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Proverbs 3:1-12

Fourth Message

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THE WISDOM OF LOVING GOD

We use the word “love” rather flippantly today. We say we love our car, our job, our pets, and even our clothes. The other day I heard a woman say, “I really love that outfit.” I enjoy golf. I like to play it, practice it, talk about it, read about it, and on those nights when I have a tough time sleeping, I even enjoy dreaming about it. I suppose you could say I love golf.

So what do we make of the words from Deuteronomy 6:5, “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”? What does it mean to love God? Generally speaking, we are aware of and are comfortable with God’s love for us and how he demonstrated that love by the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. But we have a difficult time comprehending and fulfilling the command to “love the Lord our God.”

Have we given much thought to what the greatest commandment means in our daily living? Is the command to love God just a well-meaning platitude, with no earthly consequence, or is it an active choice and personal response that affects and determines our day to day existence?

In chapter 3 of Proverbs, from which we take our text this morning, the father is instructing his son on what it means to love God with all his heart, soul, and might; and he is also giving him the practical and favorable implications of that love.

Proverbs 3, verses 1-4:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life, and peace they will add to you. Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man. (Prov 3:1-4 NASB)

It can be difficult for us to identify emotionally with this passage, because it seems to promise more than our life experience validates. We know of godly men and women whose lives on this earth were neither long nor favorable in the sight of all men. Jesus Christ himself, who was sinless and wise, is ample proof that the righteous are not free from public rejection and personal tragedy.

But it is important to remember that the observations and promises of the Book of Proverbs look not only at this earthly life, but also life beyond the grave. The intention of the father is not to give a step-by-step recipe that guarantees a long or prosperous life, but to instruct his son in a life of humble obedience before the Lord; and to reveal basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that will help him grow in wisdom and stature before God and man. The scope of the father’s teaching to his son therefore looks *into* and *beyond* this present life. He uses vivid imagery to impress upon him that loving the Lord brings real rewards.

In these first few verses we see that the father is following the mandate of Deuteronomy 6:1-9, to diligently teach his son the commands of the Lord. The father’s teaching is God’s teaching. He has heard and

understood the Word of God, and is now explaining it and applying it for his son.

His first exhortations are “do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments”; and, “do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.”

The father knows that loving the Lord and living righteously before him begins with the heart. The son cannot truly love God until he comes to know him. And it is primarily by the Word of God that he will come to know God. It is vital therefore for him to treasure God’s Word, to meditate on it and memorize it, to follow and keep it and have it etched deeply within his heart where he will not forget it and no one can take it away.

The words “kindness” and “truth” are often translated “loyal-love” and “faithfulness,” and are used throughout scripture to describe the character of God. Thus what the father is saying is that as the son meditates on the Word of God, and applies it in his life, not only is he expressing his love for God, he is becoming more like God; his character becomes a reflection of God’s character.

The father says that as a result of living life this way two things are likely to happen: First, his son will live an abundant and fulfilling life beyond that which he could attain on his own: “length of days and years of life, and peace they will add to you.” “Peace” means “wholeness” and “well-being,” and qualifies this lasting life as one that includes inner contentment, delight, and joy. This is not a guarantee that the wise will never die young, but in contrast to the fool and the wicked, the righteous will not be taken by the snare of their own net, and their life will not be spent in guilt, shame, and fear.

The second result of the son’s keeping the commandments of God and displaying kindness and truth, is that others will enjoy being around him. Finding “favor and good repute in the sight of God and man” means that he will likely find gracious acceptance and a good reputation in his relationships. As he exhibits the character of God in his daily affairs, people will be attracted to him because he is loyal and loving.

So we see that our first expression of love towards God is to come to know him; to treasure and keep his Word and bring it to the very center of our life, that as we live each day we might become a “fragrant aroma” to both God and man.

Do we really know God? How well do we have his Word etched on our hearts? What do we have etched on our hearts? What *do* we place at the center of our being that we have immediate access to and dare not forget?

We memorize our ATM pass-code, AOL password, Social Security number, important phone numbers, etc. We even have a lot of worldly wisdom at our fingertips. We remember things like, “A penny saved is a penny earned”; and “Look before you leap.”

But what about the Word of God? Are we so versed in it that we are able to share it to encourage a brother or sister in need? Are we

ready to give an “account for the hope that is within us” to those who do not know the Lord? Are we so in love with God and so familiar with his Word that we could faithfully lead someone in the way of salvation at any time and place?

The New Testament (and the Gospel of John in particular), make it clear that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. So it is no surprise that the promises of the father to the son are echoed in the New Testament, and ultimately fulfilled through Jesus. Listen to the words of John: “And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11-12). And the words of Jesus himself: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21). To know and love God then, involves not only treasuring the scriptures, but treasuring the One of whom the scriptures speak. Just as we are to write the Word of God into our hearts, so also we must invite Jesus into our hearts: to treasure him, to have fellowship with him, to express our love to him by keeping his commandments and expressing his character through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The second expression of how we can “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might” is given in verses 5-8:

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 make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body, and refreshment to your bones. (3:5-8)

We can express our love for God by trusting him completely. The father is impressing upon his son that there are really only two paths in life: to either trust the Lord and fear God, or to trust himself and fear other people. If he were to trust himself and lean on his own “understanding,” then he would be imitating the lifestyle of whoever it seemed was the happiest and most successful, even though that would bring him to ruin.

The father tells his son there is a better way. The correct path is to trust the Lord who inspires and upholds the proverbs. He is reminding him that the source of ultimate wisdom is not found in himself, but in the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The father puts it a little more bluntly later in the book when he says, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered” (Prov 28:26).

To trust someone means to feel secure with them, to rely or lean on them. The difference between believing there is a God and actually trusting in God is enormous. We are not to confuse the two. We are not to simply have an intellectual belief in an impersonal God who upholds some kind of moral order. We are to cast ourselves totally and without reserve into the arms of God. We are to fear the Lord, turn away from evil, and trust in the One who holds the past, present, and future.

Can we trust and fear God at the same time? Often we fear that which we cannot trust. But in these verses fear and trust are compatible and complementary. The fear spoken of here is not an emotion of terror or dread, rather it is an attitude of respect and humility before God.

To “trust in the Lord” and “fear the Lord” are two sides of the same coin. They are the opposite of “leaning on our own understanding” and “being wise in our own eyes.” They are the opposite of pride.

Howard Butts in his book, *The Art of Being a Big Shot*, writes:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It is appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, and go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can't ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, and limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

We all struggle with pride. I am reminded of a anecdote I once read about Muhammad Ali. Ali, who is now a much admired athlete, in his youth often referred to himself as “the greatest.” On one occasion he is said to have refused to fasten his seat-belt on an airplane. After repeated requests from the flight attendant to buckle up, he finally said, “Superman don't need no seat-belt!” To which the flight attendant is said to have replied, “Superman don't need no airplane!”

To trust and fear God is the humble recognition that only God is God—and we are not God. The “fear of God” means submitting to the truth that the ultimate authority in all things lies with God and not us; that the ultimate discernment of good and evil can be found only in him; and that our present existence and ultimate destiny lie in his hands only.

We know from the book of Genesis that Adam and Eve did not fear God in this way. They did not take his word or his warning seriously. Instead of turning away from evil they flirted with it; they did what “seemed right in their own eyes,” and they paid a heavy price. They learned the hard way that mankind was never created to know right and wrong with himself as his central reference point. That was to be learned only from the direct revelation from God.

To help his son avoid the same mistake, the father here exhorts him to trust God entirely (“with all your heart”), exclusively (“do not lean on your own understanding,” “do not be wise in your own eyes”), and exhaustively (“in all your ways”).

Trust is characterized by total commitment. We are not to trust the Lord in some areas of our life but not others. We are to allow God access and free rein in every area of our life, whether small or big, private or public, mundane or lofty, temporal or eternal. We are to live a lifestyle of obedience and dependence upon God in the good times and the bad.

Charles Colson in his book *Loving God* tells of a young woman in a suburban Washington church who demonstrated this kind of trust:

No one was surprised when Patti Awan stood during the informal praise time at the Sunday evening service. A young Sunday school teacher with an air of quiet maturity, she had given birth to a healthy son a few months earlier, a first child for her and her husband Javy. The congregation settled back for a report of the baby's progress and his parents' thanksgiving. They were totally unprepared for what followed.

Hanging onto the podium before her, Patti began. “Four years ago this week, a young girl sat crying on the floor of a New Jersey apartment, devastated by the news of a lab report. Unmarried and alone, she had just learned she was pregnant.”

The congregation grew completely quiet. Patti's tear-choked voice indicated just who that young woman was.

“I considered myself a Christian at the time,” she continued. “But I had found out about Christ while in the drug scene. After I learned about Him, I knew I wanted to commit myself to Him, but I couldn’t give up my old friends or my old habits. So I was drifting between two worlds—in one still smoking dope every day and sleeping with the man who lived in the apartment below mine; in the other, going to church, witnessing to others, and working with the church youth group.

“But being pregnant ripped through the hypocrisy of my double life. I had been meaning to ‘get right with God,’ but I kept slipping back. Now I couldn’t live a nice, clean Christian life like all those church people. I felt the only answer was to wipe the slate clean. I would get on abortion; no one in the church would ever know.

“The clinic scheduled an abortion date. I was terrified, but my boyfriend was adamant. My sister was furious with me for being so stupid as to get pregnant. Finally, in desperation I wrote my parents. They were staunch Catholics, and I knew they would support me if I decided to have the baby. My mother called me: ‘If you don’t get an abortion, I don’t want to see you while you’re pregnant. Your life will be ruined and you’ll deserve it.’

“I had always been desperately dependent on other people. But I knew this was one decision I had to make alone. I was looking out my bedroom window one night when I thought clearly for the first time in weeks. I realized I either believed this Christianity or I didn’t believe it. And if I believed in Christ, then I couldn’t do this. God is real, I thought, even if I’ve never lived like He is.

“That decision was a point of no return. I put my faith in the God of the Bible, not the God I had made up in my head. I was still everything I never wanted to be—pregnant, alone, deserted by family, and rejected by the one I loved. Yet for the first time in my life I was really peaceful, because I knew for the first time I was being obedient.

“When I went to an obstetrician and told him of my decision to have the baby and why I had made that choice, he refused to charge me for the pre-natal care and delivery. I confessed my double life to the church, and through the support of Christians was able to move away from my old friends to an apartment of my own. I began going to a Christian counseling agency and felt God leading me to give the baby up for adoption.

“I had a beautiful baby girl and named her Sarah. She was placed with a childless Christian couple, and we all felt God’s hand in the decision.

“And so that’s why I praise God this evening. I thought in the depths of my despair that my life was ruined, but I knew I had to at least be obedient in taking responsibility for my sin. But today, because of that very despair and obedience, I have what I never thought I could—a godly husband, and now a baby of our own. But what matters more than any thing is that I have what I was searching for so desperately before—peace with God.”

What a tremendous testimony of God’s faithfulness in this woman’s life! But what about us? Can God be trusted in every area of *our* life? Can we trust God with our family life, our sex life, our social life? How about our business life or our financial life? Is God trustworthy when we lose our job, when we are embroiled in legal troubles, when our teenager is addicted to drugs? How about when a young child dies unexpectedly, a wife cannot get pregnant, a husband has an affair, or a daughter is raped?

Trusting God is difficult. This is why Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt by the hand of God was so central to their faith. God had proved himself trustworthy. The nation of Israel was to never forget how the mighty and loving God had delivered them from bondage and oppression. The Lord who had delivered them could also be trusted to help them overcome their enemies in taking possession of the Promised Land.

It is the same in our lives. As the exodus from Egypt was for the nation of Israel, so the cross of Christ is for you and me. We may not all have shining examples of God’s faithfulness in our lives, but the cross of Christ is a reminder that God is trustworthy. The same Lord who freed us from the bondage and oppression of sin and death at the cross on Calvary, is the same Lord we are to cling to each and every day to see us through our present trials and direct us in an abundant, joyous, and eternal life.

Do our lives exhibit this kind of loving trust in our Heavenly Father? Do we trust him entirely, exclusively, and exhaustively? Do we throw ourselves in his arms in complete abandon, expecting him to care for us with his unlimited resources? Do we ask the Lord to guide us throughout the day, constantly looking for his direction, ready and eager to move this way or that at his leading?

For some of us, trusting God means stopping attempts to impress him with all our activity and cease striving, resting in his grace, assured that he loves us and accepts us just the way we are.

But it seems we are scared of trusting God. We are scared because we either do not believe that he is all-powerful, or that he does not truly love us and does not have our infinite best in mind.

The cross of Christ and the empty tomb are shining beacons throughout all eternity that God is sovereign and that he does indeed love you and me.

In verses 6 and 8, the father tells his son that loving the Lord by completely trusting in him is likely to have favorable results. If his son has a spirit of humility before the Lord, and acts out that humility in total dependence upon God, then he can expect his way to be straight and his life to be filled with vitality.

A reverence for God, and therefore an obedience to his ways and an avoidance of evil ways, will not only keep this young man spiritually strong, but keep him from an unhealthy and deadly pattern of behavior. This does not mean that he would not face conflict, suffering, or chaos, but rather that he would not walk in the crooked and perverse ways of the wicked whose lives are wasting away and who stumble along in the dark. The Lord will provide the trusting disciple with refreshment and healing, and guide him through the difficulties and dangers of life.

Finally, in verses 9-10, the father tells his son that how he manages his resources can also be an expression of his love for God. Where his money is spent is a public testimony of where his heart is. Jesus himself said, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt 6:21). Verses 9-10:

Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine. (3:9-10)

To honor God is to give him social weight. The father is exhorting his son to express his esteem, love, and trust for the Lord publicly. To give the first of his harvest to God is to show that all that follows in the harvest is also God’s.

Giving to the Lord demonstrates not only that God is his first priority, it is a public acknowledgment that the entire harvest is a

blessing and a gift from him. It is a public testimony that his trust is in God, because God is the one who has given the harvest.

The father is not directing his son to give to God after his barns are full and his vats are overflowing. He is saying, give to God first. Giving out of his abundance is an act of thanksgiving, but giving before abundance is an act of faith. It is this kind of public faith and trust that brings honor to the Lord.

Are we honoring the Lord with our wealth? Is God our first priority, or do we spend our resources in any way we want and then give God a tip, a gratuity or finders-fee for his help in gaining our wealth?

Do we determine the lifestyle we want and then give God what's left over, or do we determine what to give back to the Lord first and then allow that to help us determine our lifestyle? By giving to the Lord first we are declaring for all the world to see that our trust is not in our wealth; it is in the Lord. We are admitting before the world that all that we are and have is not ultimately a consequence of our intellect and effort, but that our abilities, family, friends, food, clothes, and shelter, all are gifts from him.

All our resources are the Lord's, and so we are accountable to him for how we use them. Are we using them mostly to entertain our family and impress our friends, or to participate in the work of the Lord? Are we using our resources to bring attention to ourselves or glory to God?

In verse 10, the father tells his son that if he loves the Lord by honoring him with his wealth, then he will have all that he needs, and more.

We see the same sentiment expressed in the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Let each one 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 Cor 9:6-8).

The scriptures never promise that we will have all that we want. But they assure us that beyond whatever measure of physical resources we may have, those who have put their trust and faith in Christ have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." We are God's children, and we are rich in the currency of his kingdom. We have an endless supply of his grace, forgiveness, love, mercy, and peace. Our hearts will never be empty of his love.

The father does not tell us exactly where to spend our wealth, but the Lord has made it clear in both the Old and New Testaments that he is honored when we care for those who are in spiritual, physical, and emotional need. This means not only using our wealth to care for those who have been set aside to lead his people in acts of worship, it also means using our resources to reach out in love and help those who cannot help themselves.

When I reflect on this subject, I am always immediately drawn to two passages in scripture that speak on this issue of how to use our wealth to "honor the Lord." The first is found in James 1:27: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

The second passage, from the lips of Jesus, is found in Matthew 25, beginning in verse 31:

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him: and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give you drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You. And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'" (Matt 25:31-40)

A third way we can express our love for the Lord is by using the resources he has given us to care for those who are in spiritual, physical, and emotional need.

As we reach the end of the father's discourse to his son on how to love the Lord, we rather expect a "and he lived happily ever after, never once failing or transgressing God's law" ending. But, the father knows that there will be failure and a need for growth, and thus a need for the Lord's correction. Verses 11-12:

My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe his reproof, for whom the Lord loves he reproves, even as a father, the son in whom He delights. (3:11-12)

The father here instructs his son that a fourth and final way of expressing his love for God is to submit to his discipline. He knows that wisdom is also attained through correction. We are not to despise, dread, or rebel against the Lord's discipline, but to submit to it. We are not to have any area in our life where we keep him at a distance. We are to allow all of its aspects to come under the Lord's scrutiny so that he can mold and shape, correct and lead us.

We ought to expect and welcome the Lord's correction, not as coming from an angry or disappointed disciplinarian who wants to punish us, but from a loving and gentle Heavenly Father who wants to help us mature.

It ought to be a great comfort to us to know that though we will fail in constantly loving the Lord "with all our heart, soul, and might," we have a Heavenly Father who delights in us and will correct us. This is evidence that God loves us. We are not to hate being corrected by him, but rejoice in it, because it is evidence that we are indeed his adopted children, and we are being molded into his image.

These twelve verses in Proverbs teach us how to love God in our day to day life. The passage begins and ends with the image of a father teaching his son whom he loves. Here we see most clearly that our love for God is not motivated by self-promotion or self-preservation, but is simply our response to what Chesterton called "the furious love of God." We see here a foreshadowing of the merciful truth expressed in 1 John 4:19, "We love, because He first loved us."

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