five-year career," Benton writes, "you'll experience over 100,000 hours of decision making and 400,000 hours interacting with others." [2]

Ritz-Carlton Hotels uses a very telling sentence to train their workers: "Elegance without warmth is arrogance." [3]

Sam Walton, who founded Wal-Mart understood the same thing. Years ago, when the company reached \$100 billion, he had a meeting and announced, "We just went out of the retail business. With 30 million coming in our stores a day, we're in the people business. Anybody can put product on the shelves. We'll be the best in how we treat people." [4]

Well, the Bible gave that same advice nearly 3000 years ago: A person who has friends must be friendly.

Listen to these other verses from Proverbs:

- Proverbs 16:7 (NIV): When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies to live at peace with him.
- Proverbs 18:1 (NIV): An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends; he defies all sound judgment. Roger Ailes, the political consultant and media guru once wrote a column for *Success Magazine* entitled "Lighten Up! Stuffed Shirts Have Short Careers." He pointed out that for seven out of ten people who lose their jobs, the problem isn't lack of skill; it's due to personality conflicts. "Your best career move," wrote Ailes, "is to temper your ego and become easier to like." [5]

• Proverbs 27:14 (NKJV): He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him. In other words, it's not a matter of overpowering others with your personality; it's quiet cheer and loving optimism that people need. I'll have to confess that I'm a little put off by people who have such an oversized personality that it just bowls me over. Some people come on too strong for me. It's not a matter of personality alone. Someone once said about another, "He doesn't have much personality." Well, just as God gave us each a differently shaped and formed body, He gave us each a differently shaped and formed personality. Just as we can improve our bodies by exercise and nutrition, we can improve our personalities; but you don't have to be naturally extraverted to be friendly. Anyone, anywhere, anytime can be friendly.

[2] Practicing Kindness

The second personality trait we should develop is that of kindness. Proverbs 11:16-17 (NIV): A kindhearted woman gains respect... A kind man benefits himself.

Years ago when Billy Graham became a far-famed evangelist and was often on the road, his wife, Ruth, moved the family to Montreat, North Carolina, to be near her parents. This is a little community outside of Asheville, and up and down the hills Ruth quickly became known for her acts of kindness. One of her neighbors, Betty Frist, wrote about it in a book entitled *My Neighbors, the Billy Grahams*. One day a visitor walked into the Graham kitchen and found Ruth cradling a strange baby in one arm, fixing breakfast with her other hand, and trying to shut the oven door with her foot. A young missionary couple had arrived the day before, exhausted because their baby had not been sleeping at night. Ruth gave the couple a bedroom, took the baby into her own room for the night, and was now trying to fix breakfast while the parents caught up on their sleep.

On another occasion, a woman and her son came down with the flu. Ruth showed up at their house, pulled them bodily out of bed, took them to her own home and gave them round-the-clock attention while they recovered. The two later learned that Billy was bedfast, too, at the time, suffering from the same ailment.[6]

Patricia Cornwall tells of another time when Ruth was concerned for a neighbor whose husband had just passed away. Ruth called her up and said, "I'd like to bring your family Sunday dinner." She made the pot roast, but the family was going to Sunday School so they asked Ruth just to set the meal in the oven. When Ruth did so, she noticed the oven was dirty, so she took the time to clean it. The next week, Ruth was sitting behind the person in church and finally the woman couldn't stand it any longer and turned around in the middle of the sermon and said, "Did you clean my oven?"

For some reason, I've been so impressed by those Ruth Graham stories—and those are just a sampling. While she could have taken advantage of worldwide fame and a global platform, she preferred to clean the oven of a neighbor, care for a flu-ridden family, and devote much of her considerably creative energy to meeting the needs of her mountain neighbors.

Lord, make us all like that! Teach us to commit random acts of kindness! Help us to always have a cold cup of water in Jesus' Name for a thirsty soul.

Another passage that makes the same point is Proverbs 11:24-25: One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

That's the way the newer translations put it: Those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. The actual Hebrew shows up more literally, however, in the older versions where Proverbs 11:25 says: "Those who water others will themselves be watered."

The actual Hebrew word used here is a term that is used for watering a plant or for an abundance of rain falling from the sky. It's also used in the sense of pouring, lavishing, drenching, refreshing, and renewing. In his generations-old commentary on Proverbs, William Arnot said quaintly, "It comes to this: If we be not watering we are withering."

Oh, it is sweet employment to be the waterer of a withering soul! It is gentle work for tender workers... In the keeping of this command there is great reward. To be a vessel conveying refreshment from the fountain-head of grace to a fainting soul in the wilderness is the surest way of keeping your own spirit fresh, and your experience new.[7]

[3] Displaying Cheerfulness

We also refresh others by displaying cheerfulness, and in fact I venture to think it's impossible to become a refreshing person without being cheerful at heart. If I had to select a favorite chapter in the book of Proverbs, I think I'd choose chapter 15 because this very theme shows up in three different verses:

The first is verse 13: A happy heart makes the face cheerful...

Someone once said that our day goes the way the corners of our mouths are turned.

Well, that's true. Our faces are barometers of the heart. In the aftermath of the attack on New York's Twin Towers, federal authorities

began expanding their techniques for spotting potential terrorists, and among the experts who have consulted extensively with the government is a retired psychologist named Paul Ekman. This man is known around the world for his research on facial expressions. According to the newspaper, “He has analyzed forty-two facial muscles that can produce more than 10,000 expressions. He has found that seven basic emotions—anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise—have clear facial signals.”[8]

Which of those seven basic emotions is most frequently displayed on your face?

At the mature age of 53, I’ve come to realize something for the first time. A smile shouldn’t just be a random, spontaneous, occasional expression; it should be an intentional, well-practiced facial demonstration of God’s joy in our lives. It’s a habit we must cultivate.

Until I was in high school, I suffered from a life-long habit of chewing my fingernails. I don’t remember a time when I didn’t do it. Some kids suck their thumbs; I chewed my fingernails. But in high school, my basketball coach noticed it one day and admonished me. “I don’t know how to stop,” I said.

He replied, “Well, that’s easy. Whenever you notice that your fingers are in your mouth, take them out.”

That seems simple enough to be dumb, but, you know, it worked for me. I now realize more of the mechanics behind his advice. Until then, chewing my fingernails had been an activity regulated by my subconscious brain. I just had to bring the habit up into my conscious realm for awhile to re-adjust it, and then, the bad habit broken, I could relegate the whole thing back to my subconscious.

It’s that way with smiling. It’s largely subconscious, but as a result our faces tend to need a little work. I’m trying to consciously smile. Every time I find that I’m not smiling, I stop and tell my mouth to reverse course.

Of course, there are times when it’s not appropriate to smile; but by and large, I think a pleasant expression should be the default setting on our faces. And so we just have to work at it a little bit, and for the Christian it’s just a matter of letting the joy of the Lord bubble up and rise to the surface.

In her excellent management book entitled *Executive Charisma*, D. A. Benton devoted several pages to the importance of managers and executives working on their facial expressions. She said, “The look of enjoyment should be a natural state. But it isn’t. Go outside and take a fifteen-minute walk and look at the expressions of people’s faces. They are awful. You see mad, sad, scared, nervous, serious, vacant expressions on 70 percent of the people. Another 20 percent look perpetually disagreeable, as if they never had a pleasant moment in their life and want to keep it that way! If someone does smile at you or looks happy, it’s an oddity.”

Benton actually goes on to devote eleven pages of her book to teaching people the mechanics of smiling. But the writer of Proverbs does it in seven words: A happy heart makes the face cheerful.

One of the characters in recent Christian history I wish I could have met was Samuel Logan Brengle, the self-sacrificing evangelist for the Salvation Army during the days of D. L. Moody. While Moody was going to great cities winning multitudes and making history, Brengle was going to small towns and back streets, holding evangelistic campaigns and winning the down-and-out. People were always stuck by the expression of his face. One little boy said, “Mamma, did you ever see God? Well, I saw a part of God in the face of the man who preached.” Another little fellow ran to his dad, having chatted with Brengle, and shouted, “Papa, Jesus has been here!”

On one occasion, a deaf woman sat in the front row of seats as Brengle preached. She could hear nothing and she could make nothing of the sermon, but when the invitation was extended, she went to the altar and gave her heart tearfully and sincerely to Christ. Her daughter, wondering if her mom had been supernaturally healed, exclaimed, “Did you hear the sermon?” The older woman replied, “No, I heard nothing; but I saw Jesus in that man’s face.”[9]

The second verse on this subject in Proverbs 15 is verse 15: All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

Notice the first part of that verse. Without the joy of Jesus, we are oppressed with despair and ultimate hopelessness. As I’m writing these words, I’ve just checked the news and read a report in *Rolling Stone Magazine* about the suicide of one of their prominent writers, Hunter S. Thompson. He committed suicide not long ago, and the magazine has decided to publish his suicide note. It reads, in part: “No More Games.... No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring... No Fun... 67... Act your old age. Relax... This won’t hurt.” It was written with a black marker, and the note was titled “Football Season is Over.”[10]

Without the joy of Jesus in our hearts, there’s nothing to do but to distract ourselves with sports and entertainment and alcohol and workaholicism and whatever else we can find. But all the days of the oppressed are wretched.

The last part of the verse, however, paints a different scene: But the cheerful heart has a continual feast. It reminds me of another verse in Proverbs: A cheerful heart is good medicine (Proverbs 17:22). The old slave-trader turned Gospel-preacher, who wrote "Amazing Grace," wrote many other hymns besides, and one of them speaks to this very point:

Joy is a fruit that will not grow

In nature's barren soil;

All we can boast, till Christ we know,

Is vanity and toil.

But where the Lord has planted grace;

And made His glories known;

There fruits of heavenly joy and peace

Are found, and there alone.

The third verse in Proverbs 15 on this subject is verse 30: A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones. In other words, your cheerful demeanor toward another person is contagious. It brings joy to their hearts and gives health to their bones. Proverbs 12:25 says: An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up (NIV).

[4] Cultivating Patience

Friendliness. Kindness. Cheerfulness. And finally, patience.

- Proverbs 14:29 (NIV): A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.
- Proverbs 15:1 (NIV): A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
- Proverbs 15:18 (NIV): A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.
- Proverbs 17:27 (NIV): A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.
- Proverbs 12:16 (NIV): A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.
- Proverbs 16:32 (NIV): Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

The question is, how can we cultivate patience? The answer is found in a remarkably insightful verse in Proverbs:

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 19:11 (NIV)

Patience is a quality that evidences wisdom and maturity. When I was sixteen, I began working at Jim Chamber's Men Shop in downtown Elizabethton. It was owned and operated by a devoted Christian man, and I ended up working at Jim Chamber's throughout much of my high school and college years. I still remember my first day on the job. It was during the Christmas season, and I walked in at the appointed hour and the little store was packed. I'd been given no orientation and had no idea what to do or how to do it, so I stood around for a few minutes, but Jim was too busy to instruct me. Finally I saw him take a quick break between customers and I asked him what I should do. "Just find someone and help them," he replied, and that was the extent of my training—but what else does one need?

One day an irate man entered the store, and he immediately accosted Jim with his complaint. "I bought these shoes here and look at them!" They were dirty and looked as though they had been dragged through the mud. "They're no good, and they hurt my feet, and they're not worth what I paid for them, and I want to know what you're gonna do about it." Before Jim could reply, he lit into another diatribe about those shoes, and he was so loud and angry that everyone in the store stopped whatever they were doing to listen. I felt the tension rise in the store like a thermometer. I was getting angry myself just listening to this unreasonable man.

Finally the gentleman exhausted himself and shut up, and Jim, who had been listening politely, seemed unruffled. He said, "I'm sorry you've had trouble with those shoes, Jim. Now what would you like for me to do about it? Give you another pair of shoes or give you your money back."

The man suddenly seemed deflated and nonplussed. "Well," he stammered, "I guess I'd like my money back."

"No problem," said Jim, smiling, and he went over to the cash register and gave the man his money." The man walked out of the store, and Jim turned to me and, with a wink, said, "I just lost a pair of shoes, but I kept a customer."

A man's wisdom gives him patience, said the Proverbialist. And we exhibit our maturity by our demeanor—being friendly, kind, cheerful, and patient.

Not many people exhibit those qualities anymore, but think of this...

In a sense, the book of Proverbs is one of the most Messianic books of the Old Testament. It's all about Jesus. It's not Messianic in the way that Isaiah is Messianic. It isn't full of prophecies and predictions about the coming Savior. But it gives us a pen-picture of a wise, mature person; and in so doing it anticipates the coming of the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Jesus alone has perfectly fulfilled every single verse in Proverbs describing the wise and mature person. No one has ever been as friendly, kind, cheerful, or patient as He. And the real secret to becoming more friendly, kind, cheerful, and patient ourselves is to become more like Him.

It's a matter of the Christlike life.

For those who have friends must show themselves friendly, and there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother

[1] Dale Carnegie: *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 58.

[2] D. A. Benton, *Executive Charisma* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. xiv.

[3] D. A. Benton, *Executive Charisma* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 116.

[4] D. A. Benton, *Executive Charisma* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 117.

[5] Robert Ailes, "Lighten Up!" in *Success Magazine*, April, 1990, p. 14.

[6] Betty Frist, *My Neighbors, the Billy Grahams* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), pp. 164-165.

[7] William Arnot, *Studies in Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1980), p. 227.

[8] Sharon Jayson, "It's Written All Over Your Face" in *USA Today*, July 21, 2005, p. 9D.

[9] Clarence W. Hall, *Samuel Logan Brengle: Portrait of a Prophet* (Atlanta: The Salvation Army Supplies and Purchasing Department, 1933), pp. 128-129.

[10] "Rolling Stone to Publish Thomson Note," accessed on September 9, 2005 at: <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2005/09/08/D8CG5HNG0.html>.

DISCRETION: MATURITY MEANS KNOWING WHAT TO SAY AND WHEN TO SAY IT

Proverbs

In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is worth little. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom. Proverbs 10:19-21 (NKJV)

One morning this week I sat down on a bench beside the river and read through the entire book of Proverbs, start to finish. I wondered how long it would take, so I set the counter on my wristwatch and started reading at chapter one. I didn't skim or speed-read, but I read each word at a steady clip, pausing occasionally to watch the ducks on the river or view a barge as it floated by loaded with tourists. Once a gentleman paused long enough to tell me he loved the book of Proverbs, too, because it had helped him become a wiser person. But he didn't linger, and when I finished the last word of the last chapter, I glanced at my watch. It had taken me about 42 minutes.

Somehow I was surprised at how quickly I'd read the entire book. In less time than it takes to watch your favorite reality show on TV, you can read through in its entirety the greatest manual on maturity in the annals of literature. Interestingly, the information isn't given in large chunks or enormous chapters, but in small doses.

The book of Proverbs is simply God's Wisdom in small doses, and I'm struck with how many times the writer warns us about the way we speak, the use of our tongues, and the importance of speaking wisely. As I surveyed the verses in Proverbs related to this

subject, I found that most of them fit into three categories.

Shut Up

Some verses just tell is in plain English to shut up, to close our mouths, to be cautious about what we say. I remember hearing someone once say, “Never miss an opportunity to keep your mouth closed.” Well, isn’t that what these verses are saying:

- Proverbs 17:27 (NIV): A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.
- Proverbs 17:14 (NIV): Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
- Proverbs 20:3 (NIV): It is to a man’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.
- Proverbs 11:12 (TNIV): Those who have understanding hold their tongues.
- Proverbs 12:16 (NIV): A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.
- Proverbs 12:16 (The Message): The prudent quietly shrug off insults.
- Proverbs 19:11 (NIV): A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.
- Proverbs 26:20-22 (NKJV): Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.
- Proverbs 29:11 (NKJV): A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back.
- Proverbs 17:9 (NIV): He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

Certain things are necessary for life, and these are the things we must have to survive. There’s food and water and adequate shelter and clothing. We may need medical help or spiritual hope. These are life-necessities. Here are some things that are not life-necessities:

- It is not necessary to state our opinion on every subject.
- It is not necessary to have the last word in every argument.
- It is not necessary to demand our way in every discussion.
- It is not necessary to defend ourselves against every criticism.
- It is not necessary to inject our viewpoint in every conversation.
- It is not necessary to draw a line on every issue.

Sometimes we just need to keep our thoughts and words to ourselves. I recall once years ago when I had a very, very good travel agent who was very helpful whenever I called her. One day she left the firm and I was assigned to another agent, and this woman wasn’t nearly so competent. I called one day to work out some kind of travel arrangements, and it took longer than it should and there seemed to be unnecessary problems, and I was a little aggravated. Someone was in the office with me as I was on the phone and when the woman put me on hold to work on something, I cupped my hand over the receiver and said, “I used to have a very good travel agent, but she left and this new woman doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

As soon as I’d spoken those words, I heard the woman’s voice in the receiver sounding hurt and asking, “I’m sorry, sir; are you displeased with my services?” I felt like a dog. I thought I was on hold, but she had heard every word and it had hurt her. I apologized on the spot, but on reflecting about it later, I decided that there had not been one reason in this world for me to have ever expressed my opinion to begin with. Those had been unnecessary words, damaging words, and they had been overheard.

On that occasion, I didn’t speak in anger, but my words were unwise anyway; and I’ve thought since then how much more careful I would be if I knew that I was being heard in a wider circle than I knew.

But looking back over my life I can say that the moments of which I now feel most embarrassed are those times when I spoke harshly or hurtfully in a fit of anger or temper. I’ll confess that there have been several times this year—particularly during the stress of traveling—when I’ve been sharp with someone; and I’m always embarrassed about it later and confess it to the Lord.

The book of Proverbs also makes a point of telling us that we should keep our mouths closed about sensitive issues. Often there are principles of confidentiality and trust that keep us from talking about some issues. My wife, Katrina, and I made a pact at the

beginning of our ministry that we wouldn't disclose to one another things that people told us in confidence during times of counseling. Over the years, many people have come to me with their problems, and many people have sought out my wife. We're always tempted to say, "What did he want? What did she say?" But we knew that someone telling us something in confidence deserved our utmost discretion, and we've always tried to honor that. The book of Proverbs says:

- Proverbs 11:13 (NIV): A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.
- Proverbs 12:23 (NIV): A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly.
- Proverbs 16:28 (NIV): A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.
- Proverbs 17:9 (NIV): He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.
- Proverbs 20:19 (NIV): A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.
- Proverbs 25:9 (NIV): Do not betray another man's confidence.
- Proverbs 26:20-22 (NKJV): Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.

Build Up

Of course, it isn't enough just to shut up. God hasn't called us to take vows of silence like medieval monks. He gave us the remarkable capacity for human language, and He placed tongues in our mouths because He wants us to build others up.

- Proverbs 10:11ff (NIV): The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life... Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning... the mouth of the fool invites ruin.
- Proverbs 10:19 (NIV): When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver.... The lips of the righteous nourish many.
- Proverbs 12:18: Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
- Proverbs 15:4 (NIV): The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
- Proverbs 15:23 (NIV): A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!
- Proverbs 16:23-24 (NIV): A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction. Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

When Lou Gehrig was just starting his baseball career, he went into a slump and grew so discouraged he was thinking of quitting. After several bad games, he doubted his talent and ability, and his spirits collapsed. A friend named Paul Krichell heard that Lou was slumping, and he took a train to Hartford, Connecticut, and invited Lou to join him for a steak dinner at the Bond Hotel. Lou poured out his frustrations, and Paul could see that the player's confidence was shot. Paul spent the evening telling Lou that all hitters go through slumps, that the best ones—even Ty Cobb—fail to get hits six or seven out of every ten tries. But eventually good hitters start hitting again, and, said Paul, you're a good hitter. After dinner, Gehrig walked with Paul to the train station and thanked him for coming. The next day, Lou started blasting the ball again, and over the next eleven games he came through with twenty-two hits, including six home runs—and he career took off. "I decided not to quit after all," he said.[1]

Sometimes we need to take a train, track someone down, buy them a steak, and encourage them. We do it in many ways. Our children need encouragement. Their self-image is going to be based, in large measure, by their perceptions of what we think of them. We need to find ways to affirm their strengths and express our love and admiration for them. Our husbands and wives need encouragement more than they need harping criticism. Our co-workers and leaders and friends and neighbors need to be built up. The apostle Paul once wrote something that sounds very much like the advice of Proverbs: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Who have you encouraged today?

Speak Up

The third emphasis in the book of Proverbs tells us that while there is a time to shut up and a time to build up, there's also a time to speak up. Look at Proverbs 31:8-9: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (NIV).

This is why we admire Rosa Parks. In 1955, when she was a seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, the city buses were segregated. The whites sat in the front of the bus, and the blacks sat in the back. One day, Rosa Parks got on the bus and went back to the colored section and took the first available seat. A few stops later, the bus filled up and a white man got on. The bus driver came back and demanded she give him her seat, and she spoke four words that changed history in the United States: “No, I will not.” With those four words, she almost single-handedly launched the Civil Rights moment in the twentieth century, and today she is called the “Mother of the Civil Rights in America.”

Craig and Debbie Warner and their children are members of our church who hail from Australia. Until recently I didn’t know that Debbie’s family is Dutch, and that her father risked his life to help the Dutch Resistance during World War II. He owned a bakery in Haarlem, a city just west of Amsterdam, the same city where Corrie ten Boom and her family lived. The Nazis insisted Debbie’s father keep his bakery open all the time to help supply the need for the occupying Axis forces during the war, but he outwitted them. He made his deliveries on a bicycle fitted with a large storage basket, and in the bottom of that basket he built a secret compartment, and in that compartment he smuggled weapons to the Dutch Resistance during the war. On several occasions, he was in danger of discovery or death, but he was willing to stand up and speak up for what was right.

There are certain groups today who can’t speak up for themselves. Unborn babies, for example, and the persecuted church around the world, and those in the grip of poverty. Maturity is knowing what to say and when to say it. Maturity is knowing when to shut up, when to build up, and when to speak up.

You say, “Yes, I’d like to do better in these areas, but I just keep messing up. How can I learn how to say the right things? How can I learn to control my tongue?”

How Do We Do It?

Most of us who have homes have circuit breakers installed in our electrical panels, and many of us who have computers or appliances at home have surge protectors. Suppose a lightning bolt strikes a transformer near your house. It’s possible for the lightning strike to send a powerful surge of electrical energy through the power lines and into your house, and it could fry your computer and burn up the wiring inside your appliances. So we have circuit breakers. We used to have fuses; when that surge of electricity came, it would burn out the filament in the fuse and interrupt the power before it could do any damage. When I was a boy, one of my jobs was to go down to change the fuse, and for some insane reason I have a vague recollection that if we were out of fuses we’d insert a penny, which defeated the whole purpose of the thing anyway. I’m surprised we weren’t electrocuted.

Now we have circuit breakers, and when a powerful surge of energy comes into our homes those circuit breakers trip and that interrupts the flow of electricity before any damage is done. Sometimes, however, the surge of electricity isn’t strong enough to trip the breakers, but it is strong enough to damage our computers and other sensitive appliances. So we buy power strips and surge protectors that are designed as small, localized circuit breakers to shut off or interrupt the surge of electricity before it reaches our equipment.

I’d like for you to think of these verses from Proverbs as the circuit breakers and surge protectors for the soul. It’s just a matter of installing them. That’s a four-fold process, which I’ll explain like this.

First, find a verse and take it to heart. In other words, let’s say that you’re prone to fly off the handle and respond too aggressively to a provocation. You might select Proverbs 15:1 as your verse to take to heart: A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (NIV). Take that verse seriously. Memorize it. Adopt it as a personal slogan. Print it out and post it discretely on your desk. Write it on a little paper and kept it with your loose change in your pocket or purse so you’ll be reminded of it frequently. Meditate on it, and repeat it to yourself.

If you’re prone to speak impulsively and without thinking, select Proverbs 13:3: He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin (NIV).

If you’re wanting to dedicate yourself to saying the right thing at the right time, Proverbs 15:23: A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word! (NIV).

If you think you talk too much, select Proverbs 17:23: A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered (NIV).

If it’s begun to dawn on you that you’re opinionated and stubborn in your views, learn Proverbs 18:2: A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions (NIV).

If you’re too prone to talk about others and tattle and gossip and say things you wouldn’t want the person in question to hear, learn Proverbs 20:19: A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much (NIV).

Make a determined search through the book of Proverbs and find that verses or those verses that most closely match your needs, and take them to heart.

Second, convert that verse to prayer. Becoming a person of wisdom and discretion isn't just a matter of turning over a new leaf, learning a new technique, or practicing the power of positive thinking. It's a divine work of grace in your heart. It's a maturing of soul. It is becoming like Jesus. So take that verse and say, "Lord, You have said that a soft answer turns away wrath, but I find myself always over-reacting instead of under-reacting. Look! There I've done it again. I've snapped at that co-worker. I've spoken in anger to my wife. Lord, forgive me and please take this verse and inject it into the bloodstream of my personality. Install it into the electrical panel of my soul." Really make it a matter of prayer.

Third, bring that verse to mind. Have you ever seen a television show in which—right in the middle of the action, the scene freezes and a narrator will step in and make some comments, then step out and the action resumes. That's what we have to learn to do. Right in the middle of that argument, right at that moment of opportunity, right in the middle of that meeting or conversation, we have to mentally freeze-frame the scene and bring that verse to mind. We have to ask the Holy Spirit to help us bring the needed verse to mind just when we need it.

Finally, review that verse as needed. If you blow it, you say the wrong thing, you overact, you fail to speak up when you should, you miss an opportunity to encourage someone... or if, after the fact, you think of exactly what you should have said—go back in your mind and visualize yourself responding correctly.

When I was sixteen and just learning to drive, my dad would put me behind the wheel and give me good advice. He never badgered or nagged or scolded; he was a teacher by profession, and he was a good one when it came to driving. He told me how dangerous water was on roads that had been dry for a long time. He told me that headlights coming at you at night always appear to move more slowly than they really are, and so realize that car is coming faster than it seems. But the one piece of advice I remember most was something he told me over and over—there is a blind spot in the driver's side mirror, and you just can never change lanes without twisting your head around and glancing into the left lane. He would tell me that and nine times out of ten, I'd glance around before changing lanes. But one time out of ten, I'd rely on my mirrors; and he'd either notice it or I'd nearly sideswipe a vehicle which would toot its horn at me. And my dad would say, "Rob, you've always got to twist your neck around and glance into the lane. Don't depend on your mirror because there's a blind spot." Eventually that habit sunk in and I'm sure it's saved my car and my life many times over.

If you and I want to become people of discretion with the maturity to know what to say and when to say it, we've got to listen to the heavenly Father sitting over in the passenger's seat saying, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." We've got to install some of these verses into our conscious thoughts and subconscious reactions. We've got to become more and more like Jesus, for no one ever spoke as He did. So may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to Him and be a reflection of the wisdom and maturity and grace that belongs to Jesus Christ alone

DISCIPLINE – MATURITY IS MASTERING THE SECRET OF SELF-CONTROL Proverbs

Like a city whose walls are broken down is a (person) who lacks self-control. Proverbs 25:28 (NIV)

Michael Janke, a former Navy Seal and a motivational speaker, writes effectively on the subject of self-discipline; and in his popular book, *Power Living: Mastering the Art of Self-Discipline*, he provides the best definition I've seen on this subject. Self-control, he says, is "the ability of the individual to adhere to actions, thoughts, and behaviors that result in personal improvement instead of instant gratification.[1]

Janke claims that our ability to be self-managed not only affects us, but it casts a long shadow on our children and grandchildren. He writes, "Throughout my travels as a professional speaker, I am constantly asked the question of 'what effect does self-discipline have on my life?' Sure, becoming disciplined will change your life for the better, but real results are seen in the legacy we leave behind. When we begin to use self-discipline to control our emotional highs and lows, our appearance, our work ethic, and our commitment to physical exercise, we are doing much more than improving our own lives. Our ability to begin focusing on our daily performance is directly proportional to the success our generations will experience. Today is not about you, your job, your bank account, or even your own personal satisfaction. Today is about the legacy you leave behind."

Janke does not write from a Christian perspective, but what he says is an affirmation of what the Bible says from one end to the

other.

Galatians 5:22 teaches that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Paul taught that people should be married whenever possible lest Satan tempt them due to their lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5). In Acts 24:25, Paul presented the truths of Christianity before Felix, Governor of Judea, and his wife Drusilla: "Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come."

In his second epistle, Peter told us to make every effort to add to our faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control.

Second Timothy 1:7 says that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-control.

First Corinthians 9:25 says: All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize" (New Living Translation).

Writing to Titus, Paul told him what to tell the new Christians on the island of Crete: "Tell the older men to have self-control and to be serious and sensible... tell the young men to have self-control in everything" (Titus 2:2, 6, CEV).

The Bible warns, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control" (1 Timothy 3:1-3, New King James Version).

But this is a study of Proverbs, so what does Solomon have to say on this subject? Well, it's one of the great themes of this book, and by reading the Proverbs we learn that maturity means mastering the secrets of self-control. You run into this emphasis within five seconds of opening the book of Proverbs. The first words say: "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life" (Proverbs 1:1-3, NIV).

Then down in verse 7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."

Proverbs 4:13 says: "Cling to discipline. Do not relax your grip on it. Keep it because it is your life" (God's Word).

Proverbs 12:1 says, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge."

Proverbs 13:18 says, "He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame."

Proverbs 15:32 says, "He who ignores discipline despises himself."

Proverbs 23:23 says, "Get the truth and don't ever sell it; also get wisdom, discipline, and discernment" (New Living Translation).

My favorite verse is Proverbs 25:28: Like a city whose walls are broken down is a (person) who lacks self-control. In Bible times, the city's walls were the primary means by which a town defended itself. In the days before guided missiles and grenade launchers, an enemy had no way of breaking through a town's gates, and if the city had a perpetual source of food and water, it could go about its business with a sense of security, even surrounded by the adversary. The walls kept them safe from the enemy who wanted to destroy them. Solomon wrote that self-control serves the same purpose in our lives, and it is our self-control that protects us from the attacks of the enemy. But if our self-control collapses, the enemy can romp into our lives to kill and steal and plunder our souls with devilish abandon.

Now, of course, the concepts of self-control and discipline are mere abstractions if they don't have some practical application to life, and so the writer of Proverbs is eager to point out several areas of life in which we need to master the art of self-control, and five areas are paramount.

Managing our Emotions

I was struck by something Michael Janke said at the beginning of this chapter, that we must use self-discipline to control our emotional highs and lows. I'm a person of fairly deep emotions, which, I think, is one reason I'm a pastor and a writer. I can have high highs and low lows, and through the years I had to grapple with my emotions a great deal. Most of us struggle at times with mastering our emotions. The very word emotion is motion with an end to the front of it—for erratic. Emotions are roller-coaster cars that take us for a ride, up and down, often at speeds we don't enjoy. So, like many people, I've struggled with this.

Then one day I watched some young children playing, and I noticed that they weren't very adept at managing their emotions. If they got mad, they were mad all over, head to toe, and they had little control over the way they expressed it. If they were happy, they were happy all over, and there was no end to the happy emotions that made them laugh and run and jump like jumping jacks. If they became distressed, they would cry and scream for hours. They were children, and being children they were immature, and being

immature, they had limited control over their emotions.

As I watched those children—and I watched them a lot because they were my own kids—I realized that part of maturity is the ability to control our emotions instead of letting our emotions control us.

Two of our most vexing emotions are anger and anxiety. The writer of Proverbs gives us the secret to dealing with anxiety in chapter 3:5-6: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.

As far as anger is concerned, there are a bevy of verses on that subject. For example, Proverbs 29:11 says, “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.” That verse has a permanent lodging place in my mind because of something that happened several years ago.

I became the victim of a slight injustice regarding a particular matter, and I was astounded at the anger swirling like vicious little tornados inside me. I was in an utter rage, and the passions wouldn’t subside. Every morning I’d wake up angry, and every night I’d go to bed embittered. Finally after a fitful Friday night, I rose on Saturday morning determined to master my emotions. I thought to myself that God’s Word is powerful enough to affect my attitude, so I sat down at the dining room table with a pencil and opened my Bible to the book of Proverbs. I knew there were verses about anger and patience in this book, and by reading through it I expected the Lord to give me the specific verse I needed.

I started reading in Proverbs 1, and I read and read and read. I came across many verses on the subject, but none of them snagged my heart until, near the end of the book, I came to Proverbs 29:11, and it hit me like a ton bricks: A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.

As soon as I read those verses, it was as if the Lord removed the top of a pressure cooker and released as the steam. There was something so powerful about that verse that it instantly cured my problem. That’s the power of Scripture, and that’s how potent these verses in Proverbs are when the Holy Spirit applies them to our lives. Some other Proverbs on this subject are:

- Proverbs 14:17 (NIV): A quick-tempered man does foolish things.
- Proverbs 14:29 (NIV): A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.
- Proverbs 15:18 (NIV): A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.
- Proverbs 21:18 (NIV): Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.
- Proverbs 29:22 (NKJV): An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.

I’d like to show you another verse that I’m particularly fond of, and I found a neat way to remember it. It is Proverbs 19:11: A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is his glory to overlook an offense. Whenever I think of this verse, I think of my dad; but not for the reason you might suspect. My father had lots of good qualities, but he wasn’t very good about overlooking offenses. But this sounds exactly like the advice he would have given me, and moreover—and here’s my memory device—he was born in 1911. So I used that as a technique for learning Proverbs 19:11: “A man’s wisdom gives him patience; and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

As we’re getting ready to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary at , I’ve been thinking back over the years at some of the situations I’ve experienced here. I vividly recall one man with whom I was very good friends, but he became very difficult to deal with. He got into an argumentative routine of complaining about something every Sunday, and he complained to me, and he complained loudly to me. In fact, I’d be here week after week for a half-hour or an hour after church while he harangued about one thing after another.

I tried to be patient, but I’m prone to become irritable too, and emotions begat emotions. Then one day he moved out of town, and frankly, I was sort of glad. But then a year later he came back to visit, and he pulled me aside and this is what he said: “Rob, I am so sorry about how angry and verbal I was when I was here. The truth is, I loved you and the church and there was really no problem there. But I had problems in my marriage and I had problems at work and everyone was dumping on me and everybody was complaining and criticizing me; and I couldn’t respond back to them without risking my marriage or my job, and so I just took it. You were the only one I could vent to.”

This is what therapists call transferred anger.

I wish I had been more mature and had been able to see this pattern and recognize this as I should have. The Proverbialist said: “A person’s wisdom gives him patience and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” Instead of just reacting, wise people keep themselves under control.

Here’s one last verse on the subject: Proverbs 16:32 (NIV): Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than

one who takes a city. The New Living Translation puts it: “It is better to be patient than powerful; it is better to have self-control than to conquer a city.”

In his book *At Ease, Stories I Tell to Friends*, President Dwight Eisenhower said that when he was ten years old, he became very angry with his parents. His older brothers had gone out trick or treating on Halloween, but little Dwight wasn’t old enough to go. He argued and pleaded until the last moment, but to no avail. Totally losing control of himself, he stood by an old apple tree in an absolute rage, pounding the tree trunk with his fists until they were raw and bleeding. His father grabbed him and switched him with a limb from the hickory tree and sent him off to bed.

For an hour, he lay in bed, sobbing in the pillow, feeling deeply hurt and abused and angry. The door opened, and his mother came into the room. She sat in the rocking chair and said nothing for a long time. Then she began to talk about the subject of temper and the importance of controlling it. Eventually she quoted Proverbs 16:32: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

She had no way of knowing, of course, that she was speaking to a future military general and president of the United States. She just talked about that verse, and then she put salve on his injured hands and bandages on the worst places. Eisenhower said in his book that he has always looked back on that conversation as one of the most valuable moments of his entire life.

Controlling our Impulses

It’s also important to bring self-control to bear upon our impulses. How often do we want to say an unwise word, make an unwise purchase, or enjoy an unwise pleasure! Immaturity says: “Just do it!” Maturity says: “Not so fast!”

- Proverbs 9:13 (NIV): The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge.
- Proverbs 14:8 (NIV): The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.
- Proverbs 18:13 (NIV): He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.
- Proverbs 20:25 (NIV): It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.
- Proverbs 30:20 (NIV): This is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, “I have done no wickedness.” She just operates on the basis of her impulses.

And listen to this verse—Proverbs 19:2: It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way (NIV). I want to tell you what happens when we follow our impulses. In 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, decided to visit Bosnia with his wife, Sophie. The archduke was an impulsive man, and he ignored warnings and insisted in riding through Sarajevo in spite of threats of assassination. Someone threw a bomb into his car, and the archduke deftly batted it away; but it exploded in the street and injured one of his aides. He was indignant; and still acting on impulse, he later insisted on visiting his wounded aide in the local hospital. But en route to the hospital, the archbishop’s driver became disoriented and, acting on impulse, took a sudden turn down a street. It was the wrong turn, and an official shouted, “That’s the wrong way.” The car stopped. But it stopped in front of a high school student, a teenager named Gavriol Princip, who also acted on impulse. He drew a Browning pistol out of his jacket and fired. Within minutes, Archduke Ferdinand, his wife Sophia, and their unborn child were all dead—and as a result the entire world erupted in a war—World War I—that sent my own uncle to France to fight on Flanders’ Field, and in the end cost the lives of millions of people and ultimately set the stage for World War II in which fifty million perished—partly because of a small group of people acting on impulse on June 28, 1914.

The same sort of things can happen in miniature form in our lives unless we learn to control our impulses.

Maintaining our Sobriety

Another area of discipline and self-control involves maintaining our sobriety. The writer of Proverbs anticipates something the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:18—never get drunk. There never is a time when it is appropriate to be drunk, never a time when that makes things better, never a time when any good whatsoever comes from abuse of drugs or alcohol.

- Proverbs 20:1 (NIV): Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.
- Proverbs 23:19-21 (NKJV): Hear, my son, and be wise; and guide your heart in the way. Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.
- Proverbs 23:29ff (GNT): Show me someone who drinks too much... and I will show you someone miserable and sorry for himself, always causing trouble and always complaining. His eyes are bloodshot, and he has bruises that could have been avoided. Don’t let wine tempt you, even though it is rich red, though it sparkles in the cup, and it goes down smoothly. The next morning you will feel

as if you had been bitten by a poisonous snake. Weird sights will appear before your eyes, and you will not be able to think or speak clearly. You will feel as if you were out on the ocean, sea-sick, swinging high up in the rigging of a tossing ship. “I must have been hit,” you will say; “I must have been beaten up, but I don’t remember it. Why can’t I wake up? I need another drink.”

Handling our Money

Another area in which we need to bring discipline to bear in our life is with our money. I’m so thankful for a program we have here at TDF to help singles and couples with this; it’s a class we offer entitled “Financial Peace University” and it’s based on biblical principles of money management. The book of Proverbs says:

- Proverbs 13:11 (NIV): Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.
- Proverbs 22:7 (NIV): The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.
- Proverbs 28:20-22 (NKJV): A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished. To show partiality is not good, because for a piece of bread a man will transgress. A man with an evil eye hastens after riches, and does not consider that poverty will come upon him.
- Proverbs 30:7-9 (NIV): Two things I request of you... : Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, “Who is the Lord?” or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God.

Restraining our Appetites

The final area I’ll mention has to do with restraining our appetites—and not just our appetites for food; it’s a matter of leisure and pleasure and indulgence of all kinds. The writer of Proverbs tells us that maturity in life is forgoing certain enjoyments, pleasures, and delights because they are not good for us at all. Proverbs 25:16 says, “When you’re given a box of candy, don’t gulp it all down; eat too much chocolate and you’ll make yourself sick” (the Message).

- Proverbs 2:12ff (NIV): Wisdom will save you from...the adulteress, from the wayward wife... who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.
- Proverbs 23:19-21 (NIV): Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
- Proverbs 21:17, 20 (NIV): He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.... In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.
- Proverbs 25:16 (NIV): If you find honey, eat just enough—too much of it, and you will vomit.
- Proverbs 25:27 (NIV): It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to seek one’s own honor.
- Proverbs 30:20 (NIV): This is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, “I have done no wickedness.

It’s so important to maintain physical disciplines in our lives. When I was growing up, I didn’t engage in sports and our little elementary school didn’t offer anything along those lines. When I got to the larger schools, I was inept at athletics and some of my worst moments were during physical education classes, because I just didn’t know any of the mechanics of the games and didn’t have much natural ability.

But my first year in college, at King College in Bristol, Tennessee, I had a coach who, for the first time in my life, took a personal interest in helping me. He said, “Rob, you’re no good at team sports, but you have two good legs and you can at least learn to run.” He put me on a program of running every day, and I found I enjoyed it—partly because it got me out of those wretched team sports during gym class.

When I transferred to Columbia Bible College, I kept it up; and it was there that one of my mentors told me something I’ve never forgotten. He said that our physical and spiritual disciplines are inter-related. “It’s hard to be spiritual disciplined while being physically undisciplined, but if we keep our bodies disciplined, it helps us have disciplined emotions and souls.

Looking back, I realized that I learned two things. First, discipline is just something we decide to do. It isn’t a matter of learning a dozen techniques on how to become a disciplined person, although sometimes we may benefit from a certain technique. A lot of people now are wearing rubber bands around their wrists to remind them to break a bad habit or to begin a new one. There are things like that which can be of help; but it’s largely a matter of just making up your mind to become disciplined in some particular area. The book of Proverbs approaches this in a matter-of-fact way, and so does the apostle Paul. He told Titus, remember, to teach

the young people and the older people to be self-controlled. It's a decision we make; it's a commitment we keep.

Second, I learned that self-control and discipline is a spiritual commodity. If I want to be disciplined in the physical and emotional and financial segments of my life, I have to be disciplined in my spiritual habits. It's all bound up with spiritual maturity and with my growth in Christ Jesus.

Like all the other traits we're looking at in Proverbs, it's a matter of growing to be like Christ, for not one time in the Gospels do we ever see even a hint of Jesus losing His self-control or His self-composure.

The best passage in the entire Bible on this subject bears this out. It's found in Titus 2:11-14 (NIV), and it's a good place for us to end.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all (people). It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good

DECISIONS – MATURITY MEANS KNOWING HOW TO CHOOSE WISELY

Proverbs

The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs His steps. Proverbs 16:9

The other day I was reading a news item in the paper, and it talked about an entrepreneur in Great Britain named Tony Proverbs. To my knowledge, that's the first time in my life I've heard of anyone with that last name. I immediately wondered to myself if there were any Proverbs living in Nashville, so I checked the phone book; but alas, there were none. Then I wondered how that surname developed, and I concluded that there must have been someone back in Medieval times, when surnames were developing within the sphere of onomastics, who always quoting from and living by the verses in book of Proverbs, and soon he became known Mr. Proverbs.

Well, if only we were all known by that name. What a difference it would make in our lives and families and churches and communities if we all became living, walking, breathing embodiments of Proverbs! There is a verse in the book of Proverbs to regulate virtually every attitude and action that comprises our daily lives, and to be so saturated with Proverbs that it molds our daily actions and reactions—well, that would make us a church full of people who were truly wise, prudent, disciplined, and useful for the Kingdom.

So, toward that end, we've been in a study entitled Wise Up: Thinking Smart in a Foolish World, from the book of Proverbs. Our series has been interrupted for the last couple of weeks by other things, so I'd like to begin today by reviewing very briefly what we've looked at so far.

The prologue of the book of Proverbs in Proverbs 1:1-7 tells us that its purpose in the Bible—the reason God placed it here in the middle of His Word—is to enable us to live a prudent and disciplined lives, knowing that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

With that as our foundational thesis, we're working our way through the contents of Proverbs, throughout the 31 chapters of Proverbs, certain principles and character traits are accentuated. So far, we've looked at:

Principle 1: Depth - Maturity Means Honoring God in Everyday Life

1. Fearing the Lord
2. Cultivating the Soul

Principle 2: Diligence - Maturity Means Paying Attention to Things Large and Small

3. Improving Ourselves
4. Accepting Correction
5. Working Hard

Principle 3: Demeanor - Maturity Means Learning the Fine Art of Refreshing Others

6. Projecting Friendliness
7. Practicing Kindness
8. Displaying Cheerfulness
9. Cultivating Patience
10. Developing an Even Temper

Principle 4: Discretion – Maturity Means Knowing What to Say and When to Say It

11. Shutting Up
12. Building Up
13. Speaking Up

Principle 5: Discipline – Maturity Means Mastering the Secrets of Self-Control

14. Managing our Emotions
15. Controlling our Impulses
16. Maintaining our Sobriety
17. Handling our Money
18. Restraining our Appetites

Now today, we're coming to Decision-Making. Maturity means knowing how to choose wisely. Making wise decisions isn't as easy as it seems. I recall hearing about a man who hired himself out to a farmer, and on the first day his job was chopping wood, which he did very well. The second day, he was sent out to the field to dig weeds, which he did very well. The third it was raining, so the farmer put the man in the barn to sort potatoes. His job was to work his way through the bushel boxes, tossing away the rotten potatoes; but at the end of the day he quit.

The farmer was amazed. "The first day you chopped wood and the second day you weeded in the fields," said the farmer. "Those were very hard jobs under the hot sun, and you did well. But today all you had to do was sit there and sort potatoes. Why did you quit?"

The man said, "I couldn't stand making all those decisions." And that's the way I sometimes feel. As we go through life, we don't mind the hard work; it's making the decisions that wears us out. Yet, it's our decisions that make us or break us as human beings.

- o When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, Moses had to make a decision.
- o When the angel recruited Gideon to lead Israel, Gideon had to decide what to do.
- o When Delilah tempted Samson, his entire fate was sealed by his decision.
- o When the prophet Elijah preached to the children of Israel, he told them to decide whom to follow. He said, "How long halt ye between two opinions?"
- o When Jesus said "Follow Me," Peter and Andrew faced a decision.
- o When the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, found himself standing face to face with Jesus of Nazareth, he had to make the most important decision of his life, and he had to make it quickly.
- o When the apostle Paul found that his way into Asia was barred, he had to decide where to turn and what to do.

Every human being faces a bevy of decisions every day; and our ability to make good decisions is potentially our greatest asset in life. Every good book on leadership and management contains a chapter on the fine art of decision-making. The greatest management guru on modern times is Peter Drucker, and his seminal book is entitled *The Effective Executive*. It only has seven chapters, and two of them are devoted to decision-making. It's hard work, and sometimes it's anguishing. Every one of us wishes we could turn back the clock and reverse some bad decision or another that we made.

When Admiral William Crowe was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he told Time Magazine, “I have known individuals who made a big decision and never gave it another thought. I don’t. When it’s a big issue, I don’t sleep soundly.”[1]

Well, how can we learn to make decisions that let us sleep soundly? As you might imagine, the book of Proverbs tackles this subject. Proverbs 12:26 says, “The righteous should choose... carefully” (NKJV); and Proverbs 5:23 warns, “Death is the reward of an undisciplined life; your foolish decisions trap you in a dead end” (The Message).

I read through the book of Proverbs searching out to see what it had to say on this subject, and there seemed to be three great techniques the writers advocated.

Talk it Out

The first is to talk it out. Go to a friend. Find a counselor. Seek out an expert. Find someone who can look at the matter objectively, and seek counsel. Talk it out with someone. Listen to these verses:

- Proverbs 11:14 (NIV): For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisors make victory sure.
- Proverbs 12:15 (NIV): The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.
- Proverbs 13:10 (NIV): Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.
- Proverbs 15:22 (NIV): Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.
- Proverbs 19:20 (NIV): Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.
- Proverbs 24:5-6 (NIV): A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength; for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisors.

This is so important that we can say it helped win the American Revolution. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4th, and within six months it appeared that the whole thing was a lost cause. The fledgling American troops had been defeated at New York, and Washington has lost 90 percent of his army. Despair descended on the colonies, and it seemed to be just a matter of time before the war ended in defeat.

On one side was General George Washington, and on the other side was Lord Charles Cornwallis. At critical moments, both men convened their advisors in counsels of war, but the two men had vastly different styles of leadership. When Washington met with his advisors, he actually listened to them and often hammered their advice into a consensus that formed his decisions. When Cornwallis gathered his advisors, he held court. He seldom asked advice and didn’t seem to hear it when it was offered. He just announced his decisions.

As a result, Washington made a series of better decisions, and the British forces lost a war they were on the verge of winning. He was following Proverbs 20:18, which says: Proverbs 20:18 (NIV): Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain advice.

I know that through the years here at , the advice and counsel and deliberations of our staff, our deacons, our finance committee, and many of you have been invaluable to me in helping me avoid unwise decisions as pastor. And in my personal life, I’ve learned when I have a mind to do something, that if Katrina has hesitations about it, she’s likely to be right. The two of us make better decisions than I make by myself.

In making medical decisions, financial decisions, or legal decisions, I need good advice. In making personal decisions of all sorts, I need advice. Recently we’ve found an ad hoc group of men and women who help me frame and package our sermon series; and the synergy and creativity of that group is beyond anything I could accomplish on my own.

So before making a decision, seek the advice of those you trust. Go to them and talk it out.

Think it Over

Second, think it over. Proverbs 16:9 says, “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” We can sometimes arrive at an accurate application of that verse by exchanging the “but” for an “and”—the mind of man plans his way, and the Lord directs his steps. In other words, the Lord guides us, not normally by bolts of lightning or messages in the sky, but by giving us brains to think through our options and determine His will in any given matter.

John Wesley said: “God generally guides me by presenting reasons to my mind for acting in a certain way.”

Dr. J. Oswald Sanders said: “God generally guides (us) by the exercise of (our) sanctified judgment.”

I've always enjoyed the motivational essays of the late Earl Nightingale, especially when I've listened to him read them in his rich, deep voice on the radio on a tape. One of his essays is entitled, "The Great Problem Solving Tool," and it's about the human brain. Nightingale claimed that most people only use about 10 percent of their brain's capacity, and in this lecture he put it this way:

It's the last place on earth the average person will turn to for help... You know why people don't automatically turn their own vast mental resources on when faced with a problem? It's because they never learned how to think. Most people will go to any length to avoid thinking when they're faced with a problem. They will ask advice from the most illogical people, usually people who don't know any more than they do: next-door neighbors, members of their families, and friends stuck in the same mental traps that they are. Very few of them use the muscles of their mind to solve their problems.[2]

I think he's right because I know from my own experience that I'm often likely to make decisions on impulse rather than thinking them through; but when I think over and ponder my steps, I'm much more likely to make a good decision. That's why I've learned, whenever I'm faced with a big decision, to get away and think about it. Sometimes if it's really a big decision, I'll go away a few days; other times I can only manage a few hours or a few minutes; but if I can just go walking and think it through, I'm more confident of making the wiser choice.

This is the advice of the Proverbs:

- Proverbs 14:8 (NIV): The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.
- Proverbs 14:15 (NIV): The simple man believes anything, but a prudent (person) gives thought to his steps.
- Proverbs 21:29 (NIV): A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways.

On several occasions several years ago, I heard the great Methodist preacher, Charles Allen, and I always looked forward to his sermons. He was a master in the pulpit. I once heard him tell a story that is also found in one of his books. A man came to see him so confused that he was sick. "If someone doesn't tell me what to do," said the man, "I will go crazy." Allen said that he couldn't give him any advice until he had listened to the problem, so he asked the man to lay before him the entire situation. Allen listened to the whole thing. Then the preacher said, in effect, "I need time to ponder such a problem, and since you've been thinking about it longer than I have, do you have any ideas of your own? What do you think you should do?"

The man started to talk it out and pretty soon he had outlined a marvelous solution to his own problem. Charles Allen said, "That seems to me a fine answer and the answer to your questions." The man got up and fervently thanked Dr. Allen and told him he was the wisest and most sensible man he'd ever talked to, and he left the room a new creation. Dr. Allen said, "I didn't do anything for the man, except to encourage him to use his own mind."

God gave us brains, the most advance piece of creation in the entire universe—and most of our problems and decisions can be arrived at through the application of the sanctified application of really thinking through a situation and pondering it in prayer. And that leads to my third point...

Pray it Through

In 1979, when Katrina and I were pastoring our wonderful little church in the mountains, I began to sense and know that God wanted me to move into a more populated area to minister. I had visited up and down the roads, but the valley we lived in was so sparsely populated that it was impossible to reach large numbers of people; and as a young pastor I felt limited. I'm not sure that was a correct sentiment, but that's how I felt at the time.

One day the chairman of the pulpit committee of a growing suburban church called me and asked if I would come and meet with his people and consider becoming their pastor. This was in the Midwest, in an area that I loved. I was ready to jump at the chance. This was what I'd been wanting for some time, and I thought it sounded like a tailor-made opportunity for me. But instead of giving him an immediate answer on the phone, I told him I'd like a few days to pray about it.

Katrina and I were leaving for vacation, and we were going to Myrtle Beach in South Carolina, and then on to Charlotte, North Carolina, for our annual denominational convention where I was giving the Sunday morning Sunday School message for the adults. There on the beach, I went for long walks every morning and every evening, just thinking and praying and telling the Lord how excited I was about moving to Chicago. But after praying for a week, I knew in my heart that God was saying, "No." There was in inner impression that I should not move in that direction.

We went on to Charlotte, checked into our hotel, and I called my friend, who expressed his disappointment; and I felt terrible. The next morning, I taught Sunday School, and unbeknownst to me, there were some members of this church in the audience. The next day, Herb Peppers approached me and said he wanted to meet me. And five months later, Katrina and I showed up here to begin what has become my life's work.

So many times it is in my prayer time that I sense God's will for my life and I'm able to make decisions. And that's not just true for me—that the way it is for us as Christians. Solomon's father, King David, wrote in Psalm 37 that the steps of a good person are ordered by the Lord. And Solomon himself later wrote Proverbs 20:24 (NIV): A man's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way?

The wonderful poet, John Oxenham, put this truth into a little verse he wrote:

Not for one single day

Can I discern my way,

But this I surely know,--

Who gives the day,

Will show the way,

So I securely go.

- Proverbs 20:21 (NIV): Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.
- Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV): 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.

Several years ago, I spoke to the students of Brian College in Tennessee, and my subject touched on God's ability to guide us in matters large and small. Afterward I was bombarded with questions. Another speaker some weeks before had suggested that God may establish certain parameters for our lives, but He normally does not involve Himself in specifics. He sets the tone, but we strike the notes. He appoints the destination but leaves the route to us. He has little to do with planning the details of our lives.

I respectfully disagree with the prior speaker, whoever he was. God's guidance is specific, detailed, daily, and pre-ordained from the foundation of the earth. I believe that's what the Psalmist was implying in Psalm 139:16: "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be" (NIV).

Jesus avowed that God was more concerned about the details of our lives than He is for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:26-28), and our Lord said in Matthew 10:29-30 (NIV): "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

If He counts the hairs on our heads, He's certainly interested in the moments in our days. We just have to acknowledge His Lordship in all our ways and He has promised to direct our paths. That begins to happen when we make the most important decision of all—the decision to follow Jesus Christ and let Him become the Lord of our lives. Have you done that?

If Thou but suffer God to guide thee,

And trust in Him in all thy ways,

He'll give thee strength whate'er befall thee,

And bear thee through the evil days.

Who trusts in God all unafraid,

Builds on the rock that naught can move

[1] William A. Cohen, *The Art of the Leader* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 191.

[2] From Earl Nightingale's famous lecture, "The Great Problem-Solving Tool," accessed at http://www.nightingale.com/tAE_Article~A~TheGreatProblem-SolvingTool~i~235.asp on September 29, 2005.

DEALINGS – MATURITY MEANS TREATING OTHERS WELL

Proverbs

When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

Proverbs 16:7

That is one of the most appealing and optimistic verses of the Bible. I'm not sure we should take it as an absolute promise, but as a normal principle of life. It was not always true, for example, of Christ, for His enemies killed him. But the underlying principle behind the verse is very sound—if we live so as to please the Lord, we'll have the wisdom and winsomeness that makes it hard for other people to dislike us.

The mixture of wisdom and winsomeness is a one-two combination that the world likes to call "People Skills." A Toronto newspaper, The Globe and Mail, has a regular column called "Career Coach," aimed at aspiring professionals. Recently, journalist Virginia Galt wrote the column, and the headline said, "Lousy People Skills are Biggest Hurdle for Leaders." The article said: "Leaders are promoted for their abilities to 'bring in the numbers,' take tough stands, and create strategic plans. But when they bomb -- as 35 per cent do -- it is usually because of lousy people skills...."

The article was based on a recent study by a firm called Development Dimensions International Inc., which had conducted a survey of 944 human resources professionals from 42 countries, looking at the subject of why internally promoted leaders fail over one-third of the time. The results of the study attributed the rate of failure to:

- Poor people skills: 53%
- Personal qualities (style, attitude, habits): 53%
- Poor fit with company culture: 44%
- Couldn't get results: 43%
- Don't have the skills to do the job: 36%
- Poor strategic or visionary skills: 33%
- Poor motivational fit with the job: 27%
- Inadequate preparation: 22%
- Lack of experience (not ready for the position): 21%
- Unrealistic expectations for the job: 18%
- Other: 7% [1]

So much of life comes down to people skills—but that's nothing new. It was that way in Bible times, too. For example, the Old Testament gives us the stories of two ranchers, farmers with large estates. One was Boaz in the book of Ruth, and his people skills were excellent. He genuinely liked people, and when he would go to the fields to check on his workers, he would shout to them, "The Lord be with you!" They would call back, "The Lord bless you!" He was a well-liked, well-respected leader who became the great-grandfather of King David.

But there was another man connected with the life of David who also had a vast farm. He was a sheep-herder named Nabel. He is described in 1 Samuel 25:3 as being "surly and mean in his dealings" (NIV). He was so rude and abrupt that he provoked David into a confrontation, but he died of a stroke or a heart-attack before anything came of it.

In studying this subject through the book of Proverbs, it seems to me there are four critical qualities that Boaz practices instinctively and that Nabel knew nothing about. You might say that this is Solomon's simple list of the qualities that comprise people skills.

Humility

The first is humility. Few subjects are mentioned more frequently in the book of Proverbs. Look at these verses and notice the preponderance of this theme throughout the book:

- Proverbs 28:28 (NKJV): He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the Lord will be prospered.
- Proverbs 29:23 (NKJV): A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honor.
- Proverbs 3:34 (NIV): He mocks proud mockers, but gives grace to the humble.
- Proverbs 11:2 (NIV): When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

- Proverbs 12:9 (NIV): Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.
- Proverbs 15:33 (NIV): The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.
- Proverbs 16:18 (NIV): Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.
- Proverbs 18:12 (NIV): Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor.
- Proverbs 21:4 (NIV): Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin!
- Proverbs 21:24 (NIV): The proud and arrogant man—"Mocker" is his name; he behaves with overweening pride.
- Proverbs 22:4 (NIV): By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honor and life.

Humility primarily means that we are sensitive to the needs of others and cautious about wanting our own way all the time. Philippians 2 says, "Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not [only] for his own interests, but also for the interest of others."

This shows up in so many ways in our daily lives. Several years ago, this letter showed up in a "Dear Abby" column. It was written by a woman who was trying to stick to her diet, but her husband was hindering her.

Dear Abby: Over the last two years I have lost 95 pounds. I did it by changing my lifestyle, exercising and making better food choices. My husband, "Paul," insists that he shouldn't have to hide his cookies, potato chips and chocolate candy, and says I should have self-control. I do have self-control, Abby, but sometimes the temptation is just too great. I feel Paul is unconsciously trying to sabotage me. How can I make him understand that I don't want junk food in my line of vision, and that it isn't all about willpower? --
RESENTFUL IN CALIFORNIA[2]

That's a great, though negative, example of humility. If her husband were a humble man, he would say, "Well, I like my potato chips and cookies, but my wife is trying her hardest to lose weight, so I'll keep my junk food stashed away so she won't be tempted." Instead, he was a selfish, proud, thoughtless pig who flaunted his junk food in her face.

Yet he probably didn't think of himself as I just described him. He had justified his behavior in his own eyes, and in his own mind he had shifted the blame to his wife. He probably resented the fact that she was trying to develop self-discipline while he wasn't.

Going back to Philippians 2, let me read verses 3 and 4 from the New Living Translation: "Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing."

It also means that we should change our conversational techniques from telling others about us to asking others about themselves. D. A. Benton suggests that question-asking is the mark of a good conversationalist. Most of us—myself included at the top of the list—live with an unconsciously self-centered life. We talk too much about ourselves.

The famous Chinese Christian leader, Watchman Nee, who died in a Communist prison, once said, "My destiny is to be either raptured or martyred. I refuse to be admired." [3]

Humility means we deflect attention from ourselves while guarding the self-image of those around us. Executive guru D. A. Benton suggests that the executive's number one job in life is doing everything possible to maintain the self-image of the people around them. "People may not remember exactly what you did, how you looked, or what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel," she writes. [4]

- Proverbs 24:17-20 (NIV) – here is a way of testing whether or not we are genuinely humble: Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him. Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.
- Proverbs 25:6-7 (NIV): Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.
- Proverbs 25:27 (NIV): It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.
- Proverbs 27:2 (NKJV): Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

Honesty

A penchant for honesty is the second critical quality for those whose ways are pleasing to the Lord and thus make even their

enemies be at peace with them. I'd like to take a moment just now to explain to you how you can kiss another person on the lips—man or women, it doesn't matter. Look at Proverbs 24:26: "An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips" (NIV). In fact, it is better than a kiss on the lips, because a kiss can be deceptive. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. But an honest answer is a sign of true friendship. Let me show you some other verses about this in the Proverbs:

- Proverbs 3:31-32 (NIV): Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways, for the Lord detests a perverse man but takes the upright man into His confidence.
- Proverbs 11:1 (NIV): The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are His delight.
- Proverbs 12:17 (NIV): A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies.
- Proverbs 16:11 (NIV): Honest scales and balances are from the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of His making.
- Proverbs 20:10 (NIV): Differing weights and differing measures—the Lord detests them both.
- Proverbs 20:23 (NIV): The Lord detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please Him.

The Victorian era of British history is known as the England's golden age, the age in which the sun never set on the British Empire, for it stretched around the globe. This was the time when British literary output was extraordinary, with giants like Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Jane Austen, Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning. It was a period of spiritual revival, with preachers like Charles Spurgeon.

Among the reasons for this period of ascendancy was the far-famed honesty of British merchants. The historian R. C. K. Ensor explained it this way in his best-selling history of England: "If one asks how nineteenth-century English merchants earned the reputation of being the most honest in the world (a very real factor in the nineteenth-century primacy of English trade), the answer is: because hell and heaven seemed as certain to them as tomorrow's sunrise, and the Last Judgment as real as the week's balance-sheet. This keen sense of moral accountability had also much to do with the success of self-government in the political sphere."^[5]

- Proverbs 21:3 (NIV): To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.
- Proverbs 24:26 (NIV): An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.
- Proverbs 28:6 (NKJV): Better is the poor who walks in his integrity than one perverse in his ways though he be rich.
- Proverbs 28:23 (NKJV): He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue.
- Proverbs 30:7-9 (NIV): Two things I request of you... : Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God.

Generosity

Another trait of likeable people is generosity. Proverbs 3:9-10 (NIV): Honor the Lord with your wealth, and with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

I love that verse because it seems to me that it summarizes the biblical teaching on this subject as well or better than any other verse in the Bible. It begins by telling us to worship, to honor God. But how do we do it? Well, we honor, worship, and praise Him in our singing and praying and church services. But this verse mentions none of those kinds of things. It says, "Worship God, honor Him, with your money, and with the first part of all your income."

That's why we include the offering here each Sunday as part of our worship service. It is an act of worship. But honoring God with our money and with the first part of all our income isn't limited to giving our tithes and offerings. It's a matter of becoming generous in every way. A couple of years ago, several of us heard a speaker from the Philippines who is now a university professor. She was speaking to students at a great conference, and she described her childhood in the Philippines. She said something to this effect: "I grew up in a very poor family. There was my dad and mom, and eight children. But my parents were generous, and every evening when my mother cooked supper I would watch her. She would dip her hand into the rice bag ten times, one handful of rice for each of us, and into the pot went the rice. Then she would plunge her hand into the bag of rice one more time and toss a handful of rice into a separate container that at the end of the week would be sent to someone in need. Tithing and generosity wasn't just something my parents practiced on Sunday; it was a trait that was woven into every part of their lives.

- Proverbs 3:27-28 (NIV): 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 14:31 (NIV): He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.
- Proverbs 19:17 (NIV): He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward him for what he has done.
- Proverbs 21:13 (NIV): If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.
- Proverbs 21:25-26 (NIV): 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 29:7 (NKJV): The righteous considers the cause of the poor, but the wicked does not understand such knowledge.

Here's one other passage -- Proverbs 11:24-26 (NKJV): There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself. The people will curse him who withholds grain, but blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.

Years ago, I found an old book in a used bookstore, and it was entitled *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*. I've had that book for about thirty or forty years, and I'm still amazed when I read it at some of the things that happened in the churches of Colonial New England. One year, the harvest was poor and the people badly needed corn and grain. There was a wealthy man in the community named Colonel Ingraham who had a large inventory of corn, but he was holding it back from the market, expecting the price to go up and the need became greater. The situation became rather stark, and on the following Sunday the minister rose to preach. Colonel Ingraham was there in the congregation along with all the other townspeople, and the clergyman preached on this text: The people will curse him who withholds grain, but blessings will be on the head of him who sells it. The preacher gave the best explanation of the verse that he could and proclaimed it with zeal, but the wealthy farmer seemed impervious and unaffected.

Finally, the pastor paused in exasperation and said, "Colonel Ingraham, Colonel Ingraham! You know I mean you; why don't you hang down your head?"

I think many times as we hear the Word of God preached and especially as we look at these verses in the book of Proverbs, the Holy Spirit is trying to shout our names and say to us, "You know I mean you! This is about you! Take this verse and apply it to your life! Learn to give. Learn to be generous. Learn to share whatever you have with others in a more liberal way.

- Proverbs 22:9 (NIV): He who has a generous eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.
- Proverbs 28:27 (NKJV): He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses.

Loyalty

Finally, we must have a sense of loyalty. We must stick with our friends.

- Proverbs 17:17 (NLT): A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need.
- Proverbs 24:11-12 (NIV): Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "But we know 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 27:10 (NKJV): Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.

My dad, John I. Morgan, exemplified this in so many ways, and I learned a lot from him. He had a friend named Oscar Bowers to whom he was very faithful and loyal. Oscar had worked for the city as an electrician, and somehow in the course of time he developed throat cancer and his voice box was removed. He could only talk by rasping out sounds, and as a child I felt very awkward around him because I could not understand what he was trying to tell me. But my father, seeing that other people shied away from Oscar for the same reason, took him in as a friend and recruited him to help with the apple orchard.

He and Oscar spent hours and days together, year after year, and my father learned to understand every single word and he and Oscar would spend hours talking together. For the rest of their lives, they were close friends. When my dad passed away, Oscar was as heartbroken as we were. And years later, when Oscar was dying, according to a report from his daughter to my sister, Ann, he said something remarkable. As he was slipping into eternity, he suddenly looked up with surprise and said, "Well, there's John Morgan!"

How important to be a loyal friend and to be loyal to your father's friend, as well! We can summarize today's message with hand motions. Hands up in the air in an open, disarming way—that's honesty. Hands, palms downward, moving quietly downward—that's humility. Hands outstretched with open palms—that's generosity. Hands clasped together as a show of unity—that's loyalty. And

when we are humble, honest, generous, and loyal—we are pleasing to the Lord. And when we are pleasing to the Lord, we make even our enemies be at peace with u

[1] “Lousy People Skills are the Biggest Hurdle for Leaders” by Virginia Galt in the Toronto Globe and Mail, October 15, 2005, at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20051015/RCAREER15/TPBusiness/General>, accessed on October 24, 2005.

[2] Quoted by <http://www.funnygreetings.com/index.cfm?action=daily&id=4>, accessed on July 26, 2005.

[3] Bob Laurent, Watchman Nee: Man of Suffering (Uhrichsville, Ohio, 1998), p. 83.

[4] D. A. Benton, Executive Charisma (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 48.

[5] Quoted by David L. Larsen, The Company of Preachers (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), p. 449.

DESIRES: MATURITY MEANS KNOWING WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT Proverbs 24:3-4

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. Proverbs 24:3-4NIV

I read an article in the newspaper this week that interviewed several women who had battled breast cancer, and the reporter was particularly interested in their insights following the ordeal. I was surprised at the positive attitudes displayed by these survivors. One said, “I knew there was a purpose. My purpose for having cancer was changing things in my life, not taking people and things for granted, to live a healthier lifestyle, to appreciate what’s going on around me, to find a better understanding in God.”

Another said, “I’m almost happier now because of knowing what I know and the insights I have.... I think it’s made me look at life and distill out what’s really important.”[1]

Another article in this week’s paper told about a church in Miami that was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Last Sunday, the church met for the first time since the storm. The electricity was still off and the building was still damaged. Many of the congregants had suffered loss in their own personal lives. But the pastor stood up and said, “All of us have known difficulties in the past days. This is the second storm this church has weathered. It enhances people’s awareness of the brevity of life and what’s really important.”[2]

When I put those two stories side-by-side, I was impressed with a single truth. It is very easy to become so caught up in the pressures of life that we forget what is really important. Sometimes it takes the scares of life, the scars of life, and the storms of life to remind us of life’s true priorities.

When we encounter difficulty, it often strips away all the externals and enables us to see again the real values of life. But it is also true that when we study the Bible and pour over God’s Word, the same thing happens.

That’s particularly true in the book of Proverbs, because it is such a practical, back-to-the-basics type of book. And, of course, when we read through it from that perspective, we come to the conclusion that what is really important in our lives is home and family—our dads, moms, aunts, uncles, cousins, and particularly our husbands, wives, children, and grandchildren. Many of the verses of Solomon relate to the theme of home and family, and as I read through Proverbs from this perspective, I found certain thoughts repeated over and over and over.

It’s Important to be a Exemplary Person

First, it’s important to live an exemplary life, to be an exemplary person. The word “exemplary” is related to the word “example,” and it means that we should live so that those who are watching us—specifically our children—will want to follow Christ because us. Proverbs 14:26 (NIV) says: He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. And Proverbs 20:7 (NIV) says: The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him.

When we fear the Lord and live devotedly for Him, it sets a different kind of tone in the home. When the father and mother put Christ first, it adds a dimension to family life that children need. That kind of family prays before meals because they recognize that all they have comes from the Lord. That kind of family has bedtime prayers because they recognize the need for God’s protection during the night. That kind of family goes to church on Sundays because they understand that God expects to be worshipped and adored. That

kind of family is cautious about the movies and television programs they watch because they understand that Jesus Christ is living with them in that home. That kind of family trusts in the Lord during lean times because they know that their God is one who has promised to provide.

Fathers and mothers who set that kind of example cast long shadows.

Recently, I've read two autobiographies that begin in almost the same way, even though the stories are very different. One of the books was the story of General Alexander Haig, who was a decorated army hero and went on to become White House Chief of Staff and U.S. Secretary of State. In this memoir, *Inner Circles*, General Haig begins by saying that when he was nine years old, he suffered an irreplaceable loss. His father, a World War I veteran, died. But Haig went on to describe his weekend visits to his grandparents. He would often slip up into the attic of the house where he found his father's old army uniform. Not only that, but there were helmets and gas masks and other equipment from his dad's military kit, and he became enamored with this stuff. His father, though dead, still spoke to him, as it were. It was his father's memory and his father's uniform that caused Alexander Haig at a young age to envision himself as a soldier, as a man in uniform. The course of his life was set by discovering his father's uniform in the attic at age nine.

The other memoir is by John Glenn, former astronaut and United States Senator. Before he became an astronaut, Glenn had a dramatic career as a fighter pilot in World War II and in Korea. Then he entered the space program, becoming one of America's original seven Mercury astronauts and the first man to orbit the earth.

In his memoir, Glenn tells how he became interested in flying. When he was eight years old, he was riding with his father down the road, and they came across a man beside the road giving airplane rides in an old-fashioned, open-seat biplane. Mr. Glenn stopped and told his son how fascinated he was by this new-fangled invention called the airplane and how mesmerized by reports of Charles Lindbergh who, two years before, had crossed the Atlantic in *The Spirit of St. Louis*. The dad said something to this effect: "Son, I'm going to take a ride in that plane, and if you want to come with me, come on!" They paid the man some money, strapped into the plane, and that one experience set the course of John Glenn's life.

Like it or not, we leave a legacy for our children. We pass on to them our loves and our values and our sense of honor and ethics. We plant within them the seeds of their own future, and it reminds us of the old Steve Green song:

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone

And our children sift through all we've left behind

May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover

Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find.

Oh, may all who come behind us find us faithful...

It's Important to be a Congenial Spouse

Second, it is important to be a congenial spouse. Listen to these verses:

- Proverbs 19:14NIV: Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord.
- Proverbs 21:9NIV: Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
- Proverbs 21:18NIV: Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.
- Proverbs 25:24NIV: Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
- Proverbs 31:10NIV: A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.... Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.

We're often amused by these verses, because they so pointedly address the wife whereas most of the verses in Proverbs are worded in the male gender; but I think in most cases the real meaning is gender-inclusive. When it says, for example, in Proverbs 29:11: "A fool gives full vent to his anger, and a wise man keeps himself under control," what it really means is "A fool gives full vent to his or her anger, and a wise man or woman keeps himself or herself under control."

In the same way, we can reverse these "congenial" verses and remind ourselves that they apply to men as well as to women:

- Proverbs 19:14NIV: Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent husband is from the Lord.

- Proverbs 21:9NIV: Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome husband.
- Proverbs 21:18NIV: Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered husband.
- Proverbs 25:24NIV: Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome husband.
- Proverbs 31:10NIV: A husband of noble character who can find? He is worth far more than rubies. His wife has full confidence in him and lacks nothing of value. He brings her good, not harm, all the days of his life.... His children arise and call him blessed; his wife also, and she praises him.

We all have days when we're out of sorts, and it's true that we have to work on our attitudes all the time; but it's hard to live with an ill-tempered, temperamental, hot-headed, sulking, nagging, unpleasant person. It's hard to be in a home where you always have to walk around on egg shells so as not to upset the old bear or goat that you're living with.

Several years ago, there was a Peanuts comic strip in which Lucy announced, "Boy, do I feel crabby." Her little brother, Linus, who wanted badly to please her and to relieve tension at home, decided to try to make her feel better. He said, "Why don't you just take my place here in front of the TV while I go and fix you a nice snack? Sometimes we all need a little pampering to help us feel better."

He brought her a sandwich and some cookies and milk. Then he said, "Now is there anything else I can get you? Is there anything I haven't thought of?"

"Yes," said Lucy, "there's one thing you haven't thought of." Then she screamed: "Maybe I don't want to feel better!"[3]

Well, if that's the way you are, you need to repent of those attitudes, recognizing them as the sins they are, and ask God for a revival of love, joy, peace, and patience. Christians should not be hard people to live with!

It's Important to be a Teaching Parent

The book of Proverbs also tells us over and over about the importance of being teaching fathers and mothers. Proverbs 1:8-9 says: My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be a graceful ornament on your head, and chains about your neck.

And what is that teaching father or mother to say? The passage goes on to tell us we should warn our children about the dangers of peer pressure and wrong friends. Look at verse 10: My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent....

Notice, too, how Proverbs 4 begins: Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know and understand; for I give you good doctrine....

We're to teach our children good doctrine. We're to tell them the truths of Scripture and teach them the ways of the Lord.

...for I give you good doctrine: do not forsake my law. When I was my father's son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, he also taught me, and said to me: "Let your heart retain my words; keep my commands, and live."

Have you ever said anything like that to your kids? Are you a teaching parent?

Proverbs 22:6 (NIV) says: Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

One of the things we must teach our children is the value of self-discipline. As we've seen in a previous sermon, the book of Proverbs is full of verses about self-discipline and self-control. It also tells us that it's our responsibility as parent to instill those values into our children. Until they can learn to be self-disciplined on their own, they need the guardrails of discipline from us. Listen to these verses:

- Proverbs 13:24NIV: He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.
- Proverbs 28:15NIV: Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him.
- Proverbs 23:13-14NKJV: Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.
- Proverbs 29:15, 17NKJV: The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.... Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul.

In his book, *Today Matters*, John Maxwell said, "I have to give my parents a lot of credit for training me to be self-disciplined. One of the ways they did that was to use my chores to teach me." He went on to say that every Saturday his father gave him a list of chores for the week. Some had to be done on a particular day, such as taking out the trash on the night before pickup. Others could be

done anytime, but they had to be done by noon on Saturday.

One day during the summer, John neglected to clean out the basement by the deadline, and at noon that day the whole family loaded into the car to go swimming. When he arrived at the car with his towel, his dad asked, “John, did you clean out the basement as you were supposed to do?”

John hemmed and hawed for a moment, then finally admitted that he had not, but he promised to do it as soon as they returned from swimming.

But his father looked at him and said, “That’s not what you agreed to. You chose to play all week instead of finishing your chores. We’re going swimming, but you’re staying home to finish the basement. I’m sorry, son, but those are the rules.”

John later said that that single incident taught him to stop procrastinating, and it was such incidents that taught him the value of self-discipline in his life.[4]

In a similar vein, if you are a young person, it’s important to learn to respect and obey and honor your parents. That’s one of the Ten Commandments, but it’s also a constant theme in Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 23:24-25 (NKJV) says: The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets a wise child will delight in him. Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her who bore you rejoice. Conversely, Proverbs 19:13 (NIV): A foolish son is his father’s ruin...

I want to say to our high school and college students, you have no idea how much joy you can bring or pain you can inflict on your parents, and the awareness of that should help you determine your behavior.

It’s Important to Enjoy Your Family

But finally, on a positive note, it’s important to learn to enjoy your family. Proverbs 17:6 (NIV) says: Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children. And Proverbs 18:22 (NIV) says: He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord. It’s the book of Proverbs that tells us to rejoice with the husband or wife of our youth, in other words with that man or woman we married when we were young.

Last summer a man in Florida called me after reading my book *The Red Sea Rules*. He told me that even now, in mid-life, he was struggling with issues arising from his childhood and with the lack of relationship he had with his father. His parents stayed together, they never divorced, and in many ways they were exemplary. But there were nine kids in the family, and, the man told me, his dad was both short-tempered and a workaholic—which perhaps comes from having nine kids to support. But as we talked, I asked him this question: “Do you remember ever in your life having at least one meaningful, in-depth conversation with your father.” The man paused, pondered the question, and said, “Honestly, no. Even a few weeks ago, I drove him to see a relative and we were together in the car for three hours, and I asked him questions about his childhood and about his upbringing. He just said that he didn’t grow up with a dad, didn’t know really how to do it himself, and he’d rather not talk about it.”

“I feel I lost something I can never recover,” said the man, “and I’ve had a long history of fighting temptations toward depression and same-sex attractions, although, by the grace of God, I’ve never caved into the pressure. But to this day I’m still searching for my dad’s love.”[5]

That’s why it is important to be an exemplary person, a congenial spouse, a teaching dad or mom, and that’s why it is important to enjoy your family. If you need help doing that, I know a great counselor. He’s the Wonderful Counselor, and His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Without Him, there’s no foundation in our lives for doing these things. Without Him, there’s no spiritual basis for wisdom. But with Him, we have all the resources we need.

If your life is not wholly committed to Christ, I recommend Him to you today. In Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and when it comes to the really important things in life, He alone is Number One

[1] “The Good Fight” by Erin Stuber, in *The Columbia Basin Herald*, posted Friday, October 28, 2005, at <http://www.columbiabasinherald.com/articles/2005/10/28/news/news01.txt>, and accessed on November 3, 2005.

[2] “Storm Aid from Faith-Based Groups a Blessing” by Alexandra Alter in *The Miami Herald*, posted on October 31, 2005, at <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/13039607.htm>, and accessed on November 3, 2005.

[3] Quoted by John Maxwell in *Today Matters* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), p. 47.

[4] John Maxwell, *Today Matters* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), pp. 26-27.

[5] Used by permission; some details changed

DIFFICULTIES: MATURITY MEANS IMMUNIZING YOURSELF AGAINST DISCOURAGEMENT

Proverbs

Next Sunday will bring us to the final installment in our series entitled “Wise Up” from the book of Proverbs, and next Sunday night our Home Fellowships will provide, I think, a meaningful conclusion to these messages. Most of these sermons have been about our relationships with others, or about ethics or values—these are the common themes of Proverbs. But there are a handful of verses that deal with the area of inner strength and resilience, and that’s what I’d like to look at today. How do we respond to difficulty. The writer of Proverbs would say that maturity means immunizing yourself against discouragement.

All of us battle discouragement from time to time, but someone once said, “All discouragement is from the devil.” I think that might be true—but that just means that it is all-the-more potent and malevolent.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Great Britain became involved in a war in the south of Africa that is known to history as the Boer War. There’s one very interesting detail that came out of the records of that war that relates to our subject today. It’s the only time I’ve ever read about in which a person was charged and convicted specifically of the crime of being a discourager.

It happened in a South African town named Ladysmith. The town was under attack, and this particular man would move up and down the line of soldiers who were defending the city and do everything he could do to discourage them. He would point out the enemy’s strengths and the difficulty of defending the city and how the odds were stacked against them. He never touched a gun and he used no weapon except the weapon of discouragement, but it was very effective. He was eventually arrested and charged with being a discourager.

Well, I’ve known some people like that. You can’t be in ministry for all your adult life and not run into some of those. But my point is that it isn’t primarily a matter of our being discouragers. This is the devil’s work. He is the great discourager who walks back and forth in front of your life and my life, trying to discourage us. He whispers in our ear, he oppresses our heart, he keeps us awake at night, he unnerves us—and he is the source and the force of those waves of discouragement that sometimes seem to hit us from all sides at once.

Well the book of Proverbs has a very interesting way of looking at that, and I’d like to show you five passages that deal with that subject and five principles we can extrapolate from those passages.

It’s a Shame to Be as Weak as We Are

First, it’s a shame to be as weak as we are. I want to show you one of the of the most frustrating and convicting verses in Proverbs, as far as I’m concerned. It’s found in Proverbs 24:10: If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength. Let me quote it to you from some other translations:

- You are a poor specimen if you can’t stand the pressure of adversity—The Living Bible
- If you do nothing in a difficult time, your strength is limited—Christian Standard Bible
- Don’t give up and be helpless in times of trouble—Contemporary English Version
- If you fall to pieces in a crisis, there wasn’t much to you in the first place—The Message

Sometimes the Bible is pretty blunt! I’ll admit that I cave into discouragement too frequently, and that my inner strength gives out. Sometimes I am so ashamed of myself about this.

I’m going to share something with you if you don’t misquote me on it. The Lord rebuked me recently by two different movies that I happened to see. Now, I’m not much of a movie-goer, so this is unusual for me. But after I returned from a recent trip and I was tired and weary and worried about one thing or another, I just about inwardly collapsed. I’ve been feeling recently like the battery of a cell phone that won’t hold its charge. It runs down too quickly. A lot of you know what I mean.

So I was out of town in a hotel, and I went down to work out in the little exercise room. While I was chugging along on the stair-step machine, a movie was on about the life of Franklin Roosevelt. It told the story of his struggle with polio. He was 39 on vacation in Maine when he was stricken, and in the aftermath of the diagnosis and his being left as a paraplegic, he nearly collapsed into a dark haze of personal depression, alcoholism, and self-pity. But Roosevelt decided he wasn’t going to give up. He worked like a dog to learn how to take a few steps, then bravely went to Madison Square Garden to address the Democratic National Convention. His son helped him walk across the stage to the podium, and when he nearly tripped and fell, he whispered to his son, “Laugh as though

I had just told you a joke,” and he threw back his head and laughed. And it was the rebirth of his political career.

And for some reason tears came to my eyes while I pumped away at my exercise machine, mingling with the perspiration pouring down my face, and I thought, “What is wrong with me, that I don’t have the inner strength and resilience. Roosevelt, to the best of my knowledge, wasn’t even a born-again or dedicated Christian.”

And then I came home and Katrina and I watched the movie “Luther” with Joseph Fiennes, and I was reminded of how Luther faced incredible burdens and dangers and tragedies and how he battled depression and discouragement, yet he kept on going.

And I thought, “What is wrong with me?”

And I’m going to be a little blunt here, but I’m going to ask, “What is wrong with you? What is wrong with us?” We have all the promises of God. We have the presence of Christ. We have the power of the Holy Spirit living inside of our very bodies and souls. It’s a shame to be as weak as we are.

That’s the message of Proverbs 24:10:

- If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength. Let me quote it to you from some other translations:
- You are a poor specimen if you can’t stand the pressure of adversity—The Living Bible
- If you fall to pieces in a crisis, there wasn’t much to you in the first place—The Message

It’s a Sin to Stay Down When We Fall

So the first thing the book of Proverbs says to me on this subject is that it is a shame to be as weak as we are. The second thing is that it is a sin to stay down when we fall. In the same chapter, look down at the 16th verse: Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.

- Even if good people fall seven times, they will get back up. But when trouble strikes the wicked, that’s the end of them—CEV.
- No matter how many times you trip them up, God-loyal people don’t stay down long; Soon they’re up on their feet, while the wicked end up flat on their faces—the Message.

Now the word “seven” here isn’t meant to be taken literally. This is like when Peter asked Jesus, “Should I forgive my brother seven times.” In the biblical culture, seven was a number of completion, and it meant an infinite or indefinite number of times. No matter how many times you fall, you have got to keep getting back up. God’s people keep getting back up. They aren’t going to stay down in the ditch.

I’ve used this verse so many times in counseling people who were dealing with addictive sins. A young person will come and say, “I’ve fallen again. I’ve committed that sin again.” And I say, “Well, confess it, turn from it, get right back up, and keep on going. Don’t ever give in. Don’t ever give up.”

But it’s not just a matter of falling into the sins of the flesh, it’s true about the sins of the spirit. We’re all going to fall from time to time into the ditch of discouragement, disappointment, depression, and self-pity. But it’s a sin to stay down when we fall.

Look at the biblical heroes—all of them had moments of blackness. Jacob said, “All these things are against me.” Moses said, “Lord, how can I lead these people?” Jeremiah said, “Lord, you have deceived me and I was deceived.” Elijah said, “I alone am left and they seek my life also.” John the Baptist said, “Are you he who should come or do we look for another.” The apostle Paul said, “Fears within, conflicts without.” Even Jesus Himself said, “Now is my soul troubled; what shall I say?”

But when the Word of God is in your brain and the Spirit of God is in your heart, you cannot stay down. Proverbs 10:25 & 30 says: “When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.... The righteous will never be uprooted.”

My favorite definition of success is the one given by Winston Churchill: “Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

There’s something about that that rings true, isn’t there? Just the ability to keep up our morale, our hope, and our spirits in a difficult time is success from God’s perspective, for it is the exercise of a faith that rests firmly in His promises amid the discouragements of life.

It’s a Blessing to Have an Encouraging Friend

Now there’s a third truth about adversity and difficulty in the book of Proverbs—it’s a blessing to have an encouraging friend. Look at Proverbs 17:17: A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. In other words, God gives us brothers and sisters who

support us and encourage us in adversity.

Sometimes I read things outside my normal sphere of reading, and the other day for some reason I read an equestrian column in which people wrote in with questions about training their horses. One man wrote in saying that he had a strange problem with his horse. It would do just about anything except crossing railroad tracks. He said, "I have tried everything I know and I can't get my horse to cross the railroad tracks. It's very frustrating."

The trainer answered with some helpful ideas, and then he said, in effect, stay calm and positive with the horse, because human frustration and discouragement can rub off on your horse.

Human frustration and discouragement can rub off on your horse.

Well, if frustration and discouragement can spread from us to a horse, think of how easily it can spread from us to one another. Recently I read an unattributed poem in a book. I don't know who wrote it, but it speaks to this very point:

It takes so little to make us sad.

Just a slighting word, a doubtful sneer,

Just a scornful smile on some lips held dear

And our footsteps lag though the goal seems near,

And we lose the joy and hope we had.

It takes so little to make us sad.

It takes so little to make us glad.

Just a cheering clasp of some friendly hand.

Just a word from one who could understand.

And we finish the task we so long had planned.

We lose the fear and doubt we had.

It takes so little to make us glad.[1]

It's a Refuge to Trust the Infallible Word

Fourth, it's a refuge to trust the infallible Word. As I read through the book of Proverbs again and again in preparation for this series of messages, one of the things that surprised me is that even though this is not a book of theology like Romans or Ephesians, even though this is arguably the most practical, nuts-and-bolts book in the Bible, there are here and there flashes of deep and incredible doctrine, and in chapter 30 we have one of the simplest and clearest statements found anywhere in the Scripture on the subject of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Proverbs 30:5 says: Every word of God is flawless; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.

In her wonderful book, *Edges of His Ways*, Amy Carmichael has this little paragraph:

I have always noticed that when God has purposes of blessing for some soul, the devil of discouragement, who is one of Satan's most useful servants, is sure to come and whisper all sorts of sorrowful, depressing, miserable thoughts. He drops these thoughts about, sometimes in one heart and sometimes in another. If they take root and grow into feelings and words and deeds, he knows that a great deal has been done to hinder what our God intends to do. Don't forget that discouragement is always from beneath; encouragement is always from above. God is the God of Encouragement."[2]

Hebrews 12:5 gives us a wonderful name for the Holy Bible. It is "the Word of Encouragement that addresses us as sons (and daughters)."

The old Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, once said: "A single text, well understood, and rightly applied, at once destroys a temptation... and subdues the most formidable adversary."[3]

It's a Savior Who Promises Us Victory

Look at the last part of Proverbs 21:31: The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.

Victory rests with the Lord.

Many years ago, there was a Christian writer who had a column in the paper. His name was C. L. Paddock, and his column on August 10, 1937, told of a young Christian who had been in the first World War, which until the Second World War, was simply known as the Great War. This young soldier became separated from the main body of troops, and he found himself surrounded by the enemy for several days. His food ran out, and then his water. He began thinking that the only way out was to surrender. But that night he prayed earnestly, and then he decided to fire his last shell into the air as a signal to his comrades. After the shell exploded, there was nothing to do but wait. In the morning, he heard the buzz of a plane overhead, and then a package was dropped along with a canteen of water. Attached to the package was a note, and it said, "Don't give up. We are coming."

Every day for several days, a plane passed overhead and dropped down supplies of food and water, like Elijah's ravens by the brook Kerith, and always there was a note: "Hold on.... Don't give up... We'll be there.... Keep up your spirits... We're coming."

And one day there was the roaring of the artillery and the marching of the infantry and the lost soldier was rescued and victory came at last.

Here we are surrounded by the enemy and sometimes we want to give up. But God drops down His messages from heaven, and He says, "Don't give up. I'm coming."

God has not promised

Skies always blue,

Flower-strewn pathways

All our lives thro';

God has not promised

Sun without rain,

Joy without sorrow,

Peace without pain.

God has not promised

We shall not know

Toil and temptation,

Trouble and woe;

He has not told us

We shall not bear

Many a burden,

Many a care.

But God has promised

Strength for the day,

Rest for the laborer,

Light for the way,

Grace for the trials,

Help from above,

Unfailing sympathy,

Undying love

[1] Quoted in *Ephesians: An Exposition* by W. A. Criswell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 240.

[2] Amy Carmichael, *Edges of His Ways* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1998), pp. 118-119.

[3] Henry, M., & Scott, T. (1997). *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Eph 6:10). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems

DESTINY: MATURITY MEANS ALWAYS ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE WITH CONFIDENCE Proverbs

The path of the just is like the shining sun, That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. Proverbs 4:18

Today we are coming to the end of our series of messages entitled “Wise Up” from the book of Proverbs. I feel like we’ve just gone wading in the shallow end of the book, and I wish I could start all over and preach another entire series of sermons. There are so many other verses and passages and topics and themes to this book. But next week begins the Advent Season on the traditional church calendar, and I’m going to have to leave it to you to study out the rest of Proverbs for yourself.

Our final message is entitled *Destiny: Maturity Means Anticipating the Future With Confidence*. This week I attended a function here in Nashville and among the guests was former Governor Ned Ray McWherter. I don’t hobnob very much with politicians and I almost never meet anyone whose name is well-known, so I wasn’t sure what to talk about. I asked him how he liked being retired, and he waxed on for a few minutes about that; then I asked him if he had any good advice for me when I retired. “Yes,” he said, “Stay busy, but don’t let your handlers over-schedule you.”

I nodded politely and thought to myself, “I’m going to have to remember to tell my ‘handlers’ that when I retire.”

There was an article in the newspaper this week profiling Joe Paterno, the football coach at Penn State. He is 79 years old, and his contract extends through the 2008 season. Someone asked him why he doesn’t retire, why he is still coaching at his age. He said, “Because I have no game plan to get out of it.” He said, “I’m sure I’m going to wake up some morning and say, ‘Hey, enough’s enough.’ But I don’t know when.”

He went on to say, “I’d like to coach another four or five years if I could. But I’m not going to be naïve and tell you the Lord is going to keep me healthy for another four or five years. But I’d love to be able to do another four or five years.”

The reporter who was interviewing him wrote up the story and the headline was titled: “Always Moving Forward.”

That was the attitude of the Proverbialist here in Proverbs 4:18: But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.

Now let’s give that verse just a brief prolegomenon. What does it mean? Well, we have to begin by interpreting that final phrase “perfect day.” The word “perfect” means fully-orbed or complete or mature. It is referring to the moment when the sun is in the zenith of the sky. It means what the old cowboys called high noon. That now gives this verse a profound meaning. Let’s look at the first phrase. What is “the path of the just”? It means our lives, the lives of Christian people. What does “shining sun” mean? The sun is the fireball in the sky that brightens up the solar system, and when we have periods without sunshine we grow more depressed. It’s called SAD—seasonally affected disorder. But walk outside on a sun-splashed day without a cloud in the sky, and your spirits automatically elevate.

This verse says, “The life of a Christian is like the sun that comes up in the morning and gets better and better and brighter and brighter until it reaches it’s zenith in the noon hour.”

In other words, there’s never really any afternoon for the Christian. There’s never any twilight. There’s never a night time. It’s always morning for the Christian.

The new Holman Christian Standard Version says: The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until midday. But (going on to the next verse) the way of the wicked is like the darkest gloom; they don’t know what makes them stumble.

I read about a schoolteacher who asked her class, “What’s the difference between the North and the South Pole?” One little quick-thinking boy shoot up his hand and replied, “All the difference in the world!”

Well, there’s all the difference in the world between a Christian and a non-Christian in terms of ultimate goals and destinations, or we might say there’s all the difference between day and night. For the Christian, the sun is always rising; and for the non-Christian, it is

always setting. For the Christian, it's always morning, and for the non-Christian, it's always night. For the Christian, we're approaching the noon hour, but the non-Christian is approaching the midnight hour.

Another translation of Proverbs 4:18 says: The path of righteous people is like the light of dawn that becomes brighter and brighter until it reaches midday (God's Word).

I like Peterson's translation too: The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine(The Message).

Do you remember Ronald Reagan's famous phrase—"It's Morning in America"? Well, for the Christian life, it's always morning—at least, until we reach the zenith and the high noon of heaven's eternal life. There's never a time when our sun begins to go down. There's never a sunset for the Christian. The Christian lives in an endless morning.

That doesn't mean there aren't occasional clouds, of course. It just means that the path of the just is like the rising sun that gets brighter and brighter until it reaches the zenith of its noon. That's the truth of Proverbs 4:18.

Because of that, there are two attitudes we should have as we anticipate the future.

Face Forward

First, we should face forward. Look at Proverbs 23:17-18: 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.

Notice those words: There is surely a future.... Notice the next work: ...hope. There is surely a future hope... Notice the next two words: ...for you.

There is surely a future.... There is surely a future hope.... There is surely a future hope for you! Here are a couple of other Proverbs on that subject:

§ Proverbs 10:28 (NIV): The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

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

One of the problems I have in preaching is that sometimes my sermons turn out to be therapy sessions for me. This is one of those. It's not a big problem, but I'll confess that occasionally I've found myself worrying a little about the future. If something happens to me, what will happen to my wife, who is disabled? How will my kids turn out? What will I do when I retire? Will anyone want me to speak or write? Will I have anything to do? Will I have sufficient retirement income in old age? What if I become disabled by disease or felled by heart problems?

I don't think about those things very much during the daytime, but just when I'm almost asleep, those are the questions that pop into my mind like little demons. And after all, even the book of Proverbs tells us that the future is diaphanous and uncertain from a human perspective. Proverbs 27:1 says, Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth(NKJV).

But we live by faith and by faith in God's promises. Proverbs 30:5 says: God keeps every promise He makes (Good News Translation). The same passage in Peterson's translation says: Every promise of God proves true; He protects everyone who runs to him for help. So don't second-guess him.

One of God's most precious promises is here in Proverbs 4:18, that the path of the just is like the morning sun that shines brighter and brighter until it reaches its perfect day. We've got to take this promise seriously, learn it, lean on it, and let it determine our attitude as we face the future, regardless of our age or circumstances. If our sun is still rising in the sky, arching toward the noonhour, we should be facing the future with a sunny optimism and attitude.

In fact, to do otherwise, according to Jesus, is a sin. Jesus said in Matthew 6:34: "Do not worry about tomorrow." The book of Proverbs tells us we should plan. We should give thought to our steps. We should make provision. We should think ahead. But we should not worry or be anxious or depressed.

I think one of the things that can help us is a storehouse of Christian music. Corey Hawkins and I attended a conference in Atlantathis week on the subject of worship and music, and a number of people were there representing contemporary Christian music, which I like. I love the new songs we sing; but the man who wrote the song "I Exalt Thee" said something interesting in his address to the group, and I agree with what he said. He said that the range of subjects being addressed by today's song-writers is too narrow. There is a great deal of praise and worship, but there are many other great theological and biblical themes that aren't being addressed.

And that's true. Many of the old hymns dealt with the subject of trusting the Lord with what lies ahead on the calendar of life's

tomorrow, and that's a message being neglected today, but which we badly need. Let me quote three of four of the old hymns that speak to this, one of which I think many of you will instantly know.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth

Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,

Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

John Newton wrote:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares

I have already come.

'Tis grace that's led me safe thusfar,

and grace will lead me home.

Another hymn has this wonderful verse:

Tomorrow, Lord, is Thine

Lodged in Thy sovereign hand;

And if its sun arise and shine,

It shines by Thy command.

And another:

I cannot read His future plans;

But this I know;

I have the smiling of His face,

And all the refuge of His grace,

While here below.

And finally, there's an old Gospel song that says:

God holds the future in His hands

And every heart He understands.

On Him depend,

He is your Friend,

He holds the future in His hands.

When I was growing up, my pastor used to say, "We don't know what tomorrow holds, but we know who holds tomorrow." Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. He will bring us full circle. He will guide us with His counsel, and then take us into glory. So we must always be facing forward with optimism, like Paul who said, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Aging Gracefully

That leads to a corresponding truth. We should be aging gracefully. Proverbs 16:31 says: Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life (NIV). Proverbs 20:29: The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old (NIV). And Proverbs 17:6 says: Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children (NIV).

Years ago, I preached a series of sermons on the subject of aging gracefully, about the privileges and challenges of growing older. I

was a young man when I preached it—younger, obviously, than I am now—and I debated with myself for a long time whether I could, as a young man, preach with integrity and authenticity about growing older and about old age.

Bob Hill encouraged me to proceed, and I finally decided that I could at least tell people what the Bible said about on this subject. So that's what I did. I looked up all the verses in the Bible on this subject about growing older, "I can't speak from much experience on this, but I can at least tell you what the Bible says." I was amazed at how much the Bible spoke to this issue. I ended up with ten pages of pure Bible verses.

I'm not going to read all ten pages, but may I just remind you of a few of the verses I used in that sermon series that I preached in 1994, eleven years ago:

- Ruth 4:15: He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.
- Job 12:12: Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not life bring understanding?
- Psalm 71:9: Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, until I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.
- Psalm 94:12ff: The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; He is my Rock."
- Isaiah 46:3ff: Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain in the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.
- 2 Corinthians 4:16: Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.... So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen.
- Psalm 23:6: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

A friend of mine in Phoenix sent me an e-mail last week with the words of the song "Jesus Loves Me," only it was a senior's version.

Jesus loves me, this I know,

Though my hair is white as snow.

Though my sight is growing dim,

Still He bids me trust in Him.

Though my steps are, oh so slow,

With my hand in His I'll go.

On through life, let come what may,

He'll be there to lead the way.

When the nights are dark and long,

In my heart He puts a song.

Telling me in words so clear,

"Have no fear, for I am near."

When my work on earth is done

And life's victories have been won.

He will take me home above,

To learn the fullness of His love.

Chorus:

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me

The Bible tells me so.

Well, the Bible tells us a lot of things, and many of its great truths are found in the book of Proverbs. As I've worked my way again through this wonderful book in preparation for this sermon series, there's one thing I realized that I had never realized before—and that is how prominently Jesus is featured in this book. It's all about Jesus. Proverbs is a highly Messianic book—not in terms of prophecy but in terms of portrait. It paints a rich and beautiful picture of a man who is wise beyond all reckoning, who possesses all the wisdom of God Himself.

And that man is Christ in whom is found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. As we become like Christ, we become wiser in life, and as we become wiser in life we learn to face forward, looking to the future with optimism and joy, looking ever unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

For the path of the just is like the shining sun,

That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.

HOW SCRIPTURE MEMORY CAN MAINTAIN YOUR MENTAL EQUILIBRIUM Proverbs 23:7KJV

For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. Proverbs 23:7KJV

He's been called a "literary mystery man." Little is known about him, and his writing career was as fleeting as an arrow shooting through the sky. He never achieved fame or fortune, and he died at age forty-eight. He wrote nineteen or twenty books without saying much about himself in any of them; and none of them sold particularly well in his lifetime. Yet one tiny volume—his second book and one with which he himself was unhappy—has since sold millions of copies and influenced millions of lives.

He was James Allen, born in 1864 in an idyllic part of central England; but Allen's childhood was not so idyllic. His father, grappling with a failing business and near bankruptcy, traveled to America, searching for a new job. Instead, he was waylaid, robbed, and murdered. Back in England, the financial crisis forced young James to drop out of school at age fifteen and get a job. He became a personal assistant in the world of British manufacturers, and he worked at that profession until 1902, when, at age 38, he just quit and walked away.

James Allen and his wife moved to the little coastal town of Ilfracombe, one of the loveliest spots in all England, and he lived there for about ten years before dying at age 48. He kept a strict routine. Each morning, James would get up before dawn and hike to the top of the nearby hillside and spend an hour in meditation. Then he would return to his house and devote the morning to writing. The afternoons, he devoted to his gardens and hobbies.

To the best of my knowledge, he was not a Christian; or, if he was, it was a rather liberal Christianity. But one little book was based on a Bible verse from the book of Proverbs, and that little book has cast a long shadow. It almost single-handedly gave rise to the self-improvement and positive thinking movement of the past 100 years, and was a great inspiration for men like Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, =Earl Nightingale, Robert Schuler, and others.

It's entitled *As a Man Thinketh*, and it is based on Proverbs 23:7: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (KJV).

The point of the little book, *As a Man Thinketh*, is quite simple: Our thoughts are the most important thing about us. All that we achieve or fail to achieve is the direct results of our thoughts. Our thoughts are like seeds that produce crops. Allen wrote:

Good thoughts and actions can never produce bad results; bad thoughts and actions can never produce good results. This is but saying that nothing can come from corn but corn, nothing from nettles but nettles. Men understand this law in the natural world, and work with it; but few understand it in the mental and moral world (though its operation there is just as simple and undeviating). (James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002), p. 22.)

Allen's point is that we are what we think, and our lives run in the direction of our thoughts. If we think successful thoughts, we'll be successful; if we think angry thoughts, we'll be angry; if we think positive thoughts, we'll be positive; if we think negative thoughts,

we'll be negative. The mind is a garden, and we have to cultivate it, and we are responsible for the kind of seed we sow into the furrows of our mind. To quote Allen again:

A (person's) mind may be likened to a garden, which may be intelligently cultivated or allowed to run wild; but whether cultivated or neglected, it must, and will, bring forth. If no useful seeds are put into it, then an abundance of useless seeds will fall therein, and will continue to produce their kind. (James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002), p. 11.)

Sports Visualization

There's no doubt that athletes have discovered the power of mental visualization. One of the books that I've read on this subject is *The Mental Edge: Maximize Your Sports Potential with the Mind-Body Connection*, written by Kenneth Baum with Richard Trubo. In this book, Baum tells the story of an amateur triathlete named Tom Skultitley who made up his mind that he wanted to compete in the triathlon in Hawaii. The triathlon is one of the most mind-boggling events in sports—you have to run a marathon, which is over 26 miles, swim over two miles, and bicycle over 100 miles—all the time competing with others who are trying to beat you.

Well, Tom wasn't a professional athlete, but he made up his mind that he wanted to compete in the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii and to come in among the top ten and to cross the finish line in less than ten hours.

He set up a grueling training regimen, of course, and got his body into shape. But he also practiced sports visualization. Day after day he pictured himself swimming and cycling and running. He visualized every moment of the race. He could feel the water sliding across his body in the Pacific, he could feel the pain in his muscles, he could see the tires of his bicycle flying over the pavement, he could sense the perspiration covering his body, he visualized the magnificent Hawaiian scenery, he felt his wife's embrace as he crossed the finish line.

According to *The Mental Edge*, in the week before the race, Tom visualized for four hours a day. In his mind, he foresaw every detail of the competition. And when the day came and he competed in the Ironman competition, he didn't wear a wristwatch, but he crossed the finish line in 9 hours, 59 minutes, and 37 seconds. He beat his ten-hour goal by 23 seconds. And he finished ninth in the race, which was the highest ranking for any amateur. (Kenneth Baum with Richard Trubo, *The Mental Edge: Maximize Your Sports Potential with the Mind-Body Connection* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1999), 85-87.)

As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.

Bible Visualization

I'm no advocate of the shallowness of mere positive thinking, and I know that many motivational books have been written without a solid scriptural basis; but James Allen is correct about the importance of planting the right seeds of thought into the furrows of the mind. The Bible says the same thing, as Allen himself admitted in the very title of his book. As a person thinks in his heart, so he is. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 22:37, we must love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds.

- Isaiah 26:3 says, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You" (emphasis mine here and in the following verses).
- Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.
- Ephesians 4:23 says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind."
- Philippians 2:5 commands us, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."
- Colossians 3:2 says, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."
- Romans 8:5-6 says: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace."
- The apostle Paul wrote, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).
- And the apostle Peter struck the same note: "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13).

One of the ways we do this is by planting God's Word in our hearts. Colossians 3:16 tells us to let the Word of God dwell in us richly; and in the Old Testament, the Lord promised, "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

Listen to this translation of Deuteronomy 6:4-6: "Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God

with all your heart, soul, and strength. Memorize His laws and tell them to your children over and over again" (CEV).

Deuteronomy 11:18 says, "Memorize these laws and think about them" (CEV). And Psalm 119:11 says, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."

Scripture memory, in other words, enables us to maintain our mental equilibrium and our spiritual vitality.

Spiritual Visualization

Scripture visualization in the mind becomes spiritual visualization for the soul. One night, for example, I was incredibly worried about someone. At length, I knew I had to get some sleep, for staying up all night wouldn't help the situation; and, in the end, it would leave me exhausted the next day when I needed fresh energy to deal with it. I couldn't relax in bed, but I thought I might be able to rest on the sofa if only I could corral my runaway thoughts. But my mind wouldn't cooperate, imagining the worst and visualizing every terrible scenario. Finally I decided to manhandle my thoughts and force them in a different direction. Tossing on the sofa, I began repeating the Twenty-Third Psalm, which I had memorized many years before:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me....

When I got to the end, I started again from the beginning. My mind began to visualize those green pastures, to see and sense the Good Shepherd, to know His presence in the dark valley, to claim His promises of goodness and mercy.

As my mind relaxed, so did my body; and I was able to sleep. Later I thought to myself—what if I had never known Psalm 23? What if someone had not led me to memorize Psalm 23 when I was in the second grade? What would I have done? Where would I have turned?

Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania is perhaps the world's foremost expert on optimism and motivation. In his groundbreaking book, *Learned Optimism*, he suggests that depression is primarily the result of wrong thinking. He writes, "Depression... is caused by conscious negative thoughts. There is no deep underlying disorder to be rooted out: not unresolved childhood conflicts, not our unconscious anger, and not even our brain chemistry. Emotion comes directly from what we think: Think 'I am in danger' and you feel anxiety. Think 'I am being trespassed against' and you feel anger. Think 'Loss' and you feel sadness.... If we change these habits of thought, we will cure depression." (Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), pp. 74-75.)

Scripture memory is our most powerful tool in changing our habits of thought, and the internalized truths of God's Word keep us mentally healthy. It's the greatest secret I know to personal resiliency. It molds our thoughts, and our thoughts shape our lives; for as we think in our hearts, so we are.

If our thoughts are the most important thing about us, and if the Holy Scriptures are the very thoughts of God Himself, then Bible verses represent the most healing, clarifying, bolstering, uplifting data we can insert into our brains. The power of Scripture is unlike anything else on earth. It's a force to be reckoned with, containing intrinsic power, high enough to give us insight, deep enough to give us peace, wide enough to mold our personalities, and strong enough to bear us through horrendous days.

By internalizing Bible verses, we are mainstreaming God's thoughts into our conscious, subconscious, and unconscious minds.

Life-Changing Visualization

One night several years ago I sat up into the wee hours, engrossed in a book I'd picked up at a yard sale. In *The Presence of Mine Enemies* was the memoirs of Vietnam POW, Howard Rutledge, who was shot down over North Vietnam on November 28, 1965. When his plane was hit, Howard bailed out, but he descended into thick mud near a large village and was soon surrounded by a crowd welding knives, machetes, and sticks. Forming a ring around him, the townspeople blocked his escape and descended on him, pounding him with blows, stripping off his clothing, and dragging him into their little jail, half dead. Shortly thereafter, he was transported to the infamous Hanoi Hilton where he was brutally interrogated and tortured.

Howard described how, in an initial set of tortures, his legs were forced into rough shackles, with his arms hog-tied in an excruciating position. He was deprived of clothing, food, and sleep, and forced to lie on a cold slab in a mucky cell. The walls, floors, and ceilings were caked with filth, and a large rat shared his space.

Until his incarceration, Howard had felt little concern for spiritual things; but now he desperately tried to recall snatches of Bible verses, hymns, or sermons he had heard in his childhood. Fortunately, as a youngster he had attended a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Sunday School there had stressed the importance of Scripture memory; and he racked his brain for every single verse he could recall. During the rare moments when he could communicate with other POWs, he found them seeking to do the

same.

“Everyone knew the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-Third Psalm,” he said, “but the camp favorite verse that everyone recalled first and quoted most often is found in the Book of John, third chapter, sixteenth verse: For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

With a friend’s help, Howard even managed to reconstruct verses 17 and 18.

Howard wrote, “How I struggled to recall those Scriptures and hymns! I had spent my first eighteen years in a Southern Baptist Sunday School, and I was amazed at how much I could recall; regrettably, I had not seen the importance of memorizing verses from the Bible.... Now, when I needed them, it was too late. I never dreamed that I would spend almost seven years (five of them in solitary confinement) in a prison in North Vietnam or that thinking about one memorized verse could have made a whole day bearable. One portion of a verse I did remember was, ‘Thy word have I hid in my heart.’ How often I wished I had really worked to hide God’s Word in my heart. I put my mind to work.”

In his memoirs, Howard described days and nights of tortures that made my skin crawl as I read about them; but he also testified of being able, as time progressed, to recall more and more Bible verses from the recesses of his mind. His recollection wasn’t word perfect, but he was amazed at how many phrases and sentences from the Bible lay buried deep in his memory, waiting to be discovered.

Those Bible verses literally kept Howard Rutledge from losing his mind. They faced down death, rallied his spirits, steeled his nerves, and tapped into the deepest strength known in the universe. They beat back the torture, stifled the despair, subdued the terrors he felt, and maintained his sanity even when he was immobilized for days in a stifling hut, chained to a metal frame, lying in his own waste, and covered with ants, flies and biting insects.

Those verses, long ago learned by heart, proved more restorative than any tonic. They dispensed strength and were sufficient for the pain; and they bolstered his mind and his mood with the strongest thoughts of an omniscient God in the midst of humanity’s most sadistic ravings. They were the reason he came home alive.

“That first New Year’s Eve in Heartbreak Hotel,” he wrote, “I had resolved never to be without a Bible again. Those verses of God’s Word that I had memorized or that I had scrounged from other prisoners’ memories had been a living source of strength in my life.”

Conclusion: Memorization and Visualization

Most of us will never be POWs in a concentration camp, but all of us occasionally check into Heartbreak Hotel. Life is hard, full of anguishing moments and dangerous temptations. We need strong minds—brains that think clearly, emotions that remain calm and steady.

Bible verses, committed to memory and applied by the Holy Spirit, are the most powerful medications in the whole world. They’re a balm for sore hearts, an elixir for low spirits, an immunization for bad habits, a booster-shot of high spirits, a pick-me-up for dreary days, and a stimulant for positive nerves.

How many Bible verses could you reconstruct from your memory banks, if push came to shove? How about your children? Are they hiding away God’s word in their hearts, storing up the precious seeds of the Scriptures against the coming famine? Do your teenagers know the Bible verses they need to withstand the temptations they’ll face?

The Bible was written to be memorized. Take Psalm 25, for example. If you’ll turn there in your Bible and notice it, it has twenty-two verses. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters; so when we find a passage like this with 22 verses, it is probably an acrostic psalm. In the original Hebrew, verse 1 begins with the Hebrew equivalent of our letter A. Verse two, with the Hebrew equivalent of our letter B. And so forth.

Why is that important? It was a mnemonic, a device to aid in memorization. This Psalm was intended for memorization. Its message was so important that the writer wanted to make it easy to memorize.

The longest chapter in the Bible—Psalm 119—is actually composed of twenty-two segments arranged as an extended acrostic. The passage about the wise woman in Proverbs 31 likewise has 22 segments.

In other words, these were composed to be memorized.

I recall years ago, in the little mountain church I pastored after college, listening as an old woman took the entire Sunday School hour to quote from memory, word-for-word, all 176 verses of Psalm 119, which she had memorized in childhood. Those verses had nourished and fed her soul for all the decades between eight and eighty.

God expects us to hide His Word in our hearts. It's a biblical principle that we reap what we sow, and the seeds of Scripture create a healthy mental garden with foliage that reaches to heaven and fruits that nourish many on earth. They determine our success, mold our personalities, and establish our souls. They resource us for both time and eternity. Don't wait until tomorrow. Begin today, for what we pour into our minds makes us who and what we are. The seeds we sow bear a harvest; "for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

Six Habits of Highly Effective Dads

Pr 14:26; Pr 20:7; Pr 5:15; Pr 1:8; Pr 3:11-12; Pr 17:6

Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. The wrath of a king is like the roaring of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger sins against his own life. It is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can quarrel. The lazy man will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing. Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out. Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a faithful man? The righteous man walks in his integrity; his children are blessed after him (Proverbs 20:1-7)

Back in 1909, a woman named Sonora Dodd sat in church in Spokane, Washington, listening to a Mother's Day sermon. As she listened, she thought, not of her mother, but of her father who had been a Civil War veteran. His wife had died while giving birth to the couple's sixth child, and this man had raised all six children—including Sonora—by himself. He had been a highly effective dad who had genuinely loved his children and raised them well. As Sonora listened to this Mother's Day sermon, she decided there should be a similar day to honor fathers. She organized such a day in her church in Spokane for the Sunday nearest her dad's birthday, June 19. It was a movement waiting to happen, and we've been celebrating Father's Day ever since.

There will be 102 million Father's Day greeting cards sent out this year, and one in four will contain a message that is humorous. One of the most popular—I'm trying to warn some of you in advance; you might get this card—says: "You're such a great dad. You deserve a 21-gun salute! Would you settle for 10 belches, 7 knuckles cracking, and 4 armpit sounds?"

Well, dads put up with a lot, but today is a day for us to be serious for a few moments and really consider what the Bible has to say about the importance of godly fathering. According to the latest statistics in America:

- 43% of all children—nearly half—live without a father in the home.
- 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.
- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes.
- 85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes.
- 71% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes.
- 85% of youths in prison grew up in a fatherless home.

That doesn't mean your child is destined for problems if there isn't a father in your house. It just means that the Lord has more work to do. I could tell you stories of great men and women of God who grew up in fatherless homes. The Lord is able. But nevertheless I think we'll all agree it's hard to replace the presence of a godly man in the home.

One of the most practical books in the Bible is Proverbs, and there are 27 direct references to fathers in this book. Actually, there are many more. But the actual word "father" occurs 27 times. In essence, the book of Proverbs contains 31 chapters of advice from a father to his children. It is addressed by Solomon to his sons, so it is all about fathering. Today I'd like to show you some passages in the book of Proverbs that give us six habits of highly effective dads.

Godly Dads Fear the Lord

First, according to Proverbs 14:26, a godly father is one who fears the Lord: In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and his children will have a place of refuge.

The New International Version translates this verse: He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.

The new Peterson translation says: The Fear-of-God builds up confidence, and makes a world safe for your children.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? It conveys the idea of respect. When we fear the Lord, we recognize that He is the Supreme Allied Commander of the entire universe, that He is holy and pure, and that He is to be honored and obeyed.

Now, when you have a man who fears the Lord, it sets a different kind of tone in the home. There you will find a family who prays before meals because they recognize that all they have comes from the Lord. They will have bedtime prayers because they recognize the need for God's protection during the night. They will go to church on Sundays because they understand that God expects to be worshipped and adored. They will be cautious about the movies and television programs they watch because they understand that Jesus Christ is living with them in that home. They will trust the Lord during lean times because they know that their God is one who has promised to provide.

In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and his children will have a place of refuge.

Godly Dads Live Lives of Integrity

Second, godly fathers live a life of integrity. Proverbs 20:7 says: A righteous man walks in his integrity; his children are blessed after him.

And listen to Proverbs 3:33: The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the home of the just.

Some time ago I was speaking at a college in Ohio, and the man who led the students in worship before my message was Don Wyrzten. He's a well-known and very gifted Christian musician, but he is also well-known because his father was Jack Wyrzten, a powerful youth evangelist and the founder of a camping and youth ministry known as "Word of Life."

One day when Jack Wyrzten was holding a youth crusade in New York's Times Square, Don, just a boy at the time, decided he would ride the subway. Instead of buying a 15-cent token to get on the subway, he went underneath the turnstiles. Later that night in the car, he bragged to his dad how he had ridden all over New York City without paying for his subway token. Becoming very serious, his dad explained that was cheating. Don later wrote, "He had me write a letter to the New York City Port of Authority, apologize to them, and tape some change to a card to pay what I owed. That memory sticks out in my mind. Dad felt that being honest in little things was exceedingly important, and he wasn't going to let an opportunity to teach me this slip by. I have been grateful for his tough lessons since." (Don Wyrzten, "Caught Rather Than Taught," in *What My Parents Did Right*, compiled and edited by Gloria Gaither [Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1991], pp. 257-258.)

Devotional writer Henry G. Bosch once wrote in *Our Daily Bread* that when he was a boy he would often work with his father during the summer months. Leaving home each morning, they would stop at a particular store for a newspaper which they read at coffeebreak. One day, arriving at work, Henry's dad discovered that he had taken two papers by mistake because they were so thin. After a moment's thought, he decided to return to the store immediately to pay for the extra paper. "I don't want the owner, who isn't a Christian, to think I'm dishonest," said Mr. Bosch.

About a week later, some expensive items were shop-lifted from the same store. The police calculated that at the time of the robbery only two men had been shopping in the store--Mr. Bosch and another man. "I know John is honest," said the storekeeper. "Just last week he came all the way back here to return a newspaper he'd taken by mistake."

The police questioned the other man instead and, in so doing, apprehended the culprit who made a full confession.

"Father's honesty and Christian character...not only made a deep impression on the storekeeper," Henry later wrote, "but his actions also left an indelible mark upon my young and pliable mind."

Godly Dads Remain True to Their Wives

Third, a godly man remains true to his wife. Many years ago, I remember reading a statement that made a great impact on me. It said, "The greatest thing a man can do for his for his children is to love his wife."

I want to read you a passage in Proverbs that I've never read before on a Sunday morning, because it is a little plainer that I normally like to be. But it's in the Bible, and so I'm going to read it. I don't know of any passage that is more important for a healthy home than this one—Proverbs 5:15ff. This is written by a father to his married son, warning him against unfaithfulness: Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?

Notice that phrase—Always be enraptured by her love. Men are here commanded to always be enraptured, to always be in love, with their wives. That doesn't happen automatically. It happens as we choose to remain committed to one another for the long haul,

and nothing is more important for your children than that.

A similar passage is Proverbs 31. We usually think of this as the pen-portrait of the ideal woman, but it also says something about the woman's husband. He loves her. He affirms her verbally. He trusts her. Look at verse 10: Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her.

And verse 28: Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.

What does he say to her? How does he affirm her? His words are recorded in verse 29: "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all."

Godly dads remain faithful to their wives and work on their marriages every day.

Godly Dads Teach Their Children the Way of the Lord

Fourth, godly dads teach their children the way of the Lord. This is the great theme of Proverbs, and this runs all the way through the book. Look at the way the main body of the book begins in Proverbs 1:8: My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be a graceful ornament on your head and chains about your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent....

Proverbs 4:1ff: Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding; for I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law. When I was my father's son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, He also taught me, and said to me, "Let your heart retain my words; Keep my commands, and live. Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth."

There are several ways of doing that, of course. The most basic way is to do what we're told to do in Deuteronomy 6, in the passage I often quote when we dedicate children to the Lord. Share with your kids those verses the Lord gives you, when you lay down and when you rise up, when you sit at home and when you walk along the way.

I remember once how intrigued my father was with a particular verse in Proverbs 16, and he showed it to me. On another occasion, it was a verse in the prophet Micah that captured his attention, and he shared it with me. I remember those occasions.

I think we can also share a lot of God's truth with our children by reading to them while they're younger. Some of my favorite memories as a dad was reading to my children when they were younger. We'd tuck them into bed, and then I'd read a chapter or two of a book to them to help them go to sleep. And many of the old novels—the ones that Walt Disney made into classic motion pictures—were actually originally Christian novels, written by Christians and containing tremendous Christian truth.

If you have children who are older preschoolers, kindergarten, or elementary age, don't miss this window of opportunity. Read Johanna Spyri's two volumes of Heidi. You'll be amazed at the clear Christian story that book delivers. The same is true for Eleanor Porter's original Pollyanna, and the novel Swiss Family Robinson and Robinson Crusoe. We read all the way through the six delightful volumes of The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis.

The last thing I would say about teaching your children is the need to start early. Many times I have given tribute to my dear mother. She was without equal as a woman and as a mother. But on a couple of occasions, she did me a bit of a disservice. Once, when I was very small and sitting on her lap, she said something to me that was not so very wise. She shuddered a little, and said, "Oh, Robert, I hope you never have to go into the army or to be in a war."

Now, she had just come through World War II, and in a very personal way that I'll not relate, it had changed her life and created for her a great confusion. She was still scarred by that experience, but her words that day put it into my child's mind that whatever I did, I should avoid military service.

I regret that now, and I have very frequently suffered feelings of guilt over the fact that while my friends were shipping off to Vietnam, I was staying at home, going to school on student deferments. I feel I missed something important by not serving time in the military.

Now, what I'm saying is that what we tell our children, whether good or bad, while they're young enough to sit on our laps stays with them all their lives. As a dad, I think I let some important opportunities pass because I didn't realize I should talk to my children about some things while they were younger. I thought I should wait until they were teenagers before I talked to them about some things, and now I realize that I should have talked to them while they were younger, still sitting on my lap.

Proverbs 22:6: Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

Godly Dads Correct Their Children When Necessary

Fifth, godly dads correct their children when necessary. Proverbs 3:11-12 says: My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord,

nor detest His correction: for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.

Proverbs 13:24 says: He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.

Proverbs 29:17 says: Correct your son, and he will give you rest; Yes, he will give delight to your soul.

Godly Dads Make Their Children Proud of Them

Finally, godly dads make their children proud of them. Proverbs 17:6: Children's children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children is their father.

I'd like to read you something about fathers written by a man named William Franklin: "If he's wealthy and prominent, and you stand in awe of him, call him 'father.' If he sits in shirt sleeves and suspenders at a ballgame and picnic, call him 'Pop.' If he wheels the baby carriage and carries bundles meekly, call him 'Papa' (with the accent on the first syllable). If he belongs to a literary circle and writes cultured papers, call him 'Papa' (with the accent on the last syllable). If, however, he makes a pal of you when you're good, and is too wise to let you pull the wool over his loving eyes when you're not; if, moreover, you're quite sure no other fellow you know has quite so fine a father, you may call him 'Dad.'"

Earlier I read you one of this year's most popular messages of a Father's Day card. Well, here's another: "Dear Dad, You have always been there, in my corner no matter what. When I felt confused, you were there to help me find direction. When I felt like giving up, you were there to encourage. When I had to make hard decisions, you were there to help me find strength. When I told you my hopes and dreams, you were there to help me reach out for them. And when good things happened, you were there with cheers and applause."

None of us are perfect dads or moms, and none of us are going to raise perfect children. But our society is in deep trouble today, and much of the blame is due to the lack of godly fathering in our homes. Today, I'd like to invite you to get a new beginning, wherever you are in life, by committing yourself to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you aren't the dad you need to be, but Christ can help you. Perhaps you don't have the kind of dad you need, but Christ can step in and help you. Perhaps you have bitter memories of your own father, perhaps he wasn't the kind of dad he should have been, but Christ can help you. He can bring forgiveness and healing.

Perhaps you're a boy or girl, a teenager, a dad or mom, a single, a husband or wife, a grandparent. If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Savior, whatever your need, He can help you. He can bring you to joy and victory in life.

Six Promises

2Chr 31:10; Pr 3:9-10; Pr 11:24-25; Mal 3:10; Lk 6:38; 2Cor 9:6-8

Suppose I were a farmer who, in the course of the year, harvested fifty pounds of corn. What should I do with it? Well, I could take some of it to the mill and have it ground up so we could have cornbread. Some of it could be cooked or canned for food. Some of it would go for the livestock, to keep our horses and cows alive. But if I were I wise farmer, before I did any of that I would take out the first five or ten pounds and set it aside as seed corn for next year's planting. Otherwise, I'd feast well this year only to starve to death next year.

The Bible teaches that the law of sowing and reaping is a law that is equally valid in the spiritual world as in the natural world, and several times the Bible applies it to the giving of our tithes and offerings.

When we talk about our tithes, we are talking about giving to the Lord and to his church the first ten percent of our income, whatever its source. The word "tithe" comes from the word for "tenth." It is a pattern among God's people going all the way back to the Patriarchs. Genesis 14 says that Abraham gave the priest Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

The word "offering" is typically understood to be any amount above that initial ten percent that you feel led to give to the Lord's work, to the church, and to the worldwide cause of the Gospel. We feel that we have a certain obligation to give to the Lord our tithes, but we want to give him more, we want to give him our offerings.

When we do so, it is akin to setting aside the first part of the harvest in order to insure future blessings and future sufficiency. Where do we read this in the Bible? In my message today, I'd like to show you six different passages which contain promises for those who are generous in their giving.

2 Chronicles 31:10

In 2 Chronicles 31, King Hezekiah found the work of God badly under-funded. The temple was in disrepair, and the nation had sunk into idolatry. But the king set out to promote a revival throughout his realm. Verse 3ff says:

The king contributed from his own possessions for the morning and evening burnt offerings and for the burnt offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moons and appointed feasts as written in the Law of the Lord. He ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the Lord. As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything. The men of Israel and Judah who lived in the towns of Judah also brought a tithe of their herds and flocks and a tithe of the holy things dedicated to the Lord their God, and they piled them in heaps. They began doing this in the third month and finished in the seventh month. When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps, they praised the Lord and blessed his people Israel.

Verse 9 says that when Hezekiah came and saw the abundance that had been released for the Lord's work he was amazed. He could hardly believe there were such revenues in all Israel, and he asked where in the world such provisions had come from. In verse 10, the chief priest Azariah answered: Since the people began to bring their contributions to the temple of the Lord, we have had enough to eat and plenty to spare, because the Lord has blessed his people and this great amount is left over.

When the people began bringing their contributions to the temple, the Lord began blessing them with abundance.

Proverbs 3:9-10

In Proverbs 3:9-10, this principle of giving-followed-by-the-blessing (sowing-followed-by-reaping) is stated like this—Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.

We would say, "Honor the Lord with your money, with the first part of all your income." And the harvest promise follows in verse 10: Then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Proverbs 11:24-25

A few chapters over, there is a similar passage, Proverbs 11:24-25—One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

Do you see the sowing/reaping concept here? John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, once wrote a little couplet that went like this:

There was a man

Some call him mad;

The more he gave

The more he had.

Malachi 3:10

The last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, also brings up the sowing/reaping aspect of our tithes and offerings as we read these words: "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty.

A couple of years ago, Katrina and I went to London for our 20th wedding anniversary, dearly hoping to attend Sunday morning services at Westminster Chapel where G. Campbell Morgan and Martin Lloyd-Jones had pastored. We started out bright and early, but were frustrated by the fact that portions of the subway were being repaired and we finally had to give up the whole thing.

I had hoped to hear the likes of R. T. Kendall who has served there as minister. I didn't get to hear Kendall that day but I can read his books. And his book on tithing is one of the best I've ever read. In it he tells how he himself first learned to tithe. Shortly after he and his wife were married they found themselves hopelessly in debt. Tithing seemed utterly impossible to them. Some of the bills could not be helped, and others were the consequence of imprudence. Kendall was engaged in secular work at the time, and one day he came home very, very discouraged. He fell on his knees in a sense of desperation, hoping that God would give him a ray of light that would help him through. There on the dining room table lay the large, white Bible his grandmother had given to him. He picked it up and opened it at random. Instantly his eyes fell on these words: "Will a man rob God?"

He didn't like what he found one bit, so he closed his Bible and sat down to watch the television (which he still owed for). But he was perfectly miserable. He knew that God wanted him to begin tithing, but he postponed it for a while longer; and in the meantime things went from bad to worse. "Although my wife and I were both working it seemed that paying our bills was like dipping a cup into the ocean of debt."

Then one day they made a turn. They took 10 percent of their income right off the top, making tithing the number one priority. He paid their bills with the remaining 90 percent.

"We were not out of debt in weeks but we were completely out of debt in less than two years, and those days became the happiest we have known."

Luke 6:38

Now let's turn to the New Testament, and we see the Lord Jesus himself picking up this same sowing/reaping theme, in Luke 6:38: Give, and it will be given you. A good measure, pressed down, shaking together, and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Some people say, "Well, I know that I should be giving and tithing, but this isn't a good time for me to begin." Well, recently I read the book *Tortured for Christ* by Richard Wurmbrand. For many years he was in and out of miserable Communist prisons because his faith in Christ. He was often tortured, and on some occasions he nearly starved to death. But the principle of tithing was so internalized in his heart that when he was given one slice of bread a week and dirty soup every day, he faithfully tithed from it. Every tenth day he gave his soup to a weaker brother, and every tenth week he took his slice of bread and gave it to one of his fellow prisoners in Jesus' name.

We have to begin where we are in the matter of tithes and offerings. After all, it is when we are in the greatest straits that we most need sow our seed corn the coming harvest. To put it differently, someone once said, "Give God what is right—not what is left."

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

The final passage on this theme that I'd like to show you is from the book of 2 Corinthians. Paul devoted two chapters, chapter 8 and 9, in this book to the whole subject of Christian giving and stewardship. These chapters contain some of the most powerful thoughts in the Bible regarding the giving of our tithes and offerings to the Lord. Right in the middle of it he brings up this same theme—sowing and reaping—and he applies it to giving.

/Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

This morning some of you brushed your teeth with Colgate Toothpaste. The Colgate-Palmolive Company is one of the oldest in America, going back nearly 200 years. It was started by a young man named William Colgate. He left home at 16 years of age to seek his fortune, and everything that he owned in this world was tied in a bundle that he carried in his hand. But as he walked along on his way to the city, he met an old neighbor, the captain of a canal boat, and the words the old man spoke to him on that day stayed with him his entire life.

"Well, William, where are you going?" asked the canal boat captain.

"I don't know. Father is too poor to keep me at home any longer, and says I must make a living for myself now." William went on to say that he had no skills; that he didn't know how to do anything except make soap and candles.

"Well," said the old man, "let me pray with you and give you a little advice."

There in the pathway, the two of them—a teenager and an old man—knelt down and the man prayed earnestly for William. Then, rising up, the boat captain said this: "Someone will soon be the leading soap maker in New York. It can be you as well as anyone. I hope it may. Be a good man; give your heart to Christ; give the Lord all that belongs of Him of every dollar you earn; make an honest soap; give a full pound; and I am certain you will yet be a prosperous and rich man."

When William arrived in New York, he had trouble finding a job, but he followed the old man's advice. He dedicated himself to Christ, joined a church, began worshipping there, and the first thing he did with the first dollar he earned was to give ten percent of it to the Lord's work. From that point on, he considered ten cents of every dollar as sacred to the Lord. In fact, he soon began giving 20 percent of his income to the Lord, then he raised it to 30 percent, then to 40 percent, then to 50 percent. And late in his life, he had become so successful that he devoted the whole of his yearly income—100 percent of it—to the Lord.

And even today, this very morning nearly 200 years later, some of you brushed your teeth or washed your faces with products from that young man's factory.

Why don't all of us tithe? With all of these promises in the Bible, why aren't we all tithing? Whatever would keep us from beginning today? Think of it as the firstfruits, the seed-corn, the basis of future blessing, even as the Bible says:

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops. Then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Eight Ways To Make Wise Decisions

Acts 19:21; Acts 20:2-3; Acts 20:16; Acts 21:25

Proverbs

Today we're continuing our series of messages entitled Trade Secrets of Successful People, and our topic today is Eight Ways to Make Wise Decisions. I'd like to begin by showing you a series of verses in Acts 19, 20, and 21:

After all this happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia--Acts 19:21

He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia--Acts 20:2-3

Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia...--Acts 20:16

As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision...--Acts 21:25

The apostle Paul traveled an appointed way; the Lord being his Guide and Guardian. Yet Paul himself was continually called upon to make decisions. He found that he had important and difficult choices to make almost constantly, sometimes life or death decisions, about the nature of his ministry, the content of his messages, and the directions of his travels.

And so it is with us. If we know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, if we abide in His will, we travel an appointed way. He is our Guide and Guardian. Yet we still have many decisions to make. Some of them are simple decisions of little long-term consequence, like:

- Where to go for lunch
- How to spend the evening
- Whether or not to make a small purchase
- Where to go on vacation

But often we face more difficult decisions:

- Whether or not to go to college, and if so where
- What vocation to enter? What kind of job to seek
- Whether to make a major purchase
- Whether or not to take out a loan or to mortgage our house
- Whether to put our children in a public school, a private school or a home school
- How to invest our savings?

Sometimes we confront anguishing decisions:

- Whether or not to have surgery or to submit to a difficult medical treatment
- Whether or not to take a loved one off of life support systems

Life is made up of thousands of decisions, both small and large; and in the end those decisions and the way we make them form our character, determine our path, and shape our destiny.

How, then, do we make wise decisions? I'd like to give you eight suggestions.

Aim for maturity in Christ

The first suggestion is to aim for maturity in Christ. Make up your mind you're going to be a growing Christian, growing in the Word of God, growing in daily obedience, and serious about the importance of your Christian faith.

Although this message is entitled Eight Ways To Make Wise Decisions, the fact is that there is only one way to make mature decisions, and that is to be a mature person. Mature people generally make wise decisions while immature people tend to make immature decisions.

The apostle Paul began his letter to the Christians in Philippi with a most interesting prayer, saying: And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best....

Let me show you a negative example in Scripture. After King David died, his son Solomon reigned for forty years over Israel and was renowned for his wisdom in making wise decisions. After Solomon died, the throne passed to his son Rehoboam. But Rehoboam was immature, and his first decision was a disaster. In one ill-considered decision he destroyed the kingdom his father and grandfather had so painstakingly tried to preserve and protect. The story is told in 1 Kings 12:

Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all the Israelites had gone there to make him king... and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you."

In other words, they politely complained that while the reign of Solomon was golden and very great, it was a difficult time for the general population. The laws were harsh and the taxes were high. The people asked Rehoboam to lighten up. Rehoboam reacted wisely at first, asking for time to think it over and to consult his advisors. Verse 5 says:

Rehoboam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away. Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them, "What is your advice?"

They were feeling the oats, swept away by their newly found power as the advisors of the new king, and they suggested that Rehoboam establish his authority early by saying something to this effect: "If you think my father was demanding, just wait till you see what I expect. Under my reign, the laws will become harsher and the taxes higher."

His stern answer resulted in the ten northern tribes, ten of the twelve tribes, breaking away and forming their own nation. And Rehoboam was left with only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah to rule. He was left with only one-sixth of his kingdom because of one bad decision. And why did he make it? He was immature and foolish, and he listened to his equally immature buddies instead of thinking through the advice of the older and more seasoned statesmen.

So as we make the best decisions we can from day-to-day we do so knowing that with the passing of time we should be growing wiser, and our decisions should become better. We learn from our mistakes. We grow in the Lord. And forgetting what is behind, we press on toward the goal of full maturity in Christ.

Get all the information you can

Second, at whatever level of maturity we are at, we should begin the decision-making process by assembling all the information we can in the area of our decision. Listen to these verses from Proverbs:

Proverbs 13:16 says, Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool exposes his folly.

Proverbs 18:13 says, What a shame—yes, how stupid! —to decide before knowing the facts (LB).

Proverbs 18:15 says, The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.

I served for twelve years on our denomination's board of retirement and insurance, and I learned that at the point of retirement, a person has to make a decision about what to do with their accumulated retirement funds. There are several settlement options. They

can withdraw it all at once in a lump-sum settlement. They can draw it out over a period of years. They can roll it over into some other type of retirement or savings vehicle. They can choose single or joint life annuities. And these are very important issues, and quite complex. A person needs to sit down and study it out very carefully, reading everything he can, talking to people who understand these things, asking questions and accumulating information. Only with good information can a person make a wise decision. Many of the bad decisions I've made though the years have been made because I haven't taken the time to study out a matter carefully enough and collect the data and information I needed.

Pray

Third, as we gather facts and accumulate information, we need to approach the decision-making process very prayerfully.

According to Luke 6, Jesus spent the entire night in prayer before choosing his disciples. According to James 1, if any of us needs wisdom in the making of particular decisions or the handling of particular situations, we should ask God, who gives us wisdom liberally.

But we often get into trouble when we make decisions unilaterally without consulting God in prayer. A good example of that in the Bible is the story found in Joshua, chapter 9. As Joshua and the children of Israel extended their conquest of the Promised Land, there was a particular tribe of people called the Gibeonites who mounted a deception. Although they lived just around the mountain, they sent a delegation to Joshua and pretended to be from a far away country. They took moldy bread with them, and their wineskins were cracked, their clothes ragged, as though they had traveled for many days. They wanted to trick the Israelites into making a peace treaty with them. Joshua 9:14 says that the leaders of Israel investigated their appearance, but did not inquire of the Lord.

But the men of Israel sampled their provisions, but did not inquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them....

Joshua's failure to pray before making the decision led to Israel's being caught in an unhealthy and unholy alliance with a Canaanite tribe which was a thorn in Israel's side for the next 400 years. We see a similar situation in 1 Chronicles. King David wanted to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, but he went about it the wrong way, resulting in a man's death. A few chapters later, he tries again. This time he goes about it properly. 1 Chronicles 15:13 says, "...the first time, the Lord our God broke out against us because we did not consult him about the proper order" (NKJV).

We should not make decisions without consulting the Lord about them. For the Christian, prayer is a key ingredient in the decision-making process.

Seek advice from parents and/or spouse

Proverbs 1:8-9 says, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck."

I would not make any major decision in my life right now without asking my mother for her advice, because she knows me as well as anyone, and her advice would be based on years of maturity and experience. Very often when facing a decision I think to myself, "Now if my dad were still alive, what would he say about this? What would be his opinion?"

I've also learned that if I'm about to make a mistake, Katrina knows it before I do. It is almost always dangerous to make a decision against the counsel of your spouse. So we need to pay particular attention to what these people think who are closest to us.

Seek advice from wise people with knowledge in the areas affected

Fifth, we must also seek advice from those people who have more knowledge than we do in the areas affected by the decision. Listen to these verses from the book of Proverbs:

- Proverbs 11:14: For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.
- Proverbs 12:15: The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.
- Proverbs 13:10: Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.
- Proverbs 15:22: Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.
- Proverbs 19:20: Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.
- Proverbs 20:18: Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.
- Proverbs 24:6: For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisors.

But we also need to be cautious about whose advice we listen to. As we've already seen, Rehoboam heeded the advice of his buddies, having rejected the advice of the older men. The sound of a multitude of voices is sometimes wrong. Look at what happened in Acts 27. Paul was aboard a ship, being taken as a prisoner for trial in Rome. But the weather was stormy, and the boat was in jeopardy.

Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to the ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on...

But the majority was wrong, and the trip ended in disaster. The centurion listened to the pilot instead of to the preacher, and like Rehoboam he took the wrong advice. We need to seek out the advice of gifted, godly men and women, who are seasoned, wise, shrewd as serpents but harmless as doves, who understand the ways of the Lord and who also understand the times.

Make a list

Sixth, it often helps to make a pro-and-con list. This is a very old system, and it works quite well. I recently read the biography of a man named Jabez Bunting, who lived two centuries ago. When he was 19, he struggled with life-changing decision, namely his vocation--whether or not to enter the ministry. He took a piece of paper, drew a line down the center (at least figuratively speaking), and set forth the arguments for and against, saying:

Pro:

1. The want of labourers, especially such as are intelligent and well-informed.
2. The general duty of using every talent that God has imparted.
3. The deep-rooted and long-continued conviction that I am called to this work.
4. The opinion of those Christian friends whom I have consulted.

Contra:

1. My own deficiency in point of knowledge
2. My want of time for religious study
3. My youth and inexperience
4. My unfaithfulness to God's grace and my littleness of faith and love
5. My rare opportunities of exercising

The "Pros" won, and on August 12, 1798, Jabez preached his first sermon in a cottage in a village called Sodom. His text was John 14:1. He grew to be a powerful leader of the early Methodist movement and the successor to John Wesley.

Many times when people have come to me seeking advice about a major decision, I'll take a sheet of paper, draw a line down the middle, and help them analyze the pros and cons. Very often, as they thus analyze the situation on paper, it becomes clear to them what they should do.

Take your time to think through the decision

And then we need to take time to ponder our decision, thinking through the consequences and mulling over the ramifications of the various alternatives.

Jesus once described a man who started a house but was not able to finish it, because he had not really counted the cost in advance. He described a king who went to war without sitting down first to see if he had sufficient manpower and artillery to win it.

Proverbs 14:8 says, "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways."

Proverbs 14:15 says, "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps."

Proverbs 13:16 in "A wise man thinks ahead; a fool doesn't" (LB).

Proverbs 21: 29 says, "A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thoughts to his ways."

Proverbs 19:2: It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way

Or, as Peter Drucker puts it, effective executives are "not overly impressed by speed in decision-making."

Ted Engstrom wrote in his book on leadership: "Don't make snap decisions. The spur-of-the-moment decisions are merely guesses unless they are backed up by adequate pressure.... Before announcing a decision, it's best to take a little time, sleep on it first. God may have other plans."

Commit decision to the Lord

Finally, having followed these steps and having prayerfully made the best decision you can, commit it to the Lord. Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed."

Several years ago, I participated in a political briefing for religious leaders in Washington. Among the men we met with was Jennings Randolph, who just died last year at the age of 96. At the time we met with him, Jennings Randolph was the senior senator from West Virginia, having first been elected to Congress in 1933. He was the only remaining member of the Senate or House of Representatives who had been elected in the great landslide that swept Franklin D. Roosevelt into office during the Great Depression.

We had many questions for Senator Randolph, and during the course of our visit he told us this story. He said that just after the election, he was called to the White House. There, in the president's private quarters, sat FDR. The lights were low, and a fire was roaring in the fireplace. About a dozen or so leaders of the congress had come at FDR's request. Jennings Randolph couldn't believe he had been included, as young and unknown and inexperienced as he was. But Roosevelt had his eye on Jennings Randolph.

The young congressman didn't say much that night. He just sat there in awe as Franklin Roosevelt began to speak. Roosevelt told the congressional leaders what he had in mind, and how quickly he wanted to move during the first 100 days of his administration.

He said he intended to declare a bank holiday, which was a positive-sounding phrase that really meant closing all the nation's bank indefinitely until bankers and the government could regain control of the situation. He wanted to send Congress a record number of bills quickly and furiously, including the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

He went on and on, speaking confidently, but in such low tones that Randolph had to strain to hear him. But when FDR was finished, Randolph said, the group was stunned and speechless until one of the senators said, "Mr. President, if we move that quickly aren't you afraid we'll make mistakes?"

Roosevelt looked at the man and said, "Senator, if we don't move that quickly, we will soon find that we no longer have the opportunity even of making mistakes."

At that critical moment in history, America needed a man who knew how to make decisions. And at this critical moment in history, the Lord needs men and women who know how to make wise, godly decisions; who are growing more mature day by day; who know how to gather the facts and pray over them; who seek good advice from parents, spouses, and from knowledgeable men and women; who can analyze the positives and negatives of a situation, thinking through the best options, seeing the future ramifications; and who can then commit their decision to the Lord and press on.

And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem he has only to ask God--who gives generously to all men without making them feel foolish or guilty--and he may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given him (James 1:5, Phillips).

Companionship: How To Turn Your Bedfellow Into Your Best Friend Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs

If you're having turbulence in your marriage, you aren't alone. Building a good friendship within marriage is difficult, and some of the finest Christians in history have had problems with it. Take for example, the great evangelist, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement and one of the most powerful preachers of all time. Wesley was small in size, but well-built and handsome and charming. For some reason, he habitually fell in love with nurses. At age 33 he met Sophy Hopkey, and she began making daily visits to his cottage for prayer and French lessons. When he became sick, Sophy nursed him, and he fell in love with her. "Her words," he wrote, "her eyes, her air, her every motion and gesture, were full of such a softness! I know not what might have been the consequence had

I then but touched her hand. And how I avoided it, I know not." But he hesitated too long, and when Miss Sophy suddenly married another, Wesley was shattered.

Some years later during another illness, he fell in love with nurse Grace Murray. He more-or-less proposed to her, saying, "If I ever marry, I think you will be the person." She more-or-less accepted. But when John's brother Charles heard of it, he stormed into Grace's house and burst out, "Grace Murray! You have broken my heart," and fainted. When he recovered, he pelted her with objections, saying she would destroy his brother's ministry. She broke the engagement, leaving John to painfully scribble, "We were torn asunder by a whirlwind."

On February 10, 1751, Wesley, in his late forties, suffered a fall in the middle of ice-coated London Bridge and was carried to the home of nurse Mary Vazeille. This time, he didn't hesitate. They were married within a week. It was a disaster. Wesley's friend, John Hampson, described this account: "Once I went into a room and found Mrs. Wesley foaming with fury. Her husband was on the floor, where she had been trailing him by the hair of his head; and she was still holding in her hand venerable locks which she had plucked by the roots. I felt as though I could have knocked the soul out of her." The two spent little time together, and in 1771 we find this curious entry in Wesley's journal: "I came to London, and was informed that my wife died on Monday. This evening she was buried, though I was not informed of it..."

For whatever reason, Wesley was never able to forge a partnership with the one he married. They became husband and wife, but they never became friends. Today, I'd like to share with you what the Bible says about friendship in marriage. How can you turn your bedfellow into your best friend? How can you forge your better half into your buddy?

The wisest man who ever lived, Solomon, wrote three books in the Bible, and all of them deal, in one way or another, with the subject of friendship and marriage: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (or the Song of Solomon). Let's look at verses from those books, in reverse order:

Song of Songs

Song of Songs is perhaps the most unusual book in the Bible. It's a love story between two young people, and it contains verses so plainspoken that I'd have to think twice about reading them on a Sunday morning. But in chapter 5, the love-stricken Bride describes her husband as her "lover."

My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself...

Now, that's a description of all of us who are husbands. This is just a common description of us guys. But read on, verse 16: His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this is my friend.

Many people are first attracted to their mate physically. The basis for many marriages is physical attraction. But if the relationship doesn't deepened beyond that, it'll not last long. The woman in this passage began by calling her husband her lover, describing him physically. But she ended by calling him her friend. The person we marry should become our best friend. Your husband should be your closest friend, your buddy, your pal. If there's someone you enjoy more than your husband or wife, consider it a red flag, a danger signal.

Last week, I received a letter from a lady in our church. She wanted to share a secret about her marriage, and this is what she wrote: Dear Pastor Morgan, For fourteen years Joe and I have had a date every Friday night (the only exception has been occasional work intrusions or out-of-town guests). No family. No phone. No friends. No TV. Just us! The children know not to call us on Fridays. We both like to talk, and we usually have a list of things we want to share with each other leisurely. We sit for a time at home and do only that - talk to each other. Then Joe takes us to a very nice dinner. We still look forward to our dates and guard that time. Joe is my best buddy.

Ecclesiastes

For a relationship to advance to that level takes effort, and we get an idea about the effort involved by a word that Solomon uses in his previous book, Ecclesiastes: Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Eccl 4:9ff).

Solomon is thinking of friendship in general here, saying that everyone needs a friend to help him up when he falls, to keep him

warm when he's cold, to help ward off attackers. And it's even better if you have several friends. But notice the synonym, the figure of speech, he uses for friendship. It is a cord, a rope, various strands braided together. The minister who married Katrina and me used the word "weave," telling us we needed to weave our lives together like strands twisted into rope.

That doesn't happen without effort. Judith Wallerstein, popular psychologist-author, recently studied successful long-term marriages to see what made them work. She said that such couples "build into their lives time to comfort and nurture each other. These people took the marriage seriously. They regarded it as a work in progress. It wasn't supposed to take off on its own. They put a lot of effort into it."

What kind of effort? That takes us to Proverbs, the first of Solomon's three books. For the remainder of the message, I'd like to pull out a handful of critical verses about friendship, and apply them to marriage.

Proverbs

What do good friends do together? First, they enjoy what Proverbs 27:9 calls "earnest counsel" - Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. Let me give that a Morgan paraphrase: Perfume and cologne may please your partner, but even more pleasant are stimulating conversations and common pursuits.

Couples need to be open and discuss their feelings and have meaningful conversation about serious issues, but I don't want to limit "earnest counsel" to serious topics. I can't think of anything less appealing than sitting around, talking about nothing except emotional concerns and serious subjects. Couples need joint habits and hobbies to enjoy together. When Katrina and I were married in 1976, we had little in common. We came from different parts of the country, having lived different lifestyles and pursued different hobbies. We have different tastes and habits. But through the years, we've developed some common pursuits, and we derive pleasure from those things.

For example, we've developed a real interest in, ah, murder. It began several years ago when we drove to Florida. I came by a complete set of unabridged cassette tapes for the book *Ten Little Indians* by Agatha Christie. It's a story of ten people stranded in a barren mansion on an island off the British coast. One by one, they're bumped off. Would you believe we became so caught up in the story that we didn't even want to pull over at rest stops! We did turn the tape off at the end of every chapter to take a deep breath and discuss our theories about the murderer. We arrived in Tampa before the book was finished and we could hardly wait to start home so we could finish the story. Since then, we've become armchair detectives. We avoid books that are graphic and violent and profane, but we're always on the lookout for "cozy British murders." Some nights I'll say, "I'm jumping into my side of the bed with Agatha Christie!" Katrina will say, "Go ahead, I'm curling up with Sherlock Holmes."

We've also developed a knack for cooking together. Katrina is an excellent cook, but I had never done much in that regard until I was stranded one evening in Geneva without a hotel room. A kind, elderly couple took me in, and, wanting to feed me, they set to work in the kitchen. You've never seen a couple having more fun, throwing together a supper of couscous, steamed vegetables, and hard rolls. Food flew across the kitchen. I came home and told Katrina we ought to prepare meals together, and you wouldn't believe what fun we've have from time to time, entertaining friends. The only conflict has been over red pepper, which, as far as I'm concerned, improves whatever it touches. Katrina doesn't agree, and we occasionally get in a stew over it, so to speak. But overall, it's been great fun. We also enjoy trying out new restaurants, and traveling, and taking an occasional afternoon to peruse antique stores. And so on.

Some couples get involved in a favorite sports team, or they begin collecting something or another, or they develop hobbies around their houses and yards. I recently had a couple in a marriage seminar that was hooked on miniature golf, and they found a new course or revisited an old one every Friday night. Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine." We can add the words "... for a marriage." A cheerful heart is good medicine for a marriage. Or, to put it differently, good friends play together.

Another verse in Proverbs with implicatins here is Proverbs 3:33 - The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous. The home that God blesses is one in which there is righteousness, where the husband and wife have a sense of spiritual as well as physical intimacy. I know many couples who, every night at bedtime, read the Bible aloud and pray. I know couples who often resort to prayer during the day. I've been in homes when distressing news arrived or when they heard of a problem. The man would say, "Well, we'd better pray about this." They would quietly bow their heads and pray just as naturally as other people would swear.

When a husband or a father assumes a degree of spiritual leadership in the family, something happens. God blesses the home of the righteous. This doesn't happen easily, for many men find it awkward to assume spiritual leadership in the home. It's like learning to ride a bicycle or learning to play golf. It may be awkward at first, and you might feel ill at ease. But if you're determined to follow Jesus Christ, and you ask for his help, and you begin with something as simple as bedtime prayers together, pretty soon it'll begin to feel more comfortable. And as you work at it, a level of spiritual intimacy will begin to grow, which actually serves as the foundation

for every other kind of intimacy in marriage.

Jonathan Edwards has been called America's greatest theologian. He fell in love with Sarah Pierrepont when she was 13. He was moody and stiff; she was vivacious as a songbird. He could think of nothing else, and one day studying Greek, he scribbled in the cover of his textbook that Sarah goes from place to place, singing sweetly, full of joy. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her. They married on July 28, 1727, the bride (then 17) in a green dress. Jonathan was hired by a Massachusetts church. But parishioners often criticized the young couple. Jonathan was too strict for some, Sarah too extravagant for others. Even worse, they evidently had physical relations on the Lord's Day. Colonial New Englanders believed that babies were born on the same day of the week as conceived. When six of the Edwards' eleven children arrived on Sundays, it sent tongues wagging. Such intimacy wasn't appropriate Sunday behavior.

But through all the hardships, the couple nurtured their love. Their cherished afternoon horseback rides along forest trails, and during those horseback rides they discussed their activities and talked of things they were learning. They had nightly devotions and prayed together. Evangelist George Whitefield, having visited their home, wrote: A sweeter couple I have not seen. Their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, examples of Christian simplicity. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek, quiet spirit; she talked solidly of the things of God, and seemed to be such a helpmeet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, I have put up to God, (for) a wife. Jonathan's last words were, Give my love to my dear wife, and tell her that the uncommon union which has long subsisted between us has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue forever.

Incidentally, years later a reporter tracked down 1400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah, finding among them 80 college presidents, professors, and deans, 100 lawyers, 66 physicians, 80 political leaders, three senators, three governors, and countless preachers and missionaries. Proverbs 3:33 says, "The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous." In other words, good friends pray together.

Here's a final verse in Proverbs - 17:17: A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. The CEV says, "A friend is always a friend, and relatives are born to share our troubles." In other words, good friends don't just play together and pray together, they stay together. Tough times strengthen their friendship, not weaken it. They don't abandon each other when the going gets tough. Hardship brings out the best.

Several years ago, I met a man in Kansas City who told me a story. It involved his daughter, but its truth transfers to marriage. I'll call him Ralph. He said, "I thought I had a good relationship with my daughter, Renee. Whenever she'd come home, she'd give me a kiss and go talk with her mother. But disaster struck us. She was diagnosed with leukemia. I went to the hospital to visit her, and do you know what she said to me? She said she had been afraid of me all her life. I couldn't believe it. I had never known that. I thought we had a good relationship. I said to her, 'Renee, what are you talking about? We've never had words.' She said, 'That's just it, dad. We've never talked.' I said, 'But you do that with your mother.'"

"Yes, but not with you," she replied. "I've been afraid of you because you've been a negative person."

"A negative person?" said Ralph.

"Yes, I've been negative all my life, and I got it from you. We see things negatively. I remember when I was a little girl, I wanted to get my hair cut, but I didn't because I was afraid you'd be negative. And just last summer, I wanted to borrow your boat for vacation. I took me a week to get up enough nerve to ask you. I've built up this fear of you, and it's gotten so bad I can't even talk to you."

Ralph told me, "When she said that, I realized that with my wife and daughter, I'd found the best way of getting along was to say nothing. I'd come home and get in front of the television and I thought I was getting along beautifully because I didn't communicate. I wanted them to love me more than anything else in the world, and I learned to live in a shell so that I wouldn't say or do anything to displease them."

Renee said, "Dad, now that I'm facing death I realize how distant and negative I've been, and I think this helped bring on my leukemia. If I ever hope to have physical healing, I have to have emotional healing. And you have to help me."

The two made up their minds then and there that they would begin talking to each other, growing close, being honest and yet being positive. Ralph told me, "It changed both our lives around. Now we can sit and talk for hours. She can disagree with me without it upsetting our relationship." And the last I heard, Renee's leukemia was in remission.

When we face adversity, when tough days come, friendship blossoms and true friends make up their minds to tough it out. A friend loves at all times, and a relative is born for adversity.

What, then, does the Bible say about marriage? What did Solomon teach about turning bedfellows into best friends? What does the Lord say? In Song of Songs, he tells us that our lover needs to also become our friend. In Ecclesiastes, he tells us that it's akin the weaving strands together into a rope. And in Proverbs, he becomes very practical. Lifemates play together. And they pray together.

And they stay together.

Conflict Management: How To Iron Out Your Differences w/o Being Burned

Romans 12:16, Proverbs

Romans 12:16 says, "Live in harmony with one another." The word harmony is very interesting. Our English word arm comes from the same Greek root. You can easily see that the letters a-r-m are right in the middle of h-a-r-m-o-n-y. The stem word is the Greek harmos, which means joint. Your arm is attached to your body at its joint, joined to you at the shoulder. In the same way, when you have a soprano, a tenor, a base, and an alto, all singing the proper notes, their voices join together to create one sound, one song. So the harmony occurs when various, different parts join together to make a whole. If everyone sang alto, it wouldn't sound very good. If everyone sang tenor, we'd miss the melody. If everyone sang exactly the same notes, we'd have boring unison without any fuller, more harmonious sound.

In a marriage, you have a bass and an alto. That is, you have a two people with different perspectives, different backgrounds, and different ways of looking at things. One of the partners is in a man's body, the other is in a woman's body. One has the mind of a man, the other the mind of a woman. There will never be boring unison, but neither should there be continually discord. Perhaps the greatest challenge of marriage is learning how to manage conflicts and overcome differences so as to have harmony rather than discord in your home.

It can be done. In fact, it isn't an option, it is a commandment. Romans 12:16 says: Live in harmony with one another. But the commandment also contains the seed of a promise, for the Lord has never given us a commandment without also providing the grace for us to fulfill it. In a sense, every command is a promise in disguise. When God gives us the command to live in harmony with each other, the implied promise is, "I will give you the grace necessary as you look to me to have a harmonious home, a melodious marriage."

But how do we maintain harmony when conflicts arise? Put differently, how can we iron out our differences without being burned?

Claming Up

There are three ways of responding to marital conflict, and I'd like to illustrate them using characters from an little-visited book in the Old Testament - 1 Kings. The first response to conflict is - claming up. This seems to have been the preferred method of immature and immoral King Ahab. Look in 1 Kings 21:

Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezeelite. The vineyard was in Jezeel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"

The argument here isn't between Ahab and Jezebel; in fact, they went on to become partners in crime. But the thing to notice is how Ahab reacted to conflict. Notice the words here: sullen, angry, sulking, refusing to eat. Ahab just clamed up and moped around, lower lip jutted out like a school child who didn't get his way.

Earlier in my marriage, this was my primary method of responding to potential conflict. Katrina and I have only had three fights in our twenty years of marriage. One was over hot chocolate, another was over canning tomatoes, and the third was an argument that broke out while we were vacationing once in Maine (that one was altogether and completely my fault). But the fact that we've had only three fights isn't necessarily commendable. It indicates that sometimes I've just clamed up, refused to fight, refused to talk, and the problems have lingered on.

Katrina has often commented about how frustrated she was during our early years because I wouldn't be drawn into discussions over disagreements. I avoided them. Sometimes I just shrugged and ignored the disagreements. Other times, I engaged the kind of games that young couples often play with each other. I'd send a barrage of non-verbal signals and hope she would get the message. I'd sulk or mope around or not talk with her. And I would secretly hope that she would come and ask me about it, draw me out, and eventually give in.

It was a thinly veiled attempt to manipulate her by non-verbal means. I realize now how immature that is, and thankfully we're past

that point in our marriage (for the most part). I can hardly think of any good that comes from the claming up. But the second way of responding to conflict is even worse - blowing up.

Blowing Up

And that was the preferred method Ahab's wife, Jezebel. Look at 1 Kings 19:

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a message to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like one of them." Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

He wasn't the first or last man who ran for his life from an angry woman. Jezebel was on a murderous rampage, and it proved very destructive. Blowing up - loud, angry arguments - are almost always destructive. They can torpedo a marriage faster than anything else. We lose our tempers and say more than we should, and in the process we inflict wounds on the other person and wounds on the marriage.

I want to tell you a story from the days of sixteenth century France that shows how we can often sink our own arguments by saying too much. The Protestant movement initially found fertile ground in France. Several preachers, sympathetic to reform, mounted pulpits in Paris, and the king himself showed interest. But on October 10, 1533, Nicolas Cop was elected Rector of the University of Paris and his inaugural address, prepared by a 24-year old firebrand named John Calvin, was a declaration of war on the Catholic Church. The speech demanded reformation on the basis of the New Testament and attacked the theologians of the church who "teach nothing of faith, nothing of the love of God, nothing of remission of sins, nothing of grace, nothing of justification."

The speech so inflamed Paris that Cop fled to Basel, and Calvin reportedly escaped his room from a window by means of sheets, fleeing disguised as a vine-dresser with a hoe on his shoulder. The ensuing months saw so many posters and tracts on Parisian streets that 1534 became known as "the year of the placards." The tension exploded into violence over a scathing placard by an over-zealous Protestant named Feret. He attacked "the horrible, great, intolerable abuses of the popish mass."

On the night of October 18, 1534, Feret's placard was found nailed to the king's bedroom door, and that did it. Protestants soon filled Parisian jails. And on January 29, 1535, to purge the city from the defilement caused by Feret's placards, an immense torch-lit procession traveled in silence from the Louvre to Notre Dame. The image of St. Genevieve, patroness of Paris, was accompanied by the royal family, princes, cardinals and church officials, ambassadors, and officers from State and University. Solemn mass was performed in the cathedral. The king declared he would behead even his own children if they embraced the "new heresies."

The day ended with six Protestants being suspended by ropes to a great machine that lowered and raised them into burning flames, slowly roasting them to death. In the coming months, many more Protestants were fined, imprisoned, tortured, and burned. The French Reformation miscarried. All because the Reformers were young, immature, and they said a few words too many.

The Bible says, "Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don't yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ" (Ephesians 4:31-32, CEV).

Scott Stanley is part of a research team at the University of Denver that has identified factors that accurately predict whether a marriage will survive or fail. Two of them are especially dangerous. The first is Escalation. Escalation occurs when a person says something negative and his or her spouse responds in kind, with an even harsher statement. This leads to an argument that spirals to greater levels of anger and frustration. In some ways, this is very natural for us. Whenever we're criticized, our first impulse is to defend ourselves by turning the tables on the one attacking us. We lash back, and our words can be harsh. It's especially dangerous when one of the partners says something like, "If that's the way you feel, maybe I should just move out." The other might respond with: "Don't let me stand in your way!"

Stanley refers to one couple he counseled who began discussing household chores, but in no time they were threatening divorce. He said, "They made the mistake of threatening their very commitment to the relationship - a very common and very destructive battle strategy. Now matter how angry you become or how much pain you're feeling, it's never appropriate to punish your mate by threatening divorce. Rather than helping your spouse see things your way, it only causes him or her to question your commitment to the relationship."

The second deadly factor in a marriage, according to Dr. Scott Stanley, is Invalidation. In simplest terms, this means putting each other down, calling one another names, or making personal comments or insults about the other. It includes ridiculing one another and being sarcastic. You invalidate the other person. You belittle them and attack their self-worth. This is no way to deal with conflict; it only hurts the marriage and the mate. Instead of claming up and blowing up, I'd like to recommend a third response to problems in your marriage. I suggest that you wise up.

Wise Up

We have an example of this response also in 1 Kings, in chapter 3. Here the Lord appeared to the young king Solomon and told him to ask for anything he wished. Solomon asked for wisdom. The Lord was pleased with Solomon's request, and said in verse 12: I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be again.

Out of this wisdom, Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs, and I'd like to show you two verses there. These are verses to clamp onto the refrigerator of your home, to write on your doorposts, and to memorize as personal rules of your heart:

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing - Proverbs 12:18

Losing your temper causes a lot of trouble, but staying calm settles arguments - Proverbs 15:18 (CEV).

How can we stay calm and turn a troubled marriage into a harmonious home? Here are eight ideas: First, make a conscious decision to keep your anger under control. It is possible, with God's help, to control your temper. You do not have to lose it. Proverbs 30:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control."

Second, learn to call a cease-fire. When you're in a heated discussion and you sense that you are losing your temper and the argument is escalating into a lose-lose situation, call a cease-fire. An escalating argument very quickly reaches a point of diminishing returns, and you're better off just to say, "I've got to cool down before I say something damaging. Let's go out to dinner Saturday night and try to talk through this issue with civility, and I'm going to pray that the Lord will give us the sense and the patience to work through it."

Third, apologize. Whenever you do go too far and say too much, apologize as quickly as possible.

Fourth, don't let problems simmer. Learn to be mature enough to sit down and talk through things openly, with a minimum of excess emotion. Ephesians 4 tells us to speak truthfully to each other. It's harder on the front end to deal with problems forthrightly, but it's much easier in the long run.

Fifth, remember that you don't have to say everything you think. Proverbs 29:11 in the King James Version reads, "A fool uttereth all his mind." I read an article recently by a woman named Mary Robins Clark. She said she once had a constant need to tell everyone what to do and how to do everything. She said, "I thought my husband needed my advice in every area of his life, including and especially in his driving." But one day on a radio broadcast she heard Christian author Elizabeth Elliot advise, "Never pass up an opportunity to keep your mouth shut."

Mary Clark took those words to heart. That doesn't mean that she clamed up; she just realized that she didn't always have to be giving directions. For example, she and her husband Al had been married 2 years. She was a neatnik and Al was... well, he was more laid back. She had lectured him since their wedding day about leaving clothes and magazines lying around. "If you leave these magazines on the floor, pretty soon there'll be nowhere to walk," she would say. "Why can't you just pick these clothes off the bathroom floor and put them in the hamper?" she complained morning after morning. Al ignored her. Occasionally if she acted really angry, he would pick things up, but it required increasing amounts of pressure from her.

So, having heard Elizabeth Elliot say "Never pass up an opportunity to keep your mouth shut," she decided to work on it. The next morning without saying a word, she picked up Al's dirty clothes and put them in the hamper. She was surprised that it didn't hurt worse than it did. In fact, she said that a biblical feeling came over her as she thought of herself as a servant. After a few days, she noticed a change in Al, too. He began wanting to do things for her. He did yard work that he had been neglecting, and helped her sand some old chairs. She seemed to sense that his whole attitude toward her had changed, and would you believe that soon he even began to pick up his clothes!

Proverbs 17:27-28 says, "It makes a lot of sense to be a person of few words and to stay calm. Even fools seem smart when they are quiet" (CEV).

Proverbs 12:16 says, "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult."

Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up trouble, but love overlooks the wrongs that others do" (CEV).

Six, be willing to agree to disagree. Katrina and I have very different opinions about some things. We often disagree about some of our theological beliefs. But I've always been proud to have a wife who knew her own mind. I often say that if two people agree on everything, they double their chances of being wrong.

Seven, pick up a good book about marriage. Any Christian book store has a wide assortment of books on marriage, and it's surprising how they can help. Or attend a marriage retreat, or sign up for some simple marriage counseling from a Christian counselor.

Eight, keep tight accounts with the Lord. Most of the conflicts we have with other people are not fundamentally horizontal but vertical. In other words, if my heart isn't right with the Lord, it probably isn't going to be very positive toward my mate. The reason Ahab was bitter toward Naboth and Jezebel was furious with Elijah was that their own hearts were out of fellowship with God. Most of the time, if I become angry or irritable or out-of-sorts with Katrina it's because my heart is out of tune with the Lord in some way. I suppose that eighty or ninety percent of our conflicts would be minimized if we really got on our knees and in His word and let the Lord have fuller access to our hearts.

We're either going to harm or harmonize. If we're going to enjoy healthy relationships, we can't clam up or blow up. We've got to wise up. If we do that we can iron out our differences without being burned. We can live in harmony with one another. And if we live in harmony with each other, we can make beautiful music together all our lives.

Righteousness Exalts A Nation, Proverbs 14:34

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people--Proverbs 14:34

A couple of weeks ago, the U. S. House of Representatives passed a bill permitting the posting of the Ten Commandments on the walls public schools. But the measure itself appears to be against the law as defined by the Supreme Court, because on November 17, 1980, the Supreme Court had struck down a Kentucky law that required the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. The Court said the Ten Commandments were "plainly religious... and may induce children to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and to obey the commandments."

...as though that were something terrible.

In removing the Ten Commandments from the classrooms, the Court left blank walls there, which are now being pocked with bullets all across America...

...because if, instead of a moral code, you have nothing but a blank wall, sooner or later people are going to write on it whatever they want. We are thus living in a nation in which our conduct is being governed, not by the moral laws of God, but by the immoral graffiti of our times.

The basic presupposition of the Supreme Court appeared to be that it is possible to have morality without God. But the whole underpinning and basis of morality is the existence of God.

Historian Will Durant wrote: "There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion."

...Without the reality of an eternal God there is no ultimate basis for ethics and there are no moral absolutes.

Erwin Lutzer offers a graphic picture of what is happening. Imagine a heavy steel beam, suspended high above a chasm by a single cable attached to the middle of the beam. Two men are on opposite ends, and their weight provides the balance needed to keep the bar horizontal. Now suppose that one of them steadies himself enough to pull out a gun and to shot the other one. The result is that they both fall into the chasm.

Those who are trying to destroy belief in God cannot do it without destroying themselves. And if our nation continues to descend into a godless, entertainment-centered moral relativism that holds no fear of God and no reverence for his commands, we will perish as a nation. The blank wall will become a blackboard for the finger of God to write the words of Daniel 5: Thou art weighted in the balances and found wanting.

What can we do about it?

Keep Your Lives Pure

First, we can keep our own lives pure by remaining utterly committed to God and to his commandments in our personal experience. The government can never keep us from exhibiting the Ten Commandments in our daily behavior. The government can never keep us from living out the Gospel. And more and more, Christian behavior is increasingly distinct from that of the world around us. I mentioned last week the new movie "Eyes Wide Shut" with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. The two of them are on the cover of Time Magazine this week, and I think what disturbs me so much about this particular movie is that, based upon what I've read about it, with this movie America seems to be turning a corner and mainstreaming pornography into the popular culture. Well, we can't be

responsible for what Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman do, but I am responsible for the way I live and for the purity of my own life. And through the power of Jesus Christ in our hearts, we can live blameless, holy lives, without fault, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

Keep Your Voice Heard

Second, we can keep our voices heard. The ACLU doesn't like to admit it, but Christians have civil rights, too. We have freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Students in the public schools have incredible rights when it comes to prayer, Bible study, and equal access for Bible-related events.

I don't know if you heard what happened this year at Northern High School in Silver Springs, Maryland, but it was very interesting. One of the graduating seniors, a Christian, planned to offer an invocation at the graduation ceremony, but a fellow student Nick Becker objected, saying prayer is inappropriate at a public ceremony. The state attorney general's office agreed with a request by the American Civil Liberties Union on Becker's behalf. It informed school officials that graduation prayers violate the constitutional separation of church and state. As a compromise, the Christian student agreed to ask for a 30-second "time for reflection" that did not mention God.

The time came for the graduation service, and the student asked for a moment of silence. Suddenly a man in the crowd began to recite The Lord's Prayer aloud and instantly virtually everyone in the entire 4,000-member audience, including the students, joined in. It was a spontaneous demonstration of our right of free speech as believers in a pluralistic society.

Keep Our Prayers Going

Third, we can keep our prayers going, and we can pray for revival. There have been other demoralized times in the history of our nation and in the history of other lands in which judgment was delayed by the winds of revival; and it isn't too late for our nation to experience an awakening. Psalm 85:6 says, "Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You."

Keep Our Focus International

Finally, we can keep our focus international. I believe that one of the reasons God allowed the United States of America to come into existence was to spearhead the fulfillment of the Great Commission, to supply the personnel and finances needed for the evangelization of the world.

We have been sending missionaries since 1812 when Adoniram Judson went to Burma; and partially as a result of that the world today is experiencing the greatest harvest of souls it has ever seen. I read the other day that over 260,000 people are hearing the Gospel and are being presented the plan of salvation every day.

Now is no time to stop. United States Christians still have a vital role to play in the evangelization of the world. More than ever before, God wants to use us to transform our society and to evangelize our world. And He will do it as we keep our lives pure, our voices heard, our prayers going, and our missionary focus international.

The ancient words of 2 Chronicles 7:14 are still faithful and true:

If My people who are called by My name

will humble themselves, and pray

and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways,

then I will hear from heaven,

and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Seven Ways To Break Bad Habits Proverbs 5:21-23; 1 Corinthians 10:13

Today we are continuing our series of messages entitled "Trade Secrets of Successful People: 54 Helps, Hints, and Habits for Strengthening Your Life." Our topic today is "Seven Ways to Break Bad Habits," and our Scripture reading is from Proverbs 5:21-23:

For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly.

Here is a man who has developed some sinful habits; he has some flaws in his character and behavior. Those flaws and faults are habitual, and they are described as "cords." The cords of his sin hold him fast. The New Living Translation says: They are ropes that catch and hold him.

That description reminds us of what Horace Mann, the great educator, once said: "Habits are like a cable. We weave a strand of it every day and soon it cannot be broken."

I recently read an article in ParentLife Magazine which told of a teacher who wanted to show her pupils the power of habits, and how they are formed through repeated actions or thoughts. Taking a roll of thread, she wrapped it one time around a student's wrists when placed together. "That," she said, "represents your doing something one time. Can you break the thread?" The student easily did so.

Then she wrapped the thread around his wrists, two, three, four, five or more times. The effort to break the thread became more and more difficult until finally the child was unable to free his hands at all. "That," she said, "is what happens when acts are repeated until they become habits."

The famous American psychologist William James said that by allowing separate acts to reoccur until they become habits we are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone....

Samuel Johnson put it this way: The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.

I wonder what bad habits are represented by the hundreds of us gathered here this morning? Some of you may be struggling with:

- Smoking
- Drinking
- Oversleeping
- Nail-biting
- Cussing
- Impulsive spending
- Complaining and nagging
- Pornography
- Losing your temper

We could go on making an increasingly lengthy list, but perhaps you already know what your bad habit is, and you want to be able to break it. Well, today I'd like to give you seven ways to break that bad habit.

1. Call That Bad Habit a Sin, and Put It Under The Blood of Christ

Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, wrote: The Christian must see that bad habits are ultimately spiritual issues. In his book *How To Say No To A Stubborn Habit*, he continues: "We are responsible for our own sin--including those sins 'which so easily beset us.' The fact that we do something wrong habitually does not relieve us of responsibility. On the contrary, it may make the sin all the worse. So we must take personal responsibility for our own habits and not shrink from calling them sin."

I think it helps us to realize that we aren't just trying to break a bad habit, we are endeavoring to root out and overcome a sinful tendency in our lives.

Listen to these verses from Colossians 4 and 5: You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood (in other words, get out of the habit of telling little white lies!) and speak truthfully to his neighbor (get into the habit of telling the truth)....

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (get out of the habit of losing your temper!)... He who has been stealing must steal no longer (break the habit of stealing), but must work, doing something useful with his own hands that he may have something to share with those in need (get into the habit of working hard and of giving generously).

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths (get out of the habit of being foul-mouthed), but only what is helpful for building others up....

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, for these are improper for

God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are out of place....

All these items are sinful habit patterns that God wants to deal with in our lives--sins committed so habitually that they become life-patterns for us; but the Lord wants to overturn them in our lives and to replace them with a new set of behaviors.

I think it helps to realize that. The other day I was mowing around my house, and, turning over a board, I saw a little snake. Well, I didn't think much about it, because it was a harmless little blacksnake that eats bugs and mice, and it was some distance from my house. But suppose I had recognized it as a rattlesnake or a copperhead. I would have taken it much more seriously, and would have done everything in my power to kill it before it bit one of my children.

It may be that there's something in your life or in mine that we view as a little harmless habit, a little weakness to which we frequently succumb. But God views it as sin with a capital "S" and it needs to be confessed as such and put under the blood of Christ.

2. Walk in the Spirit

Second, memorize and obey Galatians 5:16: Walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh". I had a professor once, Otis Braswell, who talked about this verse one day in class, and he made an interesting comment. He said that many Christians read this verse backward. They think that if they are not fulfilling the lust of the flesh, they can walk in the Spirit. And so they try with all their might to overcome their addictions and lusts, and they try to do it in their own energy. They turn over a new leaf. They make a new resolution. But we can never overcome our besetting sins by ourselves. We must come in full surrender to Jesus Christ, confessing our sins, and yielding ourselves to him so that by his grace we can walk in the Spirit. And as we walk in the Spirit, the indwelling Jesus Christ, by the power of his Spirit, begins to live his own life--the Christ-life--through us. And when that happens we find that we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

3. Make No Provision For the Flesh

Now, we certainly need to cooperate in the process, because the same Bible that tells us to walk in the Spirit also tell us in Romans 13:14 to make no provision for the flesh. In other words, with the help of our indwelling Christ, we need to make strategic changes in our lives that will starve the bad habits and encourage the new ones.

Some time ago while we were on an extended vacation, I asked a friend to water and spray my rose bushes. When I returned, I couldn't see the rose bushes for the weeds that had sprung up. I told my wife Katrina, "I don't know where those weeds came from. They're taller than the rose bushes." Well, come to find out, my friend saw the weeds starting to come up, and thinking I they were bedding plants of some sort that I had planted among the roses, she sprayed and fertilized and watered them!

Our lives are very much like a flower garden. The weeds--the bad habits--grow very quickly, and they can take over. The good habits--the disciplines of life--the roses--have to be carefully cultivated. Too many of us water and spray and fertilize the weeds.

I'll give you an example. I have a friend who works in an office in Chattanooga, and who has struggled in the past with a habit of watching pornography. He came to Christ, but so far he has refused to clean out the little locked drawer in his entertainment console where his pornographic videos are kept. He says, "Well, I just don't know what to do with them. I paid a lot of money for them, and I hate to throw them away, but I don't feel that I should give them to anyone else, so I just have them locked up there in that drawer that I never open."

Well, I know exactly what he should do with them. He should do with them what the Ephesians did in Acts 19 with their sinful books and occultish materials, and that is to burn them, to destroy them.

Or, to use another example, suppose you want to break the smoking habit. In her advice column, Ann Landers recently suggested if you seriously want to stop smoking, you make a little ceremony out of smoking your last cigarette, you say goodbye to it, and then you dispose of all tobacco products and paraphernalia. Throw away the ashtrays, lighters, and everything else.

4. Launch A New Habit As Strongly As Possible--Then Stay With It

(**Editorial comment:** Read Thomas Chalmers' great sermon - [The Expulsive Power of a New Affection](#))

William James, philosopher and pioneer American psychologist, wrote this about habits in his classic book *Psychology: Briefer Course*. "In the acquisition of a new habit, or the leaving off of an old one, there are four great maxims to remember: First, we must take care to launch ourselves with as strong an initiative as possible..."

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey describes the breaking and making of habits to the launch of a spacecraft like Apollo 11. To get to the moon, writes Covey, those astronauts "literally had to break out of the tremendous gravity pull of the earth. More energy was spent in the first few minutes of lift-off, in the first few miles of travel, than was used over the next several days to travel half a million miles.

"Habits, too, have tremendous gravity pull--more than most people realize or would admit. Breaking deeply imbedded habitual tendencies such as procrastination, impatience, criticalness, or selfishness that violate basic principles of human effectiveness involves more than a little willpower and a few minor changes in our lives. 'Lift off' takes a tremendous effort, but once we break out of the gravity pull, our freedom takes on a whole new dimension."

One expert suggests making a list of the reasons you want to change, and carrying it around with you. Some people say that you should commit to your decision publicly. At least, gather some friends and tell them and ask for their assistance.

Then stay with it. Make up your mind you're going to have victory over that bad habit, and never give in. Never give up. How long does it take to establish a new habit? There's a little couplet that says: A bad habit takes 21 days to break; a good habit takes 21 days to make. But in preparation for this message, I read another expert who asserts that it takes 90 days for an old habit to be broken and a new habit formed. But stay with it, and don't let yourself grow discouraged. The Bible says to put your hand to the plough and don't look back.

5. Develop A Support Group

It is also important to have a support group to encourage you and with whom to be accountable. I know a man who wanted to begin a new habit of running every morning at the track. He wanted to get up early and build up to three miles, arriving at the track each day at 6 am. But morning after morning he slept in. Finally he made an agreement with a friend that the two of them do it together. After that, when the alarm went off and he was tempted to sleep in, he thought of his friend waiting there for him at the track, and it got him out of bed. He was able to establish his habit.

I remember when I was in college, my roommate in the dormitory was a military brat, and his father had spent a lifetime in the armed forces. He had taught Bill to clean off his desk after every project. Well, Bill's desk was always clean and tidy, every pencil and paper in its place. Mine was a mess, and I couldn't find anything.

One day Bill gave me a military style lecture about the efficiency of keeping one's desk clean. "After every project," he said, "put everything back in its place, file things carefully, and clean your desk for the next project." I made a decision to do just that, but I can you that my motivation for the longest time was knowing that Bill would pass my desk several times a day in the room. So launch your new habit as strongly as possible, and get a support group going.

I read this in the newspaper recently: Dear Abby: I am engaged to be married to a wonderful young lady. Although I am usually well behaved, I have a terrible temper and sometimes swear and use bad language -- a habit I want very much to break.

"Cheryl" and I consulted a psychologist about this problem, and she suggested that I wear an elastic band around my wrist, and every time I start to lose my temper, I should snap it. I tried it a few times, but Cheryl said I wasn't snapping it hard enough, so at our next session, the therapist suggested that Cheryl snap it whenever I started to get nasty. And snap it hard enough to make it sting.

I know this may sound funny or even childish, but the rubber band treatment worked for me! The therapist said that this technique is used to stop smoking, drinking, and obsessive thoughts.

Pass this on to your readers if you think it will help. It helped me.--John M. in Bridgeport, Connecticut

Having a friend willing to do something as simple as snap a rubber band was all it took to help that man overcome his problem.

6. Memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13

I don't know of a better verse for people who are trying to break free from a besetting sin than 1 Corinthians 10:13: No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful who will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but will with the temptation also make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it.

Lynette Morgan's father, Dr. LaVerne Miley, was a missionary physician in the Ivory Coast for many years. One day he was greatly disturbed to learn that four of his prime converts had fallen into sexual sin. One of them, Benjamin, spoke for them all when Miley confronted them. "Monsieur," Benjamin said, "I believe the Bible, but some parts of it only work for you white folks. Black men have a stronger sex drive than you."

Dr. Miley turned in the Bible to 1 Corinthians 10:13 and asked Benjamin to read it. Then he asked, "Benjamin, does that promise specify skin color?" The young men were silent, then they began to weep. They confessed their sins as the doctor prayed with tears in his own eyes.

That verse will work for us any time day or night, regardless of our background, regardless of our circumstances, regardless of our skin color or the land or our origin.

7. If You Fall, Don't Give Up, Get Up

Proverbs 24.16 is a verse I frequently give out to people who are trying to overcome deeply entrenched negative patterns in their lives: Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again.

Someone else put it this way: First we form habits, then they form us. Conquer your bad habits, or they'll eventually conquer you.

Well, we can't conquer them by ourselves, but in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are more than conquerors. For...

He breaks the power of cancelled sin

And sets the captive free.

His blood can make the foulest clean

His blood availed for me.

Seeing, then, that we are encompassed by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

AGING GRACEFULLY: GRANDEST PEOPLE OF ALL Proverbs 17:6

Children's children are a crown to the aged. --Proverbs 17:6

Several years ago, after one of my daughters returned from a week at my mother's house, I asked her what she had best liked about the experience. She furrowed her brow, thought about it, and said, "Waking up in the morning. I'd open my eyes, and for a moment I wouldn't know where I was; then I'd look around at the room and remember that I was at Grandma's."

"Over the mountains," the old poem says, "and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go."

"The bond between a child and a grandparent is the purest, least psychologically complicated form of human love," says Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, author of several books on grandparenting. He claims that grandparents can offer an emotional safety net when parents falter. They pass on traditions in the form of stories, songs, games, skills, and crafts. And they have another magical ingredient that parents often lack -- Time. What many grandchildren appreciate most is the relaxed rhythm of life at Grandma's and Grandpa's.

Kornhaber has found that children who are close to at least one grandparent are more emotionally secure than other children; and they have more positive feelings about older people and about the process of aging. Grandparents are, after all, grand parents. And in the dictionary the word grand means: having more importance than others; foremost; having higher rank; large and striking in size, scope, extent, or conception; lavish, marked by regal form and dignity; intended to impress; very good; wonderful.

As I researched the subject of grandparenting I discovered some interesting facts, the first being that grandparents aren't necessarily old. The average age in America at which a woman becomes a grandmother is 46; and many in America become grandparents at 29 or 30.

There are 60 million grandparents in America today, and the number is accelerating rapidly because baby boomers are entering the grandparenting years. The number of grandparents in America will swell 26% in the next decade.

And we're finding that grandparenting is more complicated than it used to be. Responsibilities now often include step-grandparenting; and increasing numbers of grandparents are going to court for the right to visit their grandchildren. Twelve states now allow grandparents to petition for visitation rights without prerequisites. Support groups exist to give grandparents advice on legal actions.

The mobility of modern society means that many grandparents are no longer just around the corner or the curve from their grandchildren; so they have to learn the techniques of long-distance grandparenting. More and more grandparents find themselves providing regular childcare, and approximately 3.2 million American children live full-time with their grandparents. In 867,000 American homes, grandparents are raising their grandchildren in the place of parents.

A Second Chance

F. W. Boreham, the Australian Christian of a century ago, wrote, "Grandfatherism gives every man a second chance. If his parents

fail him, his grandparents may yet prove his salvation."

Perhaps history's most dramatic illustration of that truth is the story of King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for 55 years.

Manasseh was the son of good King Hezekiah, but even good men can have prodigal sons; and Manasseh has a twelve-year-old terror. When Hezekiah died, Manasseh assumed the throne -- a teenage tyrant, horribly wicked.

He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places -- pagan platforms for worship -- his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles.

These were obscene places that included immoral sexual practices as a worship rite to the pagan goddesses of fertility.

He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them.

He was into astrology and occultist practices. But even worse, he did something that in Hebrew worship is repulsive above all else:

He built altars in the temple of the Lord of which the Lord had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts.

In the most holy spot in the world -- in the temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem -- he erected astrological altars and pagan shrines. All this despite the miracles and deliverances that God had given his father Hezekiah in that very place. But even worse,

He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

The valley of Ben Hinnom was a wadi on the edge of Jerusalem in which Manasseh built shrines to demon deities and into the blazing, glowing arms of these demons he would place his own children and watch them burn to death.

He practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists.

He was caught up in the occult, in the dark and dangerous world of black demons and evil powers. He was the devil's man in the Lord's city, and he led the entire nation astray.

He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord provoking him to anger. Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.

The parallel account in 2 Kings 21 also tells us that Manasseh slaughtered many of his own people, establishing a reign of terror in Jerusalem.

Moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.

How would you like this man to be your grandfather? Well, don't answer too soon for there's more to this story that we've yet uncovered.

The Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.

Don't even give up on anyone. Don't ever think that anyone is past redemption. After a lifetime of violence, demonism, bloodshed, immorality, and the worst moral pollution the world had ever seen -- after a lifetime of all that, Manasseh came to the Lord and was transformed by God's amazing grace. The Bible says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation."

2 Chronicles 33 goes on to tell us about Manasseh's subsequent reforms and how he built up the city, tore down the idols, and prayed for his people. And then he died at age 67, having served as Judah's king for 55 years. Then what?

Amon was 22 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord; Amon increased his guilt. Amon's officials conspired against him and assassinated him in his palace. Then the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Amon, and they made Josiah his son king in his place.

Now, in chapter 34, we're going to learn about 8-year old Josiah. His grandfather had died two years before, but he had enjoyed his

grandfather during his first six years. The last six years of Manasseh and the first six years of Josiah overlap; and the last six years of Manasseh were his repentant years, his godly years, his years of reform and contrition.

It was too late for him to influence his own son Amon. But it wasn't too late for Josiah, and we can easily picture the old king spending long hours with his small grandson saying, "Josiah, someday you'll be king of this land; and you must never do the things that I did. You must serve the Lord Jehovah..."

Josiah was only six when his grandfather died; and two years later he himself became Israel's king at age 8. But look at the power of a grandfather's influence:

Josiah was 8 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem 31 years. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left. In the 8th year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his 12th year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, carved idols and cast images...

... In the 18th year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple...

And the chapter goes on to describe that as they were repairing the temple, they rediscovered the book of the Law, the Bible, that had been neglected for generations. Jeremiah the prophet served as the city's pastor, the passover was reinstituted, and revival burned like a bonfire in Jerusalem.

All because of a grandfather's influence, a grandfather who had been the most violent and wicked man in his nation's history; but who found the Lord with just enough time to spare to implant his newly-found faith in the tender heart of his little grandson.

Paul said to Timothy, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois..."

Moses said in Deuteronomy 4, "Teach (my words) to your children, and to their children after them."

How can we best do that? How can grandparents use their grand positions to the best advantage? How can they maximize their ministry? Proverbs 17:6 says that grandchildren are a crown to the aged. Today, I'd like to give you four tools for polishing the crown.

Prudence

The first is prudence. Be prudent about interfering, for new mothers often face unexpected stress with their own mothers -- or new parents with their own parents -- over how to raise the children. The reason? Grandparents sometimes feel inclined to give more advice or direction than the parents want at the very time new parents are insecure in their new role. It takes a little time for grandparents to find the right balance, learning to be involved without interfering.

Presence

Second, presence. It's vital for grandparents to be as accessible as possible. Do all you can to spend time with your grandkids. Make open your home. Make open your schedule. Make your house user-friendly for youngsters. Talk to them, tell them stories and read them Scripture. Charles Spurgeon, the famous Victorian-era preacher, credited his grandfather with molding his life, especially through stories like the one about a man named Havers from near-by Stambourne. In earlier days, Havers had suffered for his faith in Christ. One day, hiding from authorities, he ducked into a shed, crept into an empty container, and lay down. Immediately a spider came along and started spinning a web across the cover. In a few minutes Havers heard footsteps of men searching for him. They entered the shed and began poking into barrels and vats, and Havers heard one of them say to another, "It's no use looking in there. Look at that spider's web." And the Christian man escaped, saved by a God-sent spider.

In our mobile society, many people don't live near their grandchildren. But a week here or there, a vacation, a stream of letters, and regular phone calls can help fill in the gap. I read of one grandparent who recorded bedtime stories on a cassette tapes, and her grandchild went to bed every evening listening to them.

Provision

Third, grandparents can help provide materially for their grandchildren. Just a little bit here and there. Clothing. Books. Toys. Tools for a hobby. A little seed money for college.

People over fifty are, on average, a more affluent segment of our population, holding 50% of the country's disposable income and more than 75% of its financial assets. But advertisers have a hard time reaching these people because senior adults have learned through the years to be cautious with their money. Businesses are learning, however, to appeal to their role as grandparents.

And for good reason. Many young families are financially stressed; and a few extras along the way by a loving grandparent can make a big difference.

Prayer

Finally, grandparents can give their grandchildren a legacy of prayer. I sometimes wonder what a difference it would make if a person spent ten minutes a day praying for another, claiming Scriptures before the throne of grace on behalf of a friend or loved one. What kind of difference would it make if we earnestly prayed for someone we loved. Samuel said to the Israelites, "God forbid that I should sin against heaven by failing to prayer for you." And often, grandparents have more time for prayer and Bible reading than anyone else.

So what tools are necessary for effective grandparenting? Prudence, presence, provision, prayer -- and maybe just a dash of patience. Powerful tools for crown-polishing. For children's children are a crown to the aged -- and those who realize that are the grandest people of all.