

**Sermon for Sunday  
October 30, 2011  
Dr. Dan Doriani  
"Finding the Right Path"  
Proverbs 3:1-8**

One of the delights of baseball is the way we see the decisions managers and players make and how their decisions work. The manager brings in a new pitcher; everyone sees if the result is a weak pop-up or a double. Intentionally walk the star and everyone sees if the next batter gets a game-tying hit. The batter is down to his last strike against a pitcher who **can** throw 100 mph. He guesses fastball and lashes it off the wall to tie the game. It would be nice, if we could see life's decisions unfold that way. Maybe we'd better know what to do next time.

Alas, it isn't that clear, even in baseball. Sometimes a batter blasts a line drive right to a fielder and sometimes a pitiful bloop drops in. We never really know what to do – in baseball or in the greater issues of life.

### **1 Trusting in the Lord**

Life is full of big decisions. Reality is complex. We would like quick, clear guidance, but we've learned that we can't simply go to rules and authorities for "the answers." If we turn to God's word, Proverbs, to know how to make the decisions, it goes like this: We can make progress; Proverbs mentions several ways.

**1 Watch the world.** Learn from what we see, even from weak, vulnerable creatures. Tiny ants teach hard work, and storing up for winter. Wisdom applies that knowledge: therefore let us also plan.

**2 Fear the Lord.** Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, wisdom operates within the structure or parameters of God's law. No action that violates God's law is wise. So we don't plan to make it through the winter by stealing from neighbors who worked hard, **we** work hard. "The law of the Lord is perfect... making wise the simple" (Ps 19.7-8). We never outgrow the law. It is never **wise** to break God's law.

**3 Hear the father.** Proverbs 3:1 says a child begins by listening to his God-given father. "My son... keep my commands in your heart." Yet Solomon's essential word is "**Trust in the Lord with all your heart** and lean not on your own understanding." We don't trust an impersonal code of ethics, or the laws of nature and society. We trust the covenant keeping God. Proverbs 3 has three primary commands: Trust the LORD, fear the Lord, honor the LORD.

Still the blessed word - Jesus is our **good Shepherd** - means we need a shepherd's care and direction. **It's human nature to make plans, but planning is hard.** We want to base our plans on the best facts and principles. But we never have sufficient information. We **never** know **all** that we wish we knew. People are too unpredictable. The future has too many variables. Proverbs addresses this over and over. We need law and authority, we consider how the world works, but these will never be enough. We're limited. We shouldn't be too sure of ourselves. God may see things another way.<sup>1</sup>

All a man's ways seem innocent to him but motives are weighed by the LORD. (16:2) A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way? (20:24).

---

<sup>1</sup> Von Rad, 99-105

This idea is strong in Proverbs 16. "To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue" (16:1). We say "Man proposes, God disposes." Our minds frame our plans, but our plans, in themselves, accomplish nothing. God is there and at a stroke he can take everything from our hands or place everything in them (19:21). Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

Again "Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD" (19:14). How hard parents work to give their children an inheritance. There is a path toward prosperity that is regular enough to allow plans. But a good spouse is far more important and "in the choice of the right wife, so much that is incalculable is at stake; one has to accept that she is a gift from Yahweh."<sup>2</sup>

Hear Proverb 21:30-31: "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD." Again, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (27:1). There is always a great unknown, and the LORD always reigns.

So let no one boast in wisdom, power, reason, strength. "Self-glorification cannot be combined with trust in the LORD."<sup>3</sup> Solomon: "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him... He who trusts in himself is a fool" (26:12, 28:26). If you *think* you know, you're in real trouble.

What then? Proverbs 16:3 continues, "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed" [or "be established" English Standard Version] That cannot mean quick material success or that we will get all we want. We have to read all the Proverbs together and we have just seen that no plans can assure success as we define it. Besides, Proverbs teaches us not to long for riches or pleasure: "Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man" and the prayer "O God... give me neither poverty nor riches" (21:17, 30:8). Success can't mean simple material profit.

Rather, "Since the Lord assumes ownership of the disciples' initiatives (16:1) and he alone can evaluate the purity of the motives behind them, the disciple should commit his planned deeds to the Lord" (16:3). Then God will establish our plans if he so wills. Solomon assumes that the Lord finds our planned words and deeds to be pure, otherwise he would not affirm them.<sup>4</sup>

Then, "When [our] motives are pure, he will integrate them into his *fixed righteous order*." When Proverbs 16:3 says "Commit to the Lord whatever you do" it has "a sense of finality." Hebrew: *Roll it over* to God and "leave it there." When we commit or roll it over to God, we roll it away from ourselves. When we roll our plans and deeds to him, it liberates us twice over. We need not fret or worry about their effectiveness for *their achievement depend on God* not us. And we need not worry about *their purity, for that assessment belongs to God*.

The secular person, outwardly so confident, is plagued by fears. The godly know God is sovereign and lives in substantial peace. "Your plans will be established" means you will get what you want, or, better, what God wants. So we may start a business, grounded in a solid business plan and resting on prayer. But unforeseeable problems arise. Despite all our labor, prayer, the business fails.

Proverbs 16 continues, "The LORD works out everything for his own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster... In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (16:4, 9).

---

<sup>2</sup> Von Rad, 101

<sup>3</sup> Von Rad 102

<sup>4</sup> Waltke, Proverbs 2:11

God has his purposes – purposes that are inscrutable to us - even in disasters. As Moses said "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29). So we know the Lord is ordering our steps.

This brings great freedom and peace. The Lord "opens doors no one can shut" and shuts doors no one can open (Rev. 3:8). *Our future isn't tied to making the right decisions but with trusting the right Lord.*" (Scotty Smith)

"If you're facing a difficult decision, you think and pray, "I need wisdom. It's a joy and relief to bring decisions before Jesus' throne of grace confident of his audience, wisdom, authority. Jesus in an active Shepherd not an absentee landlord. Even as we make plans in our hearts, he orders our steps (16:9). We were saved by Jesus' grace, not by our good decisions. So let's not ascribe power to our decisions now. As Proverbs says "Lean not on our own understanding" – your decision-making prowess." (Scotty Smith)

"So let's trust the Lord with our heart, hopes, longings, fears, glory and groanings. Rest in Him. As we submit to him, he will make straight paths. For couples that think changing jobs, maybe moving. May they not think that the right home **is** happiness. For parents trying to find the 'right' school. Free them from panic and education-idolatry. As we have to make financial decisions or health decisions, may we have confidence in Jesus to write our story well, in mercy and in strength, so we give thanks for his goodness and timing."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Shunning evil

Proverbs 3:7: Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil." To be wise in our own eyes is to be a know-it-all. Too confident of our own opinion, our own way. Too willing to rely on our cleverness. The opposite: Fear the Lord. I happened to read this alongside 1 Peter 3:7, where it says husbands should "be considerate" of their wives and "treat them with respect... lest your prayers be hindered." I'm connecting "wise in your own eyes" and lack of respect and hindered prayers this way:

The person who shows no respect believes his wife [husband] is simply *wrong*. Now if we believe others are *simply wrong*, how will we pray? "Lord, show my wife how right I am. Lead her to repent." That's boasting, not praying! So self-righteousness, "wise in my own eyes" has no fear of God and it hinders our prayers.

Instead, we should fear the Lord – He is holy. And he knows all things. Who are we to tell Him what to do? Shouldn't we say, "Lord, you know I have a strong conviction here, but show me if I am wrong." If we fear God, we will shun evil. Shunning evil is a necessary element of wisdom.

I know a pastor who led the largest church in his town . He became a drug addict while he worked there. He had a serious illness, with pain afterward. He liked the feeling the pills gave him. He thought they let him work harder and stay sharp longer. So he lied to his doctors. He said he was in pain. They trusted him because he led a big church, so he became addicted to opiates. Everyone saw that he was changing, for the worse, but no one knew why. He lost his ministry, his name and nearly lost his family before he confessed. That was five years ago. He has recovered; he is himself again. Several of us talked about it and we agreed that he had stopped shunning evil.

The church, Christians, seem to bounce between two errors. Either too much emphasis on the law – legalism, or too little emphasis on the law – antinomianism. In our formative years, legalism was common, so we stressed grace. Obedience never gains or seals God's favor. God's love is unconditional, fatherly and free. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. We are free in Christ. We

---

<sup>5</sup> Scotty Smith

celebrate God's grace. Gratitude and love for God, not fear of punishment, motivates us to serve the Lord.

But wherever grace is beloved, there is a danger. No fear of punishment, no fear of losing God's love, leads to lawlessness, laziness. So as 'grace' churches, like Central celebrate grace and our gratitude to God, our peace in the gospel, we must remember the other pole of the Christian life.

God is holy, Jesus is righteous. He says "Seek first the kingdom and its righteousness – and all [other things will be added to you. Sin hurts people – usually the weak, the poor, the helpless most of all. Sin grieves God – the Bible says this ~ ten times: He grieved at pervasive sin after the fall (Gen 6:6-7). He grieved at Saul's sins (1 Sam 15:11, 35). Later Israel "rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit (Isa 63:10). Paul commands the church "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30 +2 Sam 24:16, Ps 78:40, Ezek 6:9)

Imagine that someone invited you to share their vacation home and they quarrel every day in front of you. How that would grieve you. God's Holy Spirit takes residence in our hearts; imagine how our sins grieve Him! Again, we're united to Christ by faith. He is at our side, all day, every day. What disrespect to sin, as if he were not there. Solomon says "Fear the Lord, shun evil" (Prov 3:7).

Paul says "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions. Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" Tit. 2:11-14. Hear it: Grace teaches us to say no to sin. We should examine ourselves for sin and deny ourselves. We should imitate Jesus, walk in his steps and think "Jesus is here with me, now."

So we make our decisions with God in mind. A good friend of mine has a connection to the Cardinals and got premium tickets to a couple of games weeks ago. Somehow he met a couple of wealthy men from Texas who had bad seats and were looking to trade up. Hours before game 7, they offered him \$8,000 for his four tickets or \$6,000 and four tickets to lesser seats. My friend is not a wealthy man – not poor either – and he turned them down. Why? Three reasons:

- ☐ He had told the Cardinals he would go to the game, not scalp the tickets. He gave his word.
- ☐ He told two friends, life-long Cards fans, he would take them. He was faithful to them. Proverbs 3:3 says "Let love and faithfulness never leave you."
- ☐ He said "I didn't want to make a decision based on money." Money is not his God. He fears God, not money.

Remember: last week we said that Wisdom lives, is found, within the parameters of relationship with God and obedience. One can be crafty and shrewd and disobey God and his law, but one is never **wise** to do so. One great reason for that: The favor of God gives us so much more than we can gain by our guile.

### 3. Enjoying God's favor

Proverbs says the life of obedience and virtue has good results and our passage makes that point again and again.

1-2 Keep father's commands **gain** Life and shalom – peace and wholeness

3-4 Show love, faithfulness **gain** Favor with God and humanity

5-6 Trust the Lord **gain** Straight paths, clear direction, smoother paths

7-8 Fear the Lord **gain** Health in body, strength in bones

I confess: I don't know precisely what this promise means. I know my friend gained the favor of his friends when he took them to the World Series. I know he would have lost favor with his contact at the

Cardinals if the man asked, "How did you like Game 7?" and he had to reply, "Well." But life isn't always so simple.

It's true that if we remember what our wise fathers say, life is generally better. We also know it isn't **always** true. Since no one can say everything at once, Scripture must interpret Scripture. And Jesus says, "In this world we will have tribulation." More: No one ever kept a father's commands better than Jesus and no one ever suffered more. Yet God is promising something. Let's consider it a bit.

Heed a father and gain **long life** and "**prosperity**" – the Hebrew is **shalom**, which is not financial prosperity but contentment, wholeness, substantial peace (3:2)

If, 3:3 says, love and faithfulness are essential, abiding character traits, we "will gain favor." Who can resist godly love and kindness? This faithfulness that keeps promises, that doesn't quit, even when it's tempting. Faithfulness means God never quit – Jesus never quit – on us, so we keep pursuing love.

What is this peace and favor? I think of my mother. She loves and she loves faithfully – for a long time, for people who are not easy to love. She is so nice, she so consistently seeks the good of others, that she assumes that everyone intends to be good and loving all the time. The last times she went to buy a car, I had to say, "Remember mom, the salesman may see an older lady and try to get you to pay more than you should." She had a hard time believing this was a possibility, but I made her promise to call me before she bought anything. She called and I have to say she got a fair deal. People just want to treat her well.

More "in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight." *Acknowledge* means to "know" God personally, as husband and wife know one another. Know him and his claims on us, trust him and he will straighten our paths.

The promise of straight paths **assumes** our paths are **crooked** now. They will become straight or smooth. Waltke says "One has to view one's life from a bird's eye view... to see this truth." As a Portuguese proverb says "God writes straight with crooked lines." Our paths are straight over the years, not day by day.<sup>6</sup>

One way to enjoy the smooth in the crooked is to get our attitudes right and the Bible really helps with that. So, if questions about jobs and money are making our path seem crooked, remember: "If we have food, clothing, and shelter, we should be content with that" (1 Tim 6.8). Don't let money define the smooth life.

Smooth can't mean "no trouble." I think of Robbie Griggs, who at thirty-three is the oldest man in his family – he has no grandparents, no parents. But when he came back from his mother's funeral he told his believing friends all about it and said, "You're my family" so that a hard path became smoother, at least. The hurt doesn't go away, but the path is smoother when we know our friends love us.

## Jesus our wisdom

As we study Proverbs and wisdom, let's remember that Jesus does more than speak wisdom, he **is** the wisdom of God. Wisdom said come to me and I will teach you. Jesus says "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden." But how is Jesus our wisdom? He fulfills every line of Proverbs 3.

3:1 Jesus never forgot the teaching of his Father, never broke a command.

---

<sup>6</sup> Waltke, 245

3:3 Love and faithfulness never left him; they always stayed in his heart. As 3:7 says, he feared the Lord, and shunned evil.

3:5 He trusted the Lord, his Father, with all his heart. He did not lean on his own understanding. He acknowledged his Father's plan. We see this so clearly in Gethsemane. Jesus faced the agony of death on the cross. He faced the misery of bearing the sins of his people and in his humanity, he did not want it and said, "Father, if possible, Let this cup pass." But he added "Your will be done."

In this way, Jesus fulfilled all that wisdom requires. And yet, during his ministry, he received hardly any of the blessing of wisdom that God promised.

1-2 Keep father's laws                    **gain** Long life or peace. Short life and hard

3-4 Show love, faithfulness **gain** Favor with humanity

5-6 Trust the Lord                        **gain** Smooth paths, but hard road to Jerusalem

7-8 Fear the Lord                        **gain** Health, but blows and beatings

Why not? Because he does more than point to the way of wisdom and offer benefits. He bore the penalty of **our** folly. By living in godly obedience and wisdom, he secured for us the benefits he offers. Long life, peace, favor, paths that feel crooked, but that he straightens.

Trust the Lord who knows this crooked, broken life. He endured it, suffered it, reversed it. We go from Psalm 90: death and anger and years ending with a moan to Psalm 1: Trees planted by stream of water, prospering.

Jesus walked the path of wisdom and invites us to walk with him. So let's labor to **gain** wisdom. Yet know our limits, trust him, make this our hope: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the LORD's purpose prevails" (19:21).