



Catalog No. 1064

Proverbs 4:1-9

First Message

Pat Harrison

July 6, 1997

THE VALUE OF WISDOM

The first eighteen years of my life were relatively smooth sailing. I had a loving home. My needs and wants were provided for. I enjoyed above average successes academically and athletically. I was well-adjusted and likeable. I also was grounded spiritually, responding to the invitation to seriously follow Christ at a tender age fifteen.

The last twenty years have been different, however. I've had to deal with leaving home, going to college, not knowing a soul, my parents' divorce, financial independence, choosing my life's work, the deaths of loved ones, loneliness, marriage, dealing with the addictions and depressions of people close to me, having children, parenting children, juggling job, marriage and children, etc.

What challenges have you had to cope with? What would your list look like?

Sooner or later, life requires us to reach deep within ourselves to see what's there. Or, having done that, we search outside of ourselves for resources to guide us through unpredictable and sometimes treacherous waters.

What have you relied on? What has been your guide? And has it been working for you? Job asked, "Where can wisdom be found?" Can we wear a "wisdom patch" behind our ear? Hang out with wise people? Read enough books?

And it's tough to have wisdom in life when you're young. Mark Twain said: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." For the young here today, what will be your guide?

Imagine there is a book that offers wisdom on how to handle the issues of life. Would you pick it up? This book is very practical, too. It speaks about dealing with the lure of easy money, easy sex, the pursuit of materialism, true friendship, the power of words to heal and hurt, use of time, dealing with gangs and peer pressure, family life, and the nature of God.

No, this book is not in the checkout line of the grocery store; it's within your reach. Welcome to the three thousand-year-old book of Proverbs.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs, written by Solomon, under God's direction, are a very readable manual for handling these challenges from a wise father's perspective to a teachable son. Eighteen times the father begins a section with the words "my son," and then shares from his treasure of wisdom. Often, he takes his son into the streets of real life to observe the outcomes of wise and foolish decisions in life. The wisdom is shared with us in the form of vivid pictures, brief sayings and analogies designed not to spoon-feed us, but to spur us into thought and reflection. We have to dig a little for its truth.

So this morning I invite you to let God do an examination of your life: what drives you, what you value, what you rely on for your

primary resource for handling life's problems. Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to join me? It's worth it.

In this three-week series in the book of Proverbs we will learn from the father's teaching, from chapter 4. Today, in verses 1-9, we will see the two ways we must value wisdom for the result to be a life of beauty—the way life was designed to be lived .

Proverbs 4:1-9:

**Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father,
And give attention that you may gain understanding.
For I give you sound teaching;
Do not abandon my instruction.
When I was a son to my father,
Tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,
Then he taught me and said to me,
"Let your heart hold fast my words;
Keep my commandments and live;
Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;
Love her, and she will watch over you.
The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.
Prize her, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a garland of grace;
She will present you with a crown of beauty." (Prov 4:1-9 NASB)**

What a beautiful picture is set before us! Here is the impassioned appeal of the father for attentiveness from his son, the tender recollection of his own home environment, and the words of his own father, the boy's grandfather.

Since we're beginning in the middle of Proverbs, we must first understand some assumptions found in this book.

First, we must understand the nature of wisdom. What is wisdom, anyway? In Proverbs, wisdom is not measured by intellect or degrees, but by character. Wisdom is the ability to apply truth to one's life experiences. It is not merely knowing truth, it is not theoretical or abstract, but has as its goal successful and responsible living.

Furthermore, in the Proverbs, wisdom is often personified, and that Person is ultimately expressed in Christ himself in light of New Testament revelation. Jesus is the very embodiment of wisdom. God crystallized his wisdom in his Son. So to fully understand and embrace wisdom, one must seek after and embrace God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Evidence for this is found throughout the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 1:30, the apostle Paul says that Christ Jesus became the "wisdom from God" for us. In Colossians 2:3, he says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Hebrews begins by saying that "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers

in the prophets in many portions and in many ways [which includes Proverbs], in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.”

A second assumption we need to understand is what is meant by the phrase, “the fear of the Lord.” It isn’t mentioned in our passage specifically, but as we have heard this morning in our Scripture readings, from Job (28:28), Ecclesiastes (12:13) and the introduction of Proverbs, the beginning of knowledge and the search for wisdom is “the fear of the Lord.”

What does this mean? Basically, it means an orientation to seek answers to life’s questions from a higher authority—the Lord—and not yourself. The egocentric person does not do that. He looks within himself for the resources to handle all that life throws at him. The “fear of the Lord” also is a deep respect and awe, not a fearful terror. It is not being afraid of God, that he is going to get even with you. It is being afraid of doing something that will hurt the heart of God.

A third thing we must understand as we approach our study in Proverbs is that we be teachable. The first words out of the father’s mouth in almost every section are: “listen,” “hear my words,” “give attention.”

Meaningful communication involves active listening—and listening well is difficult. If I want my five-year-old’s attention when I’m trying to teach him about safety, I appeal to him to stop what he’s doing and look at me. And he appeals to me when he wants to communicate something valuable to him. He’ll even grab my shirt and pull me down to him when it is evident I am preoccupied and merely paying lip-service to his voice.

Wisdom is not for a fool, not because a fool is dumb, but because he is unteachable. He is “wise in his own eyes.” He doesn’t seriously want to know about God. God desires our attentive hearts and minds, our willingness to learn.

The last thing we need to know as we come to this book is that wisdom is first to be learned in the home. Wisdom is best transferred generationally and along lines of affection.

Mother and father both are involved (1:8-9; 6:20) in this training of character. And the environment is the home, where tenderness exists and memories are created and shared. Further, the learning doesn’t stay there only, but immediately goes out into the streets (1:10-19), into all of life, to show the son what life is like and how to relate to it wisely.

So, what are the two ways we must value wisdom? And how should it look in our lives? The grandfather gives two images which represent how to treat wisdom if you’re serious about it. The first is in verses 5 and 7; the second is in verses 6, 8 and 9.

First, we must value wisdom as the supreme possession in life. Verses 5 and 7:

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget, not turn away from the words of my mouth...
The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;
And with all your acquiring, get understanding. (4:5, 7)

By repetition, he gets his point across. Five times, the same word is used, which is translated “acquire,” “buy,” or “get.” This is a business term which means to purposefully and intentionally acquire something in order to possess it. When we were in Israel, I saw this word displayed in the banks while we were “buying” shekels. I also saw it on a shopping mall. Because you value something as essential to life, you acquire it.

The point here is that he’s not talking about a material thing, but wisdom. But, in the same way, do we purposefully set aside the valuable assets of time and attention in order to acquire wisdom?

My son asked us recently about heaven. He pondered this place where we’ll see God and be with him forever. He asked if he could take any toys with him. We said he wouldn’t need any of them, because in heaven it was one big party. He thought about that and asked if an angel could come down and retrieve a few of his “treasures,” his favorite possessions, which he keeps in a little box.

We find this amusing, but really, we live our lives accumulating and consuming as if we’re going to take our favorite toys with us. Is that wise?

The language is intensified in verse 7: “in all your acquiring, acquire understanding!” This means, buy it at any cost, above all other acquisitions!

The grandfather is saying, think of all the material things we acquire over our lifetime, yet if we leave out wisdom, we have nothing. If we are busy collecting things above all else, all we’re really doing is rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic!

The best indicator of our priorities is to examine our daytimers, our checkbooks, and have someone interview our wives.

I must say to you that when it comes to Christ being preeminent in my thought life, my schedule, my prayer life and devotional life, you wouldn’t think I valued wisdom much. You might think that I valued more the praise of people.

Too often we trivialize or marginalize God. We compartmentalize him so we can manage him.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the children were finding out about who Aslan is. They ask if Aslan is a man, and Mr. Beaver replies:

“Aslan a man? Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the song of the great Emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—THE Lion.”

“Oooh!”, said Susan. “I thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about being safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Too often we have domesticated and tamed God. We don’t value him because we have the wrong idea of who he is, or we want a Jesus who is “safe.”

Secondly, we must value wisdom as the supreme relationship in life. This is the second quality which the grandfather emphasizes. Verses 6, 8, 9:

Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;
Love her, and she will watch over you...
Prize her, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a garland of grace;
She will present you with a crown of beauty.” (4:6, 8-9)

Many times in Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman who is presented as the true bride of the soul. The language is that of a bride and groom. Notice that the level of intimacy intensifies in verses 6 and 8: Do not abandon her, love her, prize her, embrace her.

I went to a wedding last week. It was an wonderfully detailed and beautiful occasion. Time seemed to stop as a glimpse of heaven's joy and beauty were captured for a moment. The emotion for me came from the imagery surrounding the bride: the absolute preciousness of her dreams fulfilled there; her preciousness and purity in the eyes of the groom, her father, and all those who knew her made her much-anticipated entrance stunning.

This is the picture the father is giving us about wisdom: that Christ is to be our most treasured, cherished and honored relationship. Treasure him as you would a woman you are taking to be your bride for life.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I went with a group to tour Israel. For the rest of our lives we will recall that wonderfully rich time together. What a blessing for our relationship, that we were able to experience it together rather than build distinct memories apart from each other.

Too often we do this with Christ. We don't let him into all areas and experiences of our lives. We don't cherish his company. Thus we build separate memories and lives apart from him. So we lack the intimacy we long for.

Building a relationship with Christ, then, means spending time with him and not building distinct memories in life apart from him. We can spend time with him in prayer, both listening and speaking from the heart. We can spend time with his Word. And we can spend meaningful time with others who know him and will also encourage this relationship first in our life.

Seeking to prize Christ as our highest relationship will serve to make all our other relationships healthier.

If we do this, if we value our relationship with Christ over our other important relationships, like marriage and children, what effect will that have?

Eugene Peterson has some wise insights here:

When I observe the families where parents seem to be doing a good job of living the Christian faith in relation to their children, it is readily apparent that the actual practices vary widely. Particular rules, techniques of discipline, variations of strictness and permissiveness, they all run the gamut. One thing stands out, though. These parents seriously, honestly, joyfully, follow the way of Christ themselves. They don't define adolescence as a problem and try and solve it; they are engaged in vigorous Christian growth on their own, and permit their children to look over their shoulders while they do it.

Are we allowing our children to look over our shoulders at our dynamic relationship with Christ, our struggles and victories? Or do they only see our arguments and disappointments in their choices?

And notice that a dynamic relationship with Christ where we are communicating with each other, falling in love with him and lifting him up to the place of the most special relationship of our life will result in receiving back blessing. Christ, the wisdom from God, will guard you, watch over you, exalt you, honor you, and crown your life with beauty and grace. This is the nature of a prized relationship with God. It is two-way; it is increasingly tender and sweet; and we receive much more than we dreamed.

So we need to ask ourselves two questions:

Has a preoccupation with the acquisition of "stuff" got in the way of seeking the Lord, at any cost?

Is another relationship in this life of greater importance to us than Christ?

Proverbs reminds us that the wisdom of God is available to anyone who wants it. Come and get it. It is free, but not cheap.

Let us return to our first love, the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ.

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Proverbs 4:10-19

Second Message

Pat Harrison

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THE WAY OF THE FOOL

Man continues to accomplish incredible feats. We can send a near flawless probe to Mars. We can clone sheep. Through the Internet, I can transmit or receive a message anywhere in the world. A twenty-one year-old can win the most prestigious golf tournament in the world—by twelve shots!

But, the speed of life is frightening sometimes. And it seems to be accelerating. Even if you want to slow down to sixty-five on the freeway, everyone else is going seventy-five, so it's almost impossible. We have no margins in our lives, so when life throws us a curve, we are immediately overwhelmed.

And the complexity of life is numbing. I looked at a business card the other day that showed me about nine different ways I could leave this man a message. Cell phone, work phone, voice mail, home phone, pager, fax, car phone, e-mail, and snail mail to his home address. Probably I'd never actually talk with him, but I could exchange information with his machines. What he should have put on there is, "just drop by sometime for a chat!" What happened to that one?

But at some point you have to ask, does checking and maintaining all these electronic things really simplify my life?

James Thurber once wrote, "Man is flying too fast for a world that is round. Soon he will catch up with himself in a great rear-end collision, and man will never know what hit him from behind was man."

Basically, we don't know how to apply wisdom to what we know.

Knowledge and information seem to be on the superhighway and wisdom is putting along on a country road somewhere. Our ability to do outstrips our ability to be.

Does God really have anything to say about our predicament? In our opening study in the book of Proverbs we saw that God makes Wisdom accessible and practical through placing him first in our lives.

But is the cost too high? Are the benefits to following wisdom real? Does it really pay to remain faithful to God when it seems easier to just "go with the flow"?

Someone once said, "Each man has a choice in life: he may approach it as a creator or critic, a lover or a hater, a giver or a taker." And Proverbs would add, "a wise man or a fool." In chapter 1 we are told "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." But the second half of that verse is an equally important part of wisdom: "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." Thus enters another player in the drama of Proverbs, the fool.

Foolishness is not being a prankster, as we might think of it today. As we said last week, it is basically an approach to life that is self-oriented. The fool is "wise in his own eyes" (Prov 12:15).

There are many descriptions of fools in Proverbs. There is the naive simpleton who is uncommitted and gullible to anything. Then there are several other types who seem progressively resistant to truth

based on their chosen outlook, not their brain power. Only the scoff-er is impervious to truth, and is unteachable. But in all of them, the root of his trouble is spiritual.

So, the father's training of his son is to introduce him to the prevailing godless attitudes of the world around him and at the same time instill a love for God. In 4:1-9, first we saw that he must seek wisdom at any cost. Now, in verses 10-19, the father tells him to stay on the path of wisdom. But there will be foolish opposition. He wants him to understand what motivates the wicked person. It's not enough to just tenaciously follow the wisdom of the Lord, we must understand the motivations and outcomes of unwise choices.

Today we will learn that there are fundamentally two paths that our choices take us down, the wise and the foolish, and we will be shown clear benefits for seeking the wise path and rejecting the way of the fool.

Proverbs 4:10-19:

**Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many.
I have directed you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in upright paths.
When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;
And if you run, you will not stumble.
Take hold of instruction; do not let it go.
Guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked,
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on.
For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.**

**For they eat the bread of wickedness,
And drink the wine of violence.
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble. (Prov 4:10-19 NASB)**

Notice the many references there are for images of "movement." Words suggesting movement on a journey are everywhere: see, walk, steps, run, stumble (three times), enter, path, way, proceed, pass by, turn away, pass on. All of it surrounds the idea of being on a road or journey.

In fact, the passage breaks out based on two "ways." Verses 10-13 speak about the way of wisdom (v. 11a); verses 14-17 give insight into the "way of the wicked" (v. 14a). Then the passage concludes, in 18-19, with a summary image of light and darkness to describe again, the paths of the righteous and the wicked.

We all understand this image of being on a journey. We use this phraseology all the time today. We say “we’re on the road of life.” The Bible describes our process of growing in relationship with God as a “walk.” The Lord God “walked” with Adam and Eve in the garden. God sent fire at night and a cloud by day in the wilderness to “show you the way which you should go” (Deut 1:33). Psalm 1 speaks of the way of a righteous man contrasted with the way of the wicked. And then Jesus landed this image in himself, saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

But we all know there are many false and harmful ways. And, as Proverbs says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

So what are some benefits of the wise path, of staying on the path of wisdom?

The first thing the father tells his son is, being teachable and humble is healing and life-giving: “that the years of your life will be many.” Verse 10:

**Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many. (4:10)**

As is his custom, the father beseeches his son to listen to and accept the wisdom passed down from his father and forefathers, the law, and what the One God, Yahweh, has revealed. The fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, is linked with a promise that it would “go well with you and your days may be prolonged.” In Proverbs 4:22, the father’s words are life-giving and healing if taken into the heart. James (5:14-16) even suggests that sometimes sickness is related to sin or caused by sin and that prayer and confession in the company of other believers brings forgiveness and healing.

Secondly, the father tells his son that the path of wisdom will add stability to his life. Verses 11-12:

**I have directed you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in upright paths.
When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;
And if you run, you will not stumble. (4:11-12)**

The word here that says “upright paths” can be literally “straight tracks.” It is used for a well-worn groove or rut that’s carved through repeated movements by an ox cart on a path. The rut actually keeps the cart on a straight path. And it’s harder to drift off the road because you know the way and have worn a path with many others before you. Do you know you can actually be in a good rut, not just a bad one? You can even pick up your speed and run with confidence, knowing the right way, and you will not stumble.

This is what it’s like applying God’s truth to your life—making a pattern out of it. It is harder to deviate; and you receive the reward of stability.

Are you tentative because you are unsure of the wisdom of following a certain decision or relationship in your life? Is your life unstable, and when you pick up speed, it really gets scary, because you don’t know where you will end up?

Finally, the father says, be diligent to hang on to what you’ve learned about wisdom. Verse 13:

**Take hold of instruction; do not let it go.
Guard her, for she is your life. (4:13)**

The father now drives it home by using three ways of saying we must not be complacent in our walk with God. Seize (wisdom), don’t relax, guard her.

We can’t ever afford to stop learning and growing. We can’t rest. Athletes have to keep their muscles toned or they will go backward and atrophy. Will Rogers said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there!”

The reason is because “she is your life.” Wisdom, which we know is Christ himself, gives us a quality and stability of life we can’t afford to ignore.

But it is also true that we can’t afford to engage in the other path, in verse 14, the way of wickedness.

So the second part of the motivation to stay on the path of wisdom is to understand what motivates the wicked and what his outcome is.

In chapter 1, the father took his son into the streets to observe the mob, the gang, the peer group that offers excitement, a shared purse, and acceptance. (Sounds a lot like parts of the business world too, not just the temptations of the young!) In chapters 5 and 7, the father takes his son into the world of sexual temptation and shows him the result of the person without sense who has created an unbridled appetite and in the end loses everything valuable to him.

There are many arenas of foolishness that we need to expose. It could be the seductiveness of materialism or workaholicism. What seduces you and draws you into its world where wisdom is no longer the operable principle in your life?

The father doesn’t ignore or shelter his son from the existence of evil, rather he shows him the teeth of ungodliness and unmasks its allure by explaining where it ends up.

The father gives him two insights about it:

First, you will not be strong enough to resist its charms by being regularly immersed in it. Verses 14-15:

**Do not enter the path of the wicked,
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on. (4:14-15)**

This is why the father repeats himself and intensifies his words. Listen to his language: “Do not enter their path, don’t proceed, avoid it, don’t pass nearby, turn aside, and pass beyond it.”

We must be careful. This isn’t talking about separating ourselves from the world so we don’t get contaminated and live little cloistered Christian lives in Christian communities going from fox hole to fox hole. No, we are being encouraged to apply wisdom to the world we live in, but recognize the power of seduction of certain thinking and self-oriented behavior. Don’t think you can enter into that world day after day and not be affected by it.

So the first insight is really pretty obvious: if you struggle with walking with Christ and seeking wisdom in a certain area of your life, don’t keep placing yourself in the midst of a situation you can’t handle. Remove the fuel. Stay clear. Disengage. Tell someone about it so they can help you as well.

The second insight is deeper. It unmasks what motivates the ungodly. The normal activities of life no longer satisfy them, and they develop an appetite for exploitation. Verses 16-17:

**For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness,
And drink the wine of violence. (4:16-17)**

You meet people down this path who become driven not just to enjoy the common elements of honest labor (rest, food and drink). That's not enough to satisfy their lusts. They live on the edge and promote their own success at the expense of others in the process. In fact, ironically, they are robbed of sleep until they rob life from someone else. They've traded normal bodily appetites, which should refresh and regenerate the body, to become tools for scheming to get what they want. What begins as adventure can end up in an addiction or being hurtful in ways never intended.

The story was in the news recently of several teenagers who started out one evening of adventure taking a road sign. At the end of the night, they had taken nineteen road signs. Later that night another car of teenagers went through the intersection with a missing sign and were broadsided. That sign was a stop sign. All the young people in the second car died. The kids were given fifteen years and a lifetime of dealing with the results of their actions. There was a high cost to continuing down a path of foolishness. What can begin as setting foot in an unwise path, can lead farther than ever imagined.

Again, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it is the way of death." Ultimately, an appetite is created for self, rather than an appetite for God. We have to ask ourselves, do we really want to end up there?

And if that's not enough motivation for clinging to God's path, the father gives us a beautiful analogy, light and darkness. Verses 18-19:

**But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble. (4:18-19)**

The righteous (or followers of God's way) walk in ever-increasing light. It is like dawn breaking into mid-day: it is ever-increasing until full. This is what our relationship with Christ is like. Walking in the light with Jesus is not a static thing, but dynamic, gradually shedding light in shadows and dark places of life.

I like to hike in the hills to spend time alone with Christ. Spending time in God's Word, reflecting on it, and talking with God in prayer, sheds light on muddled areas of my life as I walk. Jesus regularly spent nights in a cave alone to restore his outlook on life from the Father regarding the pressures surrounding him. And the Father would restore him. We have a dynamic relationship with God.

The wicked stumble around in the dark. The word here is actually a deep darkness. Here is a great image of people not looking to Christ but themselves to make it through life. It's like getting up in the middle of the night with a power outage, trying to find a candle, stumbling about. They don't have a clue. Do you want to trip and not even understand what you're tripping over? That's dark.

So, are you moving in the light or stumbling in the dark?

You have a choice. The father is imploring us to choose the way of wisdom and experience, blessing and light, not darkness and defeat. Make no mistake, a choice needs to be made, or a choice will be made for you. This is real.

Joshua exhorted Israel in his farewell words to them, as they lived in a land filled with enemies, "choose for yourselves today who you will serve, the gods of the land around you or the Lord, but for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The scripture on the cover of the bulletin is the Lord appealing his people through Jeremiah to walk in the ancient paths, the good way, and find rest. But the people rejected God and continued their idolatrous ways (Jer 6:16).

What are the gods of our land that woo us to serve them, to leave the Lord of Wisdom, and trust in ourselves as the only way to get ahead?

Has the Way, the Truth and the Life only become one of many ways for you?

Have you let go of his hand and found your own way and now are somewhere you never thought you'd be?

Or are you on the path at all? Perhaps you haven't ever stepped onto the path of walking with Christ. He invites you to leave the realm of darkness and be transferred into the kingdom of light. He said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."

The great news is that wisdom is always available to us. Christ is wooing us to draw near and receive our hearts' desire, a relationship with him. He will lead you on straight paths that will delight you and not put you in danger of losing all that is important to you.

The choice is before us.

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Proverbs 4:20-27

Third Message

Pat Harrison

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THE ISSUE OF THE HEART

The heart is truly a wonder. It beats more than a hundred thousand times a day, pumping oxygen and nutrition through sixty thousand miles of arteries, veins and capillaries. The health of the whole body depends on the heart. It is strategically protected beneath the surface, and is central to our lives.

The condition of our hearts is of great importance to us, and it should be. We spend a great deal of time and money exercising to get our heart rate up, eating less fatty foods, etc. We are preoccupied with exercise and diet. We look at the heart symbols next to menu items. My wife has convinced me of the benefits of tofu, something I never thought possible. I found myself even ordering a tofu enchilada in a restaurant lately.

The Bible teaches there is a spiritual heart too. It too is central and interior to our being, critical to our life as God intended it to be lived, and is always active, receiving and distributing what we feed it. Our spiritual heart is the part that causes us to act the way we do. Our words, attitudes, and actions flow from it.

To care for our spiritual heart, we must understand some things about it.

The heart is the richest term in the Bible for the totality of man's inner nature. It is the deepest core of our being which animates the rest of the body. It is the source of what makes us truly alive: our soul, emotions, longings, ambitions, thoughts, beliefs, and will.

We use this term the same way today. We refer to a deep longing as something we "set our hearts on." And a person who has character has a "good heart."

But, the natural heart apart from God's regenerate touch can be devious. It has the tendency to wander and lead us away from what is good for us. In fact, Jeremiah says the heart is "deceitful above all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9-10).

But then, as we read in David's response to his sin, in Psalm 51, God is pleased with a "broken and contrite heart." Spiritually speaking, we actually need a heart transplant. We all need heart transplants, but often we settle merely for reforming the parts of the old one. We attempt remodeling instead of gutting it like we know it needs. David says "create in me a clean heart." Create, here, means to bring something new out of nothing, like God did in creation.

So it's reasonable to ask, What is the condition of our spiritual heart? What are our vital signs? Today, our passage from the book of Proverbs is a spiritual heart examination, by the Great Physician. But, it is open book examination, so let's read together. Proverbs 4:20-27:

**My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them depart from your sight;
Keep them in the midst of your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,**

**And health to all their whole body.
Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth,
And put devious lips far from you.
Let your eyes look directly ahead,
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.
Watch the path of your feet,
And your ways will be established.
Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
Turn your foot from evil. (Prov 4:20-27 NASB)**

Notice the metaphor throughout is members of the body. Ear, eyes, heart, whole body, heart, mouth, lips, eyes, eyelids, feet, and foot are mentioned, top to bottom, each with different functions. Members that receive information are mentioned in verses 20-22. The heart is the ultimate receptacle (verse 23), but like the physical heart, it passes through and recirculates what came in. Then out of the heart, active members are mentioned (verses 24-27). But the heart is at the center of the passage, literally and in importance of meaning.

So how do we go about improving the condition of our hearts?

There are two parts to this father's test. He tells us to examine two pathways: what's going in and what's going out of the heart.

Let us examine the quality of the inflow. Verses 20-23:

**My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them depart from your sight;
Keep them in the midst of your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
And health to all their whole body.
Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life. (4:20-23)**

The emphasis here is what's going inside. What are the ways we ingest into the spiritual heart?

First, be attentive, bend your ear toward God's wisdom. What do we listen to? Gossip? Endless talk radio? There are a lot more big talkers in the world than good listeners. Have you noticed that? We can be attentive to God rather than just talking about God all the time.

And second, fix your eyes upon that which is good. What do you look at? The gate of the eyes can receive truth and beauty or it can take in harmful material. Jesus said, "the lamp of the body Is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear (healthy), your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." He was talking about the pathway to the heart too, because he just said in the verse preceding this, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

We need to keep the pathway to the heart unhindered. The health of the whole body depends on the quality of what we ingest into our body and gets absorbed into the blood stream and then distributed by the heart. The heart is a pass-through mechanism and doesn't discriminate between nutrients and toxins. Harmful things get circulated as well.

Take the entertainment industry, which floods our homes and lives. It's amazing what's at our disposal for entertainment these days, videos, music, television, games, movies, etc., and the money we spend on it. It's been my observation that generally we are indiscriminate with videos and movies. The only questions we ask are, "Is it sold out?" or, "Who can I go with?" I'm not going to try to set a specific standard, but why not use the test: What will it do to my heart?

Finally, God's Word flows to the center of the heart where it will provide life for the whole body. What is the center of your life? What informs you at the core?

Perhaps some of you know about the Delaney sisters, Sadie and Bessie. They have shared their story and wisdom about life in a couple of books recently. They are worth listening to, because they are about 108 and 106 years old. I think the Lord took one of them home recently. They are from a family of ten children and parents who were slaves.

Talking about their time growing up, they said:

Papa kept the Bible in his study, and we'd get a reading from it every night before we went to sleep. Papa always handled the Bible very carefully. He used to tell us never to put anything on top of it, not even a piece of paper. It was sacred. That Bible—the Word of God—was the center of our home, and you know, we still have it. We keep it in the living room, on a special small table between the two chairs where we spend most of our time. The Bible is where we go for guidance. God's wisdom is at work in the words, but you can also get plenty of practical advice in the Bible. After all, mankind hasn't changed that much. [*Book of Everyday Wisdom*]

Is God's Word central to your life, your home? Often you see entertainment centers being the center. The wise son, then, is diligent to feed the heart spiritually.

Why? Because there are benefits. Verse 22:

**For they are life to those who find them,
And health to all their whole body. (4:22)**

The benefits are, life, and healing to the whole body. The Word of God affects the whole quality of our life and our health. It is medication for the whole of life.

Verse 23 is the center-line of this passage. Without this understanding, the rest won't make any sense. The father has an exhortation: Guard the heart above all else.

Watch over your heart with all diligence. (4:23a)

Literally, it reads, "in all your watching over, watch over your heart." Or, above all other concerns for guarding things, guard your heart. It is very similar language to 4:7, about acquiring wisdom: "in all your acquiring, acquire wisdom."

What do you spend time protecting and guarding? Your house, lifestyle, family, money? Psalm 127 says, "unless the Lord guards the city, the watchmen stay awake in vain."

The way you watch reflects the importance of the heart. Apply all diligence. Constant vigilance is required. If we are energized to guard any area of our lives, it should be this.

So, the heart is to be guarded vigorously. Life becomes very focused and simple when there is a physical crisis in our lives. The same should be true with our spiritual heart. Don't be careless with the thing that provides life to your whole body.

The reason follows:

For from it flow the springs of life. (4:23b)

The heart is the source (spring) of life. Some translations say "wellspring." Literally, it is the "goings out," or outflow of life, like a freshwater spring.

The heart is vital to bring life, much like water. In Israel, springs of water are of utmost importance. Cities were built for proximity to a water source. Battles were fought over water (as they are here in California as well!). Most stream beds in Israel are only seasonal and dry up, but when a consistent spring is found, it is life indeed.

King Hezekiah knew how important a source of spring water was, especially during a time when enemies threatened God's people in Jerusalem. The Assyrian armies under Sennacherib were decimating any cities in their path coming down from the north. Jerusalem was on his hit list. He not only would plunder the city but would bring his style of worship of idols back to the temple where God alone was to be worshipped. Hezekiah had already spent most of his kingship ridding Israel of all its unprecedented number of other gods that came in under King Ahaz.

Under this pressure, Hezekiah built an eighteen hundred-foot tunnel through solid rock from the Gihon spring to the pool of Siloam inside the city walls. You can walk through this marvel of engineering today. Do you know how hard that was to build? From inside, you can see the hand chisel marks. It was all because they needed to guard above all else what was precious to God, the Temple, the place where God resided. But it didn't matter how many fortified walls he had around Jerusalem, if Hezekiah didn't have a source of water. And a constant flow of it. He even blocked off other sources of water so the enemy couldn't be refreshed! He was diligent!

We are to treat our heart, which is God's residence within us, this way to combat the siege of enemies on every side. Do we protect our source of life this tenaciously?

And what is our source or spring that provides life giving water to satisfy our thirst?

The source of never ending spring water is Christ. Remember his words to the woman at the well: "whoever drinks of the water I give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (Jn.4:14). This is the same idea. Jesus was speaking of living water. If she were to drink the kind of water he was offering, she would never be thirsty again. If Christ resides in our hearts, he is that living water. And, unlike the wells that we seek after that soon dry up, that Source, residing in our hearts, will never dry up.

The second pathway the father would have us to examine is, what goes out of the heart. The emphasis here is on the outside. The acting members of the body are affected by what issues forth from the heart.

We should examine the outflow from our hearts, the fruits that are produced in our lives. In verses 24-27, we are told of three areas

where we can see evidence for whether we have a fountain flowing through our hearts or whether they are processing toxins.

First, our speech, what we say. The words of James (3:5-12) say that the controlling of our words is an evidence of the purity of the "fountain" which bubbles forth from within. Do our words build up or tear down? Our speech is evidence of what is in our hearts.

Secondly, our vision, what we see. Our eyes must look straight ahead, neither to left nor right. When my son rides his bike, he has a habit of looking around at me riding behind. I have visions of him riding into a light pole (and he has on occasion). If our vision is directed straight ahead, it will guide our path.

And thirdly, our path, where we go. Keep your feet on the well-worn track. The problems come only when you get off the road. Ephesians 5:15 says be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.

Do you like what's bubbling up out of your life? Do your words build up or tear down?

Is your vision keeping you on track?

How about your path? Where are your feet leading you?

In chapter 4 of Proverbs over the last three weeks we have heard the father share three basic ideas: seek wisdom above all else; choose the way of wisdom; and now, guard your heart above all else. Christ fulfills each one of these in our lives, because he has become our Wisdom, the Way, and now our Source of living water.

What flows into the heart, flows out of the heart. The issue is the heart. And what issues from the heart is critical.

We need a new source of water before we go back to the same old well; otherwise we will get thirsty again. Remember the response of the woman at the well: "give me this water, so I will not be thirsty, and not come all the way here to draw."

Is that our response too? Give me this water, Lord, so I don't keep seeking it from wells which dry up. Or, perhaps we need a change at the source and not make another trip to the dry well.

Do you have vital signs? Do you need a new heart?

Do you desire to have a source in life to never thirst again?

What are you feeding your heart? What is landing in your heart on a consistent basis?

Let's come before the Lord, accepting his examination.

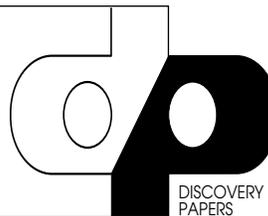
Search me, O God, and know my heart. (Ps 139:23-4)

Let God, the great Physician, heal you and revive your heart, for from it flow the springs of life.

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ENJOYING CONTENTMENT IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



Catalog No. 678
Philippians 4:10-23
Seventh Message
Gary Vanderet
May 29, 1988

If you are a parent, perhaps you can identify with these words by Charles Swindoll in *Come Before Winter* :

Someday when the kids are grown, things are going to be a lot different. The garage won't be full of bikes, electric train tracks on plywood, sawhorses surrounded by chunks of two-by-fours, nails, a hammer and saw, and unfinished "experimental projects,"...I'll be able to park both cars neatly in just the right places, and never again stumble over skateboards, piles of papers (saved for the school fund drive)...

Someday when the kids are grown, the kitchen will be incredibly neat. The sink will be free of sticky dishes, the garbage disposal won't get choked on rubber bands or paper cups, the refrigerator won't be clogged with nine bottles of milk, and we won't lose the tops to jelly jars, ketchup bottles...or the mustard...

Someday when the kids are grown, my lovely wife will actually have the time to get dressed leisurely. A long, hot bath (without three panicked interruptions), time to do her nails (even toe nails if she pleases!) without answering a dozen questions and reviewing spelling words...

Someday when the kids are grown, the instrument called a "telephone" will actually be available. It won't look like it's growing from a teenager's ear. It will simply hang there...silently and amazingly available! And it will be free of lipstick, human saliva, mayonnaise, corn chip crumbs...

Someday when the kids are grown, I'll be able to see through the car windows. Fingerprints, tongue licks, sneaker footprints, dog tracks...will be conspicuous by their absence. The back seat won't be a disaster area, we won't sit on jacks or crayons anymore, the tank will not always be somewhere between empty and fumes, and (glory to God!) I won't have to clean up dog messes another time.

Webster's Dictionary defines the word *content* as "happy enough with what one has or is; not desiring something more or different; satisfied." I must confess to you that God has been working in my life in the area of contentment. I am sure it was his plan that I did not preach this sermon back in February to finish off my series in the book of Philippians. I have had to live with Philippians 4 for over four months. As a result, God has been able to do open heart surgery in my life, pointing out many areas of discontentedness over and over. In fact, I could share many personal examples with you, but I will just share one poignant memory.

About nine years ago, shortly after I came on staff at Peninsula Bible Church, my wife and I almost bought a house in Palo Alto next door to Steve Zeisler, another pastor, and his family. We dreamed of having a strong *koinonia* relationship involving shared lawn-mowers and meals. I actually talked the owner, who was using the house as a rental, into selling it and offered him \$89,000. When he put his house up for sale, he received another offer for \$90,000. He came back to me to see if I would raise my offer, but I decided not to buy the house. I took my original figure as a fleece from the Lord and thought we could not afford the extra \$1,000. That decision has gnawed at me for nine years!

God brought this memory to my attention during these past four months, showing me that I have never given it up. In fact, my wife is tired of hearing about it! As I was wrestling with this and thanking God for what he has been teaching me, Steve Zeisler came into my office and said, "Guess what! The house just sold again for \$319,000!" I broke out laughing and said, "Lord, you are funny!"

While working on my life, God has uncovered an irritability which is based upon discontentedness. My guess is that I am not alone in this. I am sure many of you are wrestling with the same seeds of discontentedness planted in the soil of your hearts. Maybe I am speaking to some who have worshipped at the shrine of *promotion* for too long. To you, contentment is a foreign word meaning loss of prestige or laziness. You see it as something to be experienced between birth and kindergarten and between retirement and the grave by those who have no ambition. Perhaps I am speaking to some couples who are discontented because they want a bigger house or a better location. Maybe I am speaking to some students who are flirting with dissatisfaction regarding their lack of transportation or their family situation.

The seed of discontent is planted early in our lives and grows in our brains with every new situation. I found this out when I took my eight-year-old son shopping for clothes. He was not satisfied with just any pair of jeans and shirt. He wanted the "Morey Boogey" brand. He could not be content with anything less.

Contentment is one of the true marks of maturity

I am convinced that one of the critical needs in the body of Christ is contentment. We live in neighborhoods filled with people who are looking for some source of contentment. We are working with people who in their eager pursuit of ambition have grown tired and discontented. We are rapidly becoming a nation of discontented marionettes, dangling from the strings of the dictatorial puppeteer Covetousness.

Paul told us in 1 Timothy that godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. One of the amazing statements Paul makes in this passage is, "I am content." My desire for you is to help you see the importance of being contented with what you have rather than being perpetually dissatisfied and always striving for more.

Philippians 4:10-23 will help us discover the same secret of contentment Paul learned. I want to take you into the operating room where God has been doing his work on my heart. I assume that he wants to perform surgery on your life as well. My prayer is that for the next few moments you will restrict your thoughts to one person, yourself. We can all think of someone else who needs this passage, maybe a co-worker or a spouse, but we must concentrate on ourselves. God wants to teach all of us something in the area of contentment.

Paul has graciously shared his experience with us in this passage. Interwoven in these verses are three secrets that will

help us to experience the same contentment Paul enjoyed. Along with each secret, I have included an exhortation that will help us apply the truth.

Let us look at the first secret in verses 10 and 14 through 18.

I. The Secret of Christian Generosity: Learn to

Share Your Resources

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity...Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

The principle Paul reveals is simple: one Christian has enough because another Christian is generous. Paul had enough because other Christians contributed to meet his needs. He had a family who cared about him. No matter how distant or isolated he might be geographically, he knew there were people who were willing to give of their means for his needs. What a great source of encouragement this must have been to him!

The Philippians felt a strong attachment to the apostle because God called these believers to faith in Jesus Christ through him. God had brought great blessing to their lives through Paul. As a result, they loved him and wanted to help him.

For a short time after he left Philippi, Paul worked in Thessalonica. Being located near this city, the Philippians sent messengers to find out how Paul was doing. When they heard he was in financial need, they took up a collection for him. Later they sent another gift. Paul refers to this in verse 16 where he says, "For even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs." After a riot drove Paul out of Thessalonica, he went south to Berea and then to Athens. For a while, the Philippians must have lost track of Paul and wondered where he was and how he was doing. Questions flooded their minds: "Does he have a place to stay? Is he without money? Is he forced to take care of himself by tentmaking?" When the news finally arrived that he was in need, the Philippians sent money again, as 2 Corinthians tells us.

Eventually the believers at Philippi lost touch with Paul entirely, for he was constantly on the move and communications were slow. After he left Greece and returned to Judea, he began his third missionary journey. Although many years had passed since Paul first set foot in Philippi, their love for him was still strong. Having heard of his need in prison, they immediately sent a gift in the care of Epaphroditus.

The Philippian's generosity was an *ever-present sentiment*. Notice verse 10 says, "You were indeed concerned for me but you lacked opportunity." It had not been easy to maintain communication with Paul, but their love was always there. As

soon as an opportunity arose, they were eager to take it.

Paul was not too proud to admit that he needed the help of other believers. There are two extremes we can take in the body of Christ. One extreme is total independence. This is the attitude that says, "I don't need anyone else! I am sufficient in myself." The opposite extreme is total dependence upon the support and encouragement of others. Both of these are wrong. The correct attitude is one of *interdependence*, being willing to give and to receive. This is the attitude Paul expresses here.

Generosity is essential in Christian relationships. Other people's needs ought to affect us. The Philippian church was not a rich church, comprised of prominent and wealthy people. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, Paul says, "Let me tell you what God in his grace has done for the churches in Macedonia. Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, they have mixed their wonderful joy with their deep poverty, and the result has been an overflow of giving to others." (TLB) The Philippian church was poor but generous.

Paul says to the Philippians, "It was kind of you to share in my trouble." His need was not remote to them; they felt it. Paul commends their actions as an admirable thing to do. Be generous with the resources God has given you. In talking about money, William Barclay puts this in perspective:

Money in itself is neither good nor bad; it is simply dangerous in that the love of it may become bad. With money a man can do much good; and with money a man can do much evil. With money a man can selfishly serve his own desires; and with money he can generously answer to the cry of his neighbor's need. With money a man can buy his way to the forbidden things and facilitate the path of wrongdoing; and with money he can make it easier for someone else to live as God meant him to live. Money brings power, and power is always a double edged thing, for it is powerful to good and powerful to evil.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, "What on earth are you going to do with all your money?" The patient replied, "Just worry about it, I suppose." Dr. Menninger then asked him if he derived much pleasure from his worrying. "No," responded the patient, "but I get such terror when I think of giving it to anyone else."

In commending the generosity of the Philippians, Paul makes two important statements about this attribute.

A. Generosity Is Given to God

Generosity is primarily a vertical transaction, not just a horizontal one. Paul calls their a gift a "fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice." This takes us to the Old Testament and the picture of the burnt offering. In Genesis 8, we find the first account of a burnt offering. After the flood when Noah offered a burnt offering to God, the Scripture tells us, "When the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man...'" Paul is telling us that when we generously sacrifice to meet the needs of others, we are ultimately expressing our own obedient consecration to God. We are offering a sacrifice to God which is a pleasing aroma he delightfully accepts.

B. Generosity Will Be Rewarded by God

Paul was always sensitive about receiving monetary help from churches because there were always those who questioned his motives. He even risks appearing cold in this passage to emphasize the real value of the gift. His words in verse 17 seem

to be a disclaimer: “Not that I seek the gift.” This is not Paul’s intention at all. He is genuinely content to accept whatever circumstances God provides.

Thus, he says that he does not covet the Philippians’ money, but the “profit which increases to your account.” These Greek words are the kind of financial terms we would expect to hear in a banking institution to indicate that a new partnership has been formed. They involve credit and compounded interest. Paul is saying that when we share what God has entrusted to us, whether it be our love or possessions, we are actually entering into a partnership not only with those with whom we share but also with God himself. Paul says God pays interest compounded daily for our investment!

In his statement, he is suggesting that this is a proper motive for Christians to cultivate. This is similar to Jesus’ words in Luke 12 where we are told to seek opportunities to be generous to the needy for in so doing we are making for ourselves purses which do not grow old and a treasure in heaven that will not fail. Cultivate a generous heart by learning to share your resources. This is the secret of generosity.

Paul’s second secret is revealed in verses 11 and 12.

II. The Secret of Christian Discipline: Learn to Discipline Your Desires

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

These verses give us another vital principle. The first factor which allows us to be content is the generosity of others. The Lord uses the resources of one to meet the needs of another. The second factor involves a Christian’s attitude toward his own circumstances. It is easy to complain when times are difficult. One of the secrets of contentment is being able to see our needs as being met by that which we presently have. What we learn from Paul’s personal testimony is that “enough” and “contentment” are relative terms based upon what we think our needs are.

We must cultivate the discipline of learning that we do not need more than we have. We have already mentioned how careful Paul was in detaching the financial gifts of the Philippian church from any personal desires. He was so careful that his statements can be misinterpreted as ungratefulness: “Not that I speak from want...Not that I seek the gift.” Paul is not giving backhanded thanks here but guarding himself from being covetous.

Coveting has many nasty synonyms: envy, jealousy, lust, and greed. It starts in our heart as a seed, but it gets watered by the inevitable pressures of our pride. Your friend gets a promotion with a significant pay raise—the seed germinates. The new model cars roll out on the showroom floor—the seed sprouts roots. You go shopping with a friend who fits into dresses that are the same size she wore 15 years ago—the seed becomes a budding plant. Coveting is material inebriation, an addiction to things that do not last and a craving for things that do not really matter. It forces us to depend on tomorrow to bring us the contentment that today could not supply.

In this passage, Paul uses two well known idioms from his

day. The term translated “content” is taken out of the Greek Stoic philosophy which used it to describe a “self-sufficient” person with no needs or weaknesses, someone who had found a completely self-satisfying world. The Stoics aspired to being so self-sufficient that they were untouched by anything. This is a strange word for Paul to use, but he borrows the term to describe the “restful contentment” of a Christian who has freed himself from the constant cravings of a covetous spirit.

The second word helps us to understand that this contentment is something learned. Paul says, “I have *learned* the secret.” This verb was used in the Greek mystery religions to describe the person who had worked through the various lower degrees of knowledge until he reached the full possession of the “mystery” itself. Paul is saying, “I have made my way through the progressive detachment from the things of the world, both its comforts and discomforts, and I have gained freedom from those things. Circumstances no longer master me.” From this passage, we can learn a wonderful principle: contentment is one of the true marks of maturity.

Coveting is material inebriation

It is interesting to compare Paul’s attitude with that of the children of Israel during their journey from Egypt. In Exodus 17, the children of Israel grumbled and quarreled with Moses and with one another because there was no water for them to drink. Verse 7 tells us Moses “named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us, or not?’” But the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 81 that God had not abandoned them. Their thirst was not an accident but a purposeful test designed to examine their devotion to God. They failed the test because they tried to force God’s hand, reasoning, “If God were really with us, this would have never happened. Let him deliver us and then we will trust Him.”

We struggle with this same truth. We often say, “If God were with me, I would not be in this circumstance! Lord, get me out of this, and then I will trust you.” John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “How much money does it take to satisfy a man?” With rare wisdom he replied, “A little bit more than he has.” This is true in so many areas of our lives. Paul had learned contentment bit by bit, through circumstance after circumstance.

How is your heart? Have you learned to discipline your desires or are you constantly wishing for more, for something better, or for something different?

The third secret may be the most important one of all. Look at verses 13, 19 and 20.

III. The Secret of Christian Trust: Learn to Live in Christ

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me...And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul gives the glory to God. We can pass over this common Christian phrase without pausing to grasp its significance. What is Paul giving glory to God for? This would include the times

when the Philippian church could not help him as well as the times they could, his times of hunger and times of plenty. It would also include the churches who neglected him and those who remembered him. I am sure he thought of his chains as well as his freedom. Because he accepted all of these circumstances as being from God, he glorified God in all of them. He was contented because God was trustworthy even when it looked like he was not. Paul had learned to be content because he had learned to trust.

He expresses his contentment in two ways: as his own personal experience and as a doctrine for all. Verse 13 gives us his personal experience: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." No circumstance could ever defeat Paul because it could never be too much for his God. He says, "I have all the power I need to handle every situation I face."

Here we find the secret of his strength. Although Paul has already revealed that he has the strength of a self-sufficient Stoic, he now reveals his source. His power for victory over the demands of life is not inherent in himself but arises from another source. Paul has this daily strength because of the one who, as we might paraphrase, "infuses me with dynamite."

The key word in this sentence is "in", translated "through" in the NASB. Jesus Christ is not a channel along which all the blessings flow, but the place in which they are deposited. He is the sum of all the blessings. The person who possesses Christ possesses all! Paul could be content because he learned how to live in Christ. Christ *in* us is our internal power. He is the one who gives mastery over the demands of life.

Lest we should feel that what Paul is expressing is unique to him, he restates the trustworthiness of God as a Christian doctrine: "My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." The apostle is not unique in gaining this strength from his God. His God will supply anyone's needs. The *all things* of Paul's personal experience is matched by *every need* which might come upon the Philippians or us. No situation is beyond the power of this God whom Paul knows well enough to call "my God." In meeting our need, his supply is not limited to the size of our need, but rather is given according to the infinite riches of heaven available to the Christian on earth.

The key to it all is "in Christ Jesus." Christ in us is the adequate resource for every circumstance. Paul had learned what it meant to be in Christ. This is what he has been talking about throughout this book. In Christ, we are secure and have everything we need. For our anxiety, he provides the peace of God patrolling and guarding our hearts. For our struggles in relationships, Christ is our model. In Christ, we become new people with new feelings. We have a new way of looking at life, seeing his sovereign hand in all our circumstances. Learn to live in Christ.

Paul began this letter by addressing the saints and commending them to the Lord Jesus. He ends in the same way, greeting the saints and commending them to the Lord's grace. Look at verses 21 through 23:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

God's grace is enough for them because it is the remedy for every human need. Jesus' grace reveals all his glories—his power, helpfulness, and riches—and makes them available to his people. God's grace is our all-sufficient supply. The greatest power of God is not found in signs and wonders or even in the power of nature. Rather, it is found in the power of Jesus Christ living in a heart, causing that heart to rise above every circumstance to trust him in the midst of any turmoil. This is the power of God.

There is no more fitting conclusion to this book than the simplicity of this final prayer. For us, as well as for himself, Paul wants nothing more than a daily deepening experience with Jesus which he finds so satisfying and rewarding.

Horatio Spafford, an attorney who lived in Chicago at the turn of the century learned this lesson well. He was a dynamic Christian man and was influential in founding the Moody Bible Institute. During the great Chicago fire in 1871, he lost his business. While rebuilding, he sent his wife and children abroad to Europe. On the journey across the Atlantic, their ship was struck by another vessel and sank. Although his wife watched their four children drown, she was miraculously saved by falling on some floating debris. While she was recuperating in a hospital in Wales, she telegraphed her husband two words: "Saved Alone." He, of course, took the first ship to Wales. As he sailed near the spot where the ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford walked along the deck contemplating all that had happened. There he was moved to write the song we sing so often, "It Is Well With My Soul,"

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

This is the message Paul wants to communicate to us. Whatever our circumstances, we can say, "It is well with my soul." This is the key to our contentment, the secret which enables us to rest. Our neighbors and associates are longing to find a life at rest and peace. May they see that contentment modeled in our lives.

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Catalog No. 1067

Proverbs 3:1-12

Fourth Message

Andrew Drake

July 27, 1997

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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Catalog No. 1068

Proverbs 3:27-35

Fifth Message

Andrew Drake

August 3, 1997

THE WISDOM OF LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

Last week I said I was a big fan of golf. Today I confess to being a big fan of sports in general, especially our local teams. Around this time of year I become a bit disillusioned with the world of sports, however. Football stars are signing contracts for such huge amounts of money, I have a difficult time even comprehending it; and my baseball loyalties are divided as players are traded from team to team. I find myself cheering for players I once rooted against, because suddenly they are members of my team. I'm not alone in saying that sports fans put up with this because we want the best players. We want to have winning teams, and we will pay higher admission prices and cheer them on as long as they win. We love them because they make us feel good by winning.

This kind of self-serving love is not unique to sports. It is the kind of love that says, "I love you for what I can get from you," or "I love you for what you can do for me." This attitude is clearly reflected in the following classified advertisement that appeared in a rural New York newspaper: "Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet woman about 30 who owns tractor. Please enclose picture of tractor." This is the self-serving attitude toward our neighbor that God warned the nation of Israel against in Leviticus 19; and it is the same attitude the wise father is instructing his son against in the last section of Proverbs chapter 3.

In our last study we saw the father instructing his son on how to live out the first and greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Today he instructs him on how to live out the second greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Apostle Paul sees this commandment as the summation of a large portion of the law, as he wrote in Romans 13: 8-10: "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law."

Unselfishly loving our neighbor is a crucial part of what it means to be God's holy people.

Now, in Proverbs 3, the father instructs his son on how to love his neighbor by first telling him how to relate to a neighbor in need. Chapter 3, verses 27-28:

**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
When it is in your power to do it.
Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back,
And tomorrow I will give it,"
When you have it with you. (Prov 3:27-28 NASB)**

The father says that a wise and loving neighbor does not take advantage of his fellow neighbor's need. He does not hoard his wealth, he shares it. We are to be generous, not selfish.

The Hebrew word translated "good" is a very broad word. In this context it means "benefit." We are not to withhold anything that is beneficial from those to whom it is due. More literally translated, the entire phrase is saying: "do not withhold good from its owner." The benefit that is within our power to do is not really our own, it belongs to the one who is in need of it.

As we saw last week in the opening twelve verses of this chapter, our resources are not our own, they are gifts from our Heavenly Father, entrusted to us to honor him by helping those in physical, emotional, and spiritual need.

There are two attitudes we can adopt towards life. We can think we are entitled to things and trample on others to get or keep what we believe is rightfully ours; or we can believe that all we have is a gift from God who entrusts us with resources and opportunities to share with people in need. D. L. Moody said: "Life is simply a stewardship, not ownership." We must give account for what is entrusted to us.

We live in a very affluent place, surrounded by material things that demand our attention. But we must see these for what they are, and that is, tools to be used to express our love for God and for others. With such wealth all around us we must be careful not to allow our possessions to possess us.

The tension between focusing on the spiritual and eternal versus the physical and temporal is poignantly illustrated by Scott Wesley Brown in the song he simply titled *Things*:

Things upon the mantle
Things on every shelf
Things that others gave me
Things I gave myself
Things I've stored in boxes
That don't mean much anymore
Old magazines and memories
Behind the attic door.

Things on hooks and hangers
Things on ropes and rings
Things I guard that blind me to
The pettiness of things
Am I like the rich young ruler
Ruled by all I own
If Jesus came and asked me
Could I leave them all alone?

Oh Lord, I look to heaven
Beyond the veil of time
To gain eternal insight
That nothing's really mine
And to only ask for daily bread
And all contentment brings
To find freedom as Your servant
In the midst of all these things.

For discarded in the junk-yards,
Rusting in the rain,
Lie things that took the finest years
Of lifetimes to obtain
And whistling through the tombstones
The hollow breezes sing
A song of dreams surrendered to
The tyranny of things.

Material things are not to be the believer's priority. Above all, God is our first priority, and loving people in his name comes together with that. We are to use whatever we have to love others.

In verse 28, the father goes on to say that this good we have that our neighbor can benefit from is to be given to him promptly. He instructs: "do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it,' when you have it with you." When we have the resources to help someone who has a need, we are not to stall or delay or procrastinate, but do it immediately. As the saying goes: "Help which is long on the road is no help at all." When someone asks us for help we are not to say "Maybe some other time," or "Ask me next week." We are to give quickly so as not to cause further embarrassment. Delay is inconsiderate and unjust.

Oftentimes delay is a cover for selfishness. We secretly hope that the matter will be forgotten, dropped, or taken up by someone else. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, certain of the characters ignore a man in need, but there is one who proves to be a loving neighbor:

"On one occasion, a certain lawyer stood up and put Jesus to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

"And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:30-37)

Here Jesus reminds us that our neighbor is not necessarily the person next door, he is the next person in our path who has a need we can meet. We are not to be concerned so much with discerning who is or is not our neighbor. Our task is to focus on being a loving and merciful neighbor who promptly helps anyone who has a need and

who has been placed before us. And our love should not discriminate against any race, religion, color, social status, age, sexual preference, or political ideology.

Is there ever a time when it is right to say no to someone? Obviously we can never meet all the needs presented before us, so we must be wise and discerning in deciding which needs to meet. Later, the father will give his son two guidelines to help him know when to say no. First, he must avoid going into debt; and second, he warns him not to contribute to the leech or the sluggard. It is clear that we are not to go into debt to meet the need of another, and we are not to financially help those who can work but choose to live off the generosity of others. Contributing to them only reinforces their sinful habits. But, to all others we may give, and give freely and generously as the Lord directs.

In chapter 11 we see the father instructing his son that not only should he respond to the petition of his neighbors, he is to diligently seek out opportunities to benefit them. Proverbs 11:24:

**There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more,
And there is one who withholds what is justly due, but it results
in want.**

**The generous man will be prosperous,
And he who waters will himself be watered.
He who withholds grain, the people will curse him,
But blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.
He who diligently seeks good will find favor,
But he who searches after evil, it will come to him. (Prov 11:24-27)**

Are we diligently seeking ways to benefit others? I strongly believe that part of this search involves getting to know our neighbors. Loving people can be scary, of course, because that demands being involved in their lives, asking the hard questions, and going the extra mile. Love is risky.

Gary Inrig in his book *Quality Friendship* puts it well: "All true love involves risk. It makes us vulnerable to being hurt by others as we give ourselves away, and we become vulnerable to hurt with them when they hurt. But without risk, life itself withers away. Without risks, there can be no victories, no growth, no positive achievements. Consider the turtle, he only makes progress when he sticks his neck out. Not to care and not to risk is also not to mature and not to rejoice."

Risk-taking is what we were created for. We were not designed to live safe and sanitized lives. Ephesians 2:10 cries out to us: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Doing good works is not just a nice concept, it is what we are here for.

Initially we tend to think of doing good only in financial terms. But the scriptures are clear that there are many ways to care for others that require little or no money at all, like inviting social outcasts into our homes and sharing meals with them. Our loving presence can be powerful as we visit orphans and widows in their distress and prisoners and the sick in their time of need. Even our words are powerful in bringing good to others. With well chosen words we can lift a burden or soothe a sorrow, encourage, correct, instruct, and spiritually enlighten others.

A recent incident brought home to me the power of doing good. About a month ago I was in dire straits. My son's birthday was a few weeks away and I was desperate to prepare a safe playground area and build a play structure for him before his birthday. I have never

been very good at asking for help, and as a result I have often missed the joy of allowing others to minister to me.

But one day, with very little encouragement on my part, a group of High School boys came to my house and worked hard all day in the hot sun digging a ditch, using shovels and picks. They would not let me pay them; and rather than letting me treat them to lunch, they bought me lunch. Because of their help and the help of a few others from this body I was able to have the entire play area and structure ready for Evan's party. Every day as I look into my back yard and see the joy on my children's faces as they play, it is visible and tangible evidence of the overwhelming love of others for me and my family.

There are as many ways to love as there are people who love and people with needs. Instead of trying to give you a list of ways to benefit others, I am asking you to pray that God will show you who to love and how to love those in need around you. This text forces us to pray to have the Lord open our eyes to see the people who need our love, to see the good works he has prepared for us to walk in.

Many of you are already involved in ministering to those in need. I would like to encourage you by echoing the words of Paul to the Galatians: "And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all men" (Gal 6:9-10).

So here in verses 28-29 we find that loving our neighbor begins with seeing their need, and instead of taking advantage of them, we bless them and benefit them.

The father now continues his discussion with his son on how to be a loving neighbor, in verses 29-30:

**Do not devise harm against your neighbor,
While he lives in security beside you.
Do not contend with a man without cause,
If he has done you no harm. (3:29-30)**

His second exhortation is that a loving neighbor does not take advantage of his fellow neighbor's trust and innocence. A loving neighbor does not victimize.

Who is easily taken advantage of because they trust us? Is it our employer who will never know we make long-distance personal phone calls from our desk at work? Is it the restaurant owner down the street who will never know if we paid for that refill at the soda machine? Is it our neighbor who loans us a roto-tiller that we never refill with gas? Is it our spouse whom we don't tell everywhere we've been? Is it our customer who does not really know that the product we sold them is at best useless, and at worst harmful to them?

The harm we can cause our neighbor may not be merely economic, but social too. Proverbs 11:9 reminds us: "With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor." We may not contend with others in a court of law, but what about in the court of public opinion? What kind of words do we use when we talk about others? What do we say about them when they're not around? Do we slander them or gossip about them? Do we tear them down in order to build ourselves up?

As loving neighbors we are to work at building a loving community. We should be peacemakers, not troublemakers. We should seek to help restore people, not expose them.

So in these first four verses we see that as a loving neighbor we are not only to be eager to bring benefit to others, we are also to be careful not to cause harm to them.

The first two exhortations concern how to relate to others who are passive in their relationship to us, the needy and innocent. But how are we to relate to those who actively pursue an evil way of life? The father addresses this question in verses 31-35.

**Do not envy a man of violence,
And do not choose any of his ways.
For the crooked man is an abomination to the Lord;
But He is intimate with the upright.
The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked,
But He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.
Though He scoffs at the scoffers,
Yet he gives grace to the afflicted.
The wise will inherit honor,
But fools display dishonor. (3:31-35)**

The father tells his son that a loving neighbor does not envy or emulate a man whose ways are contrary to the way of the Lord. Proverbs 16:29 shows that the father is aware that "a man of violence entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good." So he is giving his son ample warning not to be led unaware by his evil neighbor down a path that will cause him and his family great sorrow.

The first thing he is told is: "Do not envy a man of violence, and do not choose his ways."

Whom do we envy? People who seem to be getting ahead in life? Those who seem to have freedom, fortune, and fame? We are to be careful here, because emulation is just one small step from envy. As soon as we start to envy someone we desire to have what they have, and so we mimic their values and actions. But this is a dangerous, slippery slope.

We must choose: Will our relationship with God be intimate or adversarial? In these verses we are given four reasons not to envy or choose the way of those who do not love the Lord or their neighbor.

The first reason is this: "The crooked man is an abomination to the Lord, but He is intimate with the upright" (verse 32). Proverbs 2:12-15 describes a crooked man in these terms:

**...the man who speaks perverse things;
From those who leave the paths of uprightness,
To walk in the ways of darkness;
Who delight in doing evil,
And rejoice in the perversity of evil;
Whose paths are crooked,
And who are devious in their ways. (Prov 2:12b-15)**

The Lord detests perverse men; he wants their devious ways far from him. But he is intimate with the upright. The picture is that of intimate friends counseling one another. The upright have the ear of God at any time; they are near and dear to him.

This is the kind of intimate relationship spoken of in Psalm 25:14, "The Lord confides in those who fear Him, and He makes His covenant known to them." Likewise John 14:23: "And Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him.'"

The second reason is because "The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous" (verse 33). A curse is not like a magic spell or evil voodoo hex, but

a visitation of God's judgment upon those whose chief aim is to do evil and hurt others.

Proverbs 6:12-19 further describes this kind of wicked man:

**A worthless person, a wicked man,
Is the one who walks with a false mouth,
Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet,
Who points with his fingers;
Who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually,
Who spreads strife.
Therefore his calamity will come suddenly;
Instantly he will be broken, and there will be no healing.
There are six things which the Lord hates,
Yes seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that run rapidly to evil,
A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:12-19)**

God's judgment is upon such a person, but his blessing is upon the righteous. God bestows a fruitful and abundant life on those whose thoughts, attitudes, and actions conform to his holiness.

Here is the third reason: "Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted" (verse 34). The Lord laughs at the pride of scoffers, but he helps the humble. As James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 put it: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

And fourth: "The wise will inherit honor, but fools will display dishonor" (verse 35). The wise will be given esteem and social significance, but fools will end up in public shame.

Psalms 84:11-12 has this wonderful promise for those who walk uprightly: "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, how blessed is the man who trusts in Thee!" In the New Testament, Galatians 6:7-9 has this to say about the consequences of foolish choices: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life."

The words "curse," "abomination," and "scorn" seem harsh, especially if they are quoted as coming from God. God does not desire to hurt anyone, but a life lived contrary to him will reap woeful consequences. The point is, we are to flee God's curse and find his blessings. We are to pursue righteousness and flee from wickedness.

There is a progression here for the spiritual state of the two men who are contrasted and the resulting curse/blessing they receive. It begins with the private soul/heart ("intimacy"); moves to the family/habitation ("dwelling"); and then to the public courtyard ("honor"). We are shown that what is in the heart of a man is eventually made public by his actions; and that the consequences from the Lord are also public.

We are warned that though evil men may appear to be successful and found favor with God, they are not. They may have the perishable riches of this world, but they are not partakers of God's eternal riches. The wicked may look like they have freedom, fortune, and fame, but their ultimate end is shame and eternal death.

This would be the fate of all of us, without exception, had it not been for Jesus Christ. Left to ourselves, we could never fulfill the law completely. We could never utterly love God and our neighbor. Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us that all the good works in the world cannot help us earn salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." While I have made many references to good works this morning, we must freely acknowledge that we do not perform good works to earn our salvation, we do them *because* of our salvation.

The communion table is a great reminder that Jesus Christ is the only perfect loving neighbor. He is the only one who never withheld good or harmed another; and we are the desperate needy neighbor in need of mercy. In taking communion together we proclaim our Lord's death until he returns. We celebrate the memory of Jesus' sacrifice for sinners for desperately needy neighbors like ourselves. Let us remember that because of his love for us we are able to love others in return.

The cross is the eternal symbol of love that risks and hurts and makes itself vulnerable. It is only when we truly believe and trust in God's love for us, that we are then able, by his Spirit, to love others freely and generously.

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Proverbs 5:1-23

Sixth Message

Andrew Drake

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THE WISDOM OF LOVING YOUR SPOUSE

Recently our pastoral staff were exchanging wedding stories, and I shared an experience from one of my first wedding ceremonies. Rick and Heather were strong Christians and were active in the youth group I was shepherding in Pleasanton. On their wedding day, the church was filled with families and friends, and when it was time for the exchange of vows and rings, I said: "Rick, will you receive this ring from Heather, as a token of her affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward you; and will you wear it as a symbol of your own affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward her?" He said: "I will." Then I said: "Heather, will you receive this ring from Rick, as a token of his *infection*, sincerity, and fidelity toward you, and will you wear it as a symbol of your own affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward him?" Can you believe I actually said *infection*? That term brings to mind so many images you don't want to think about at a wedding. I tried to cover my mistake, but there was an audible gasp from the congregation, and then snickering was heard throughout the church. Of course, after the wedding ceremony I apologized profusely and we all had a good chuckle.

In pre-marital counseling I tell couples that I'm not in the business of performing weddings. What I want is to help them build a strong foundation for a fulfilling and lasting marriage, because that is what they will need to stand against the host of things that threaten marriage today. It's safe to say that Rick and Heather didn't expect the first threat to come from their pastor!

In today's world, many people enter marriage with sexual baggage that must be addressed. Sexual diseases and infections, for one thing, are often associated with a deadly virus that can destroy our bodies. In today's passage from the book of Proverbs we will see how sexual sin can bring death to more than just our bodies, however. But this passage deals with more than the negatives. We will also discover the joy and fulfillment to be found in the intimate relationship between a husband and wife.

In Proverbs chapter 5 the father instructs his son how to express his sexuality in a righteous way. He warns him about the danger and stupidity of entering into lustful habits and sexual sin; and by means of an allegory tells him that the place he can enjoy the pleasure of sex and intimacy to the greatest degree is not with a loose and easy woman, but with a loving and faithful wife.

This passage is for all of us, whether single or married, male or female, young or old. The issue is sexual temptation, and that includes every one of us. Those who think they are immune to this kind of temptation are the most likely to fall. Not only will this Scripture guide us in our own life, it reveals truth that we can share with others and live out before a watching world.

I approach this subject with humility and sensitivity, knowing that no one is immune to sin in this area. Many in this congregation have felt the deep pain that results from having sex outside of marriage. It is not my desire to bring further pain or condemnation, but to reveal truths from this passage to help us avoid sexual sin.

Here then are the words of the father to his son. Proverbs 5:

**My son, give attention to my wisdom,
Incline your ear to my understanding;
That you may observe discretion,
And your lips may reserve knowledge.**

**For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
And smoother than oil is her speech;
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
Sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death,
Her steps lay hold of Sheol.
She does not ponder the path of life;
Her ways are unstable, she does not know it.
Now then, my sons, listen to me,
And do not depart from the words of my mouth.
Keep your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house,
Lest you give your vigor to others,
And your years to the cruel one;
Lest strangers be filled with your strength,
And your hard-earned goods go to the house of an alien;
And you groan at your latter end,
When your flesh and your body are consumed;
And you say, "How I have hated instruction!
And my heart spurned reproof!"
And "I have not listened to the voice of my teachers,
Nor inclined my ear to my instructors!
I was almost in utter ruin
In the midst of the assembly and congregation."
Drink water from you own cistern,
And fresh water from you own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone,
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,
And embrace the bosom of a foreigner?
For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord,
And He watches all his paths.
His own iniquities will capture the wicked,
And he will be held with the cords of his sin.
He will die for lack of instruction,
And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray. (Prov 5:1-23
NASB)**

The word translated "adulteress" here is literally "female stranger," or "strange woman," as it is sometimes translated. She is a stranger, because her way of life is outside the framework of the covenant community. She is a loose and dangerous woman who has broken her covenant with her husband and her God, looking to sexually prey on unsuspecting men. Her life is unstable because she seeks to assuage her sexual appetite without regard to the consequences. She is a fool who lives in a way that is in direct contrast to the righteous ways of the wise. She and her

companions may seem to be living the good life, but their ultimate fate is darkness, ruin, and death.

It is not clear whether the son is married at the time this instruction is given. But it doesn't really matter. The bottom line is, this woman is totally off limits to the young man because she is not his wife. This text reminds us that we are not to be naive or gullible. We must have the wisdom of Scripture in our hearts and on our lips to help protect us from those who would seduce us with their enticing words and actions.

Proverbs 7:6-23 sets out in greater detail the alluring words of the cunning temptress:

For at the window of my house I looked out through my lattice, And I saw among the naive, I discerned among the youths, a young man lacking sense. Passing through the street near her corner; and he takes the way to her house, In the twilight, in the evening, in the middle of the night in the darkness. And behold, a woman comes to meet him, dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart. She is boisterous and rebellious; her feet do not remain at home; She is now in the streets, now in the squares, and lurks by every corner. So she seizes him and kisses him, and with a brazen face she says to him: "I was due to offer peace offerings; today I have paid my vows. Therefore I have come out to meet you, to seek your presence earnestly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, with colored linens of Egypt. I have sprinkled my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come let us drink our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with caresses. For the man is not at home, he has gone on a long journey; He has taken a bag of money with him, at full moon he will come home." With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him. Suddenly he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as one in fetter to the discipline of a fool, Until an arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life. (Prov 7:6-23)

The adulteress offers something without any commitment or hard work in return; there are no strings attached. Her words are persuasive and flattering as she appeals to the man's sensual desires, assuring him there will be no price to pay. Everything about her seems attractive and inviting. What she is offering is pleasure, plain and simple. But such pleasure is temporary and shallow, and the consequences are severe.

She is not the only one to blame, however. The young man also contributes to the deadly outcome. Notice the progression as he draws ever closer to temptation. He is out strolling around at the most tempting and vulnerable time of the day (the evening); he passes near her street corner; he decides to go down her street; eventually he is within arm's reach of her; and ultimately he enters into her house.

Sexual temptation is a slippery slope. That is why we are implored to stay far away from it. The closer we get, the more attractive it seems. It is only when we are close to it that can we hear the enticing words, smell the inviting aromas, and feel the sensuous embrace.

Our actions follow closely on the heels of our desires and thoughts. Many who have fallen say they sinned sexually because they were suddenly overwhelmed with temptation. But sexual sin is the culmination of a progression of small and deliberate choices and indulgences. Instead of guarding our hearts and judging our thoughts, we entertain fantasies that often yield to actions.

If someone enters our presence and we become sexually aroused, that is not a sin; we ought to be thankful for a healthy sex drive. But if someone other than our spouse enters into our presence and we become sexually aroused, and cultivate that arousal into a fantasy about having sex with them, then we are sinfully lusting after them.

C. S. Lewis reminds us:

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point

from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or in anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.

The warning is loud and clear: We are to diligently avoid situations that draw us near to the slippery slope of sexual immorality. For some, that means not being alone with a certain someone in a secluded or private place. It may mean not going out with your boss, your secretary or co-worker to that out-of-the-way restaurant. It means not promoting emotional intimacy with someone you are counseling. It may mean not seeking and encouraging attention by dressing for work or a date in sexually suggestive clothes. It may mean not flirting with someone other than your spouse.

For some it may mean not reading a particular kind of magazine or romance novel, or viewing certain television shows or movies. It may mean we have to avoid visiting certain web-sites on the Internet. Any situation that arouses in us a romantic or sexual fantasy for someone other than our spouse is to be avoided at all costs.

Sexual fantasy and action are closely tied together. Faithfulness to a spouse is a matter of the heart and body. That is why Jesus made no distinction between lust and adultery, when he said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt 5:27). We must be ruthless in guarding our hearts, minds, eyes and ears from the myriad of sexual stimuli that surround us.

Sexual temptation is strong, and it is also very deadly. A sexual relationship outside of marriage is more than it appears to be. What may seem to be simply a single night of pleasure often results in a lifetime of pain and regret.

This text reminds us that what is attractive to our eyes and ears, and can bring temporary pleasure to our body, can also in the end result in tremendous internal and eternal damage. The words and actions that entice us to sexual sin may at first appear as attractive and sweet as honey, but they end up being as repulsive and bitter as wormwood. The speech and behavior that seemingly offer to heal and soothe our sexual drives are ultimately as painful and destructive as a two-edged sword.

Extramarital sex is deceiving. Though initially it might be sweet, exciting and easy, in the end it brings only bitterness, destruction and death.

Verses 9-14 set out in greater detail just how bitter, destructive and deadly sexual immorality can be. I will begin reading at verse 8:

**Keep your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house,
Lest you give your vigor to others,
And your years to the cruel one;
Lest strangers be filled with your strength,
And your hard-earned goods go to the house of an alien;
And you groan at your latter end,
When your flesh and your body are consumed;
And you say, "How I have hated instruction!
And my heart spurned reproof!"
And "I have not listened to the voice of my teachers,
Nor inclined my ear to my instructors!"
I was almost in utter ruin
In the midst of the assembly and congregation." (5:8-14)**

Sexual immorality can lead to financial, emotional and social ruin.

We will get a better understanding of this from a similar account in Proverbs 6:25-35, where a more detailed description of this financial, social and personal ruin is given:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her catch you with her eyelids. For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, and an adulteress hunts for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk

on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go unpunished. Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is hungry; but when he is found, he must repay sevenfold; he must give all the substance of his house. The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it. Wounds and disgrace he will find, and his reproach will not be blotted out. For jealousy enrages a man, and he will not spare in the day of vengeance. He will not accept any ransom, nor will he be content though you give him many gifts. (Prov 6:25-35)

Both of these passages describe the consequences that will result if this young man commits sexual immorality. First, he will, in effect, become an indentured slave. All his present and future wages and goods will go to the husband of the woman whom he took sexually. Second, he will cry out in anguish to his dying days in regret for his pride in not having obeyed the wisdom of his teachers. And third, he and his family will face public denunciation for his sin.

Sexual immorality has a very high price tag. It can lead to the loss of position, power, prosperity and peace of mind. In our modern culture it may not lead to indentured slavery and public disgrace, but it still can lead to a loss of respect, loneliness, jealousy, venereal disease, alimony and child support.

As this contribution to a recent issue of a Christian youth magazine attests, shame and years of regret are also part of the price of sex outside of marriage. One teenage girl writes:

Last year, I had a Christian boyfriend who meant the world to me. When we broke up, I was miserable. But what was worse than losing my boyfriend was the horrible realization that a big part of me went with him. We had been sexually active. I was left with shame, guilt and a broken heart. I still can't get through a day without thinking about the things we did and feeling horrible about them. I won't forget the pain for a long time. The few minutes of pleasure were definitely not worth a lifetime of guilt. I wish somehow I had been aware of the consequences of my actions before I let my hormones take over. Because sex is glamorized in our society, I ignored the teachings of the Bible. As a result, I caused grief to myself and God. I want to tell other teenagers it's just not worth it. Pregnancy and STD's aren't the only risks. I'm left longing for real love, but I fear I'll never find it. I'm writing in hope that others won't make the mistakes I did. I got a lot more than I bargained for.

Extramarital sex can be pleasurable, but the pleasure is fleeting, shallow, and deadly.

God has designed a far better way. The father now illustrates by way of an allegory a blessed marriage that brings true and lasting pleasure. Verses 15-20:

Drink water from you own cistern,
And fresh water from you own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone,
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,
And embrace the bosom of a foreigner? (5:15-20)

The predominant image here is water. Actually, this passage almost exhausts the Hebrew vocabulary for sources of water, using terms like cistern, well, springs, and streams. Water is a very precious commodity in parched Canaan. It is a source of satisfaction, refreshment and life that should not be wasted. The key to interpreting the image in the

allegory is found in verse 18: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth." These sources of water are used here, as they are in the Song of Solomon, to describe the source of sexual satisfaction experienced by husband and wife. The father says: "rejoice in the wife of your youth." We are to rejoice not in our youthful spouse, but in the spouse we have had since our youth. A lifetime of marriage can lead to deep intimacy.

Erma Bombeck in her book *A Marriage Made In Heaven... Or Too Tired For An Affair* shares a funny story that illustrates deep love and life-long commitment:

We looked a little ridiculous—two forty-seven-year-old adults sitting alone around a card table in the back yard with pointed party hats strapped under our chins. It wasn't the way I had imagined our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gala. When I fantasized about it, I visualized a large white tent housing a six-piece orchestra. The inside would be decorated with flowers and several hundred guests would be milling around. My husband and I would exchange matching diamond-studded tennis bracelets. He would romantically feed me blueberries out of season, and the orchestra would play our favorite song, "Our love Is Here to Stay," while we swayed together on the dance floor.

The reality was our kids had thrown a couple of hamburgers and a few hot dogs on the grill, scarfed them down and split, leaving us to clean up. The pool table nearby held our bounty: matching one-size-fits-all bathrobes. I knew it would only be a matter of time before Bill's beard was bits of white fuzz and I grew a mustache. No one would be able to tell us apart.

I looked at him as he returned the folding chairs to the original boxes. We had gone through three wars, two miscarriages, five houses, three children, nine cars, twenty-three funerals, seven camping trips, twelve jobs, and nineteen banks. I had cut his hair and cleaned up his toenail clippings, and turned 33,488 pieces of his underwear right side out. He had washed my feet when I was pregnant, bought feminine products for me when I could not get out of the house, and put his car seat back to its original position after I had used it 18,675 times.

We had shared toothpaste, debts, closets, and relatives. We had given one another honesty and trust. He came over to where I was seated and said, "I've got a present for you." "What is it?" I asked excitedly. "Something you like. Close your eyes." When I opened them, he was holding a cauliflower that comes packed in a pickle jar. "I hid it from the kids," he said, "because I know you like the cauliflower."

That kind of intimacy can only be cultivated in a lasting and loving marriage.

Let us enjoy the spouse of our youth. Water from our private garden is much better than water from a public source. Rainwater from our own cistern and well water fed by fresh streams are of a much higher quality than water found in the streets. These verses emphasize that the best source for quenching our sexual thirst is not found in the individual off the street, but from the spouse who dwells within our own home.

Today, many people say that monogamy, not marital fidelity, is important to develop deep intimacy and a healthy sex life. But the text does not say that we are to rejoice in our lover or partner or significant other. It says we are to rejoice in our spouse and only our spouse.

The term "rejoice" here has the idea of spontaneous and unrestrained outward expressions of joy. It is used for stamping the feet, clapping the hands, dancing and shouting. Marriage is a blessing from God, and sexual delight is a God-given thing. He desires the sexual relationship between a husband and wife to be exciting and satisfying. The connotation here is that this is not just a one-time joyous experience, but one that is renewed on a continual basis.

In our fast-paced, stressful world we tend not to invest our best energies in our marriages. We rejoice in our job, our children and our achievements, but how often do we rejoice in our spouses? Do we give

public praise to them? Do we surround ourselves with mementos, pictures and reminders of our marriages that give public testimony of our love for them?

What kind of speech do we use when we address them? And what tone of voice do we use? Are our words attractive, healing, gentle, productive, sensitive and loving, or are they demanding, negative, nagging and offensive? The alluring words of the sexually immoral become more attractive if there is no loving speech at home.

The second image used in this allegory intensifies just how much joy and pleasure we are to find in our spouse: "As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love." The imagery for intimate love in marriage is drawn from the animal world. Like the hind and the doe, our physical affection for our spouse is to be loving and graceful, energetic and playful. We are to be intoxicated with each other's tender and affectionate love. The sexual expression between husband and wife is not to be technique-oriented or boringly routine, but exciting, lively and sensual.

After a long day at the office or at home with screaming children, of course, it can be difficult to be energetic and playful. That is why it is important to get away for romantic weekends, or set the mood at home with soft words, back rubs, foot rubs, music, poetry, dancing, candlelight, etc.

Both of the images in this allegory praise the wonderful physical and sensual pleasure to be found within the marriage relationship. But even more is hinted at here, because physical and sensual pleasure can also be found in having sex outside of marriage. Great satisfaction and enjoyment come not only from sharing sex with someone, but in sharing the intimacy that sex within marriage cultivates.

Cultivating this kind of intimacy with our spouses, rekindling the love, romance and passion of our marriages, is mutual protection against infidelity. What is described here is a deep, generous love, not a selfish, shallow, temporary love. Why waste our sexual energies on dead-end, shallow relationships? Why not use them to develop loving, lasting and intimate relationships with our spouses? Even common sense tells us that brief liaisons with strangers offer no time for intimacy. True and deep intimacy, trust and joy require the protection and security that can only be found in the life-long commitment of marriage.

Verses 15-20 exhort us not to waste our sexual expression on shallow and short-lived relationships. Let us instead enjoy the deeply satisfying and intoxicating love of our own spouses. The best defense against sexual temptation is a healthy, generous, growing, intimate and joyous marriage.

There is a close relationship between human sexuality and human spirituality. For those who are single, cultivating faithfulness and intimacy with God and allowing him to meet your deepest longings is good protection against seeking fulfillment in counterfeit physical pleasures. I agree with David Roper when he writes:

Sexual passion is in some inexplicable way a small representation of our more profound, spiritual passion for God—our "urge to merge" with him. He alone can gratify that desire. Devotion to Christ serves to satisfy our deepest longings and quell our other lusts. But when our love for Christ is on the wane, we get restless for something more, and our resolve in every area weakens.

Experiencing the deep love of God promotes in us a desire to love and relate to others in the same way. Instead of seeing them as sex-objects to selfishly satisfy our desires, we view one another as men and women created in the image of God who need love, prayer and support.

In verses 21-23 the father gives his son one more reason not to engage in sexual immorality:

For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord,

And He watches all his paths.

His own iniquities will capture the wicked,

And he will be held with the cords of his sin.

He will die for lack of instruction,

And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray. (5:21-23)

Sin is always discovered. We may think no one will know and that we will get away with it unscathed. Our best friends may not know, our parents or spouse may not know, but God knows. No matter how hard we may try to conceal our sin, we cannot conceal it from God. He sees it all.

As a fool wraps around a strange woman, he in turn is wrapped in the consequences of his sexual sin. Neither money, power nor secrecy will free us from the bondage of our sin. Sin is a cruel master. We enjoy its pleasures, but we become its slave. Sexual expression outside of marriage brings pleasure, but not satisfaction and fulfillment. So we seek more and more pleasure, but never find what we are looking for. Sexual immorality only arouses more desire and more longing for intimacy that immorality will never fulfill.

When God warns us against this, he is not trying to limit us or hold out on us. He is trying to free us. He has our best interests in mind. His intent is not to cramp our style, keep us from having fun or inhibit us, but to satisfy and fulfill us. Sexual freedom is not found in finicky and shallow encounters, but in a committed marriage where each partner is free to express his or her sexuality without the fear of abandonment.

Some might say: "We are two adults consenting to sex. No one will get hurt." But sex outside of marriage is sin—and sin always destroys. As Gary Vanderet says: "Something is not evil because God calls it sin. God calls it sin because it is evil. It really will destroy us." Sexual sin is not freeing; it leads to narrowness and obsession.

For those who are strangled in the chords of sexual sin, or those whose marriages are dull and lifeless, my word to you is, get help. Help is available if you want it. And not only help from a pastor or counselor, but help from God himself. If you are involved in sexual sin and your marriage is in the dumpster, all hope is not lost. David, the king of Israel, who committed adultery with Bathsheba, was the father of Solomon, the author of Proverbs. When David was confronted with his sin, he confessed and repented, and God restored and healed him.

God wants to do the same for us. The cross of Christ reminds us that God paid a terrible price to extend to us his forgiveness and grace. Restoration and healing is possible if we repent of our sin, if we hate what we have done and turn from it in disgust. Then God is able to lift us up high. Let us remember the words of John: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). And the wonderfully encouraging words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:9-11).

God's forgiveness, grace, restoration and healing are ours if we come to him. By his blood, Jesus canceled the debt of our sins and our failures. United with Christ, we can boldly enter into the warm and loving embrace of our Heavenly Father. May we enter into his love, and love others in the same way!

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