

October 25, 2020
Sunday Morning Service
Anniversary
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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ARE YOU BLESSED OR PERISHING? Proverbs 29:18

Today we celebrate our 35th anniversary as a local expression of the Body of Christ. To be exact, the first meeting of this church was August 5, 1985, but we were officially incorporated with the South Carolina Secretary of State on October 21, 1985. To some extent we acknowledge our anniversary each year. However, every five years we hold a special celebration that includes a Saturday picnic and a special afternoon service on Sunday. This is that day.

It is a bit sobering, but I realized the other day that our five-year cycle means that this is the last one of these celebrations I will participate in as your pastor. Sober thoughts like that also stir up reminiscence of the road that has led us to this place in our history. Many people have been a part of this ministry over the past thirty-five years. We have learned so many lessons as God has been so incredibly patient with us.

One very important lesson that we do well to remember and to apply, no to insist on, in the future is this: We would be out of existence if it were not for the faithfulness of people committed to the cause. As in all churches, there have been those people, often a minority in number, who have been so committed. We just knew those folks would be at the regularly scheduled services unless they were out of town or something quite serious hindered them. They were the people who supported the church financially, month-in and month-out, year after year. They were the volunteers who stepped up to serve when there was a need in any number of areas of the ministry. Like all churches, Community Baptist not only survives but thrives on the backs of the committed people.

Why are some people in the world like that and many are not? It might have something to do with the way their parents reared them. It might be a matter of them simply taking ownership in their church. It might be that they just wanted to please the pastor or impress other people in the church. But, in the church setting, I attribute that “all in” attitude to something else.

Our chosen text is quite familiar, especially in its rendering by the KJV, which begins, “*Where [there is] no vision, the people perish.*” Many folks have interpreted this statement to mean that someone, somewhere needs to give people a vision of what great things can happen before others will get on board. Apparently, according to this interpretation, the committed people of Community Baptist Church somehow gained a great vision of what we could do.

I am not convinced the text should be interpreted that way. More accurately, this is a text about God’s revealed Word, the Bible. It seems to fit the overall teaching of the Bible to conclude that people who have come to know God through reading and studying their Bible become so changed that they are zealous to make a commitment to a work on earth that strives to honor that God they have come to know.

The opposite of getting to know God is being content to “know thyself” to quote the pagan humanist Ralph Waldo Emerson. That phrase came from a poem he wrote in 1831 titled in the Greek, “*Nothi (gnosko-to know) Seauton (seauto-yourself)*” which, therefore, means, “know yourself.” The great heresy of the poem is that, in Emerson’s view, every single person has God living within. That is the heresy that each person is born with a divine spark within that simply needs to be fanned into a flame which will make us like God. To that end, Emerson proposed that if we get to know ourselves, we will know God.

Quite the opposite is the truth. When we get to know God through His Word, we will understand how desperately we need to be forgiven of sin and become more like Him. True knowledge of God humbles us. It does not motivate us to try to create a god who is like us. That is pride which is the root problem. When we wrongly perceive that we are more important than God, everything about us and our life is able to supersede a commitment to God’s work and God’s people.

Our text points out the huge contrast between those two positions. If we do not pursue, if we ignore, the divine revelation God has given to us, we are going to run wild, be unrestrained, or perish. But knowing God through His law results in the truly “blessed” life.

The Words of the Text.

The plethora of translations of this simple text hint that the interpretations of the words are open to a lot of opinions. For example:

The ESV reads, *Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.*

The KJV says, Where [there is] no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy [is] he.”

God’s Word Version states, *Without prophetic vision people run wild, but blessed are those who follow God’s teachings.*

The NASB (1985) says, *Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the law.*

The NIV (2011) reads, *Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction.*

So which translation is right? Actually, they are all quite similar. However, it is profitable for us to take a few minutes to look carefully at the words God chose to put in this verse. Consider the first phrase that teaches that no vision results in failure. More precisely this should follow the ESV translation “Where there is no prophetic vision . . .”

The Hebrew root word (*hatzon*) speaks first of seeing, observing with the eye. Therefore, in it’s strictest sense it means to be able to see something. However, this word is often found in the Old Testament to refer to refer to spiritual understanding. For example, speaking of God’s majesty, Elihu said to Job, *All mankind has looked on it; man beholds it from afar (Job 36:25).* Okay describe the power and majesty of God. We see manifestations of it, but we can’t see the actual power.

That is why the same Hebrew word often describes a vision, something seen or observed in a dream such as Nebuchadnezzar had. *The king said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, “Are you*

able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?” (Daniel 2:26)

It is important to notice in our text that word is juxtaposed with “law” in the next phrase. Because of this connection, we must interpret it to mean divine revelation, the messages God unveiled to His messengers. A prime example of that kind of supernatural divine message was how God would speak to Samuel in contrast with the norm up to that point. *Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision (1 Samuel 3:1).*

Our text states that where that kind of divine communication is either absent or rejected the result is that people cast off restraint. The Hebrew word translated “cast off restraint” is found sixteen times in the Old Testament with three similar but different meanings. It can mean to let down one’s hair either literally or figuratively. It can mean to run wild. It can mean to ignore, treat carelessly, as in letting something slip through your fingers. Therefore, when a word from God is missing or missed the result is that the people run wild or become careless.

Typical Hebrew poetry will contrast one line or phrase with the next line or phrase. Such is the case here. Contrasted to not having God’s revelation which results in ruin, guarding God’s law results in blessedness. Our text promises that the person who does this is blessed.

There are essentially two Hebrew words translated “bless” in the English. One word, *barak*, is the word that speaks of God blessing or granting blessing to an individual. That word can also be used to describe humans blessing God. That is not the word used here. Here the word is *asar*. *Asar* means to be desired or maybe even to be envied. It is the idea we think of when we look at the person who is affluent and living the good life, we say, “He sure is blessed.” It speaks of a lifestyle God would approve of.

To be blessed in this sense a person has to do something. In very pragmatic ways it would be something like make a good investment and the result is that you are blessed financially. Or exercise regularly and you will be blessed with good health. Or study hard and you will be blessed with academic honors. The assessment of “blessed” depends on the kind of achievement we are observing.

Notice in this text that the “blessed” life is the result of effort by him who keeps the law. Typically the *law* in wisdom literature refers to the totality of God’s law. It refers most accurately to the moral law of God which is the revelation of God’s character. This is the idea in Ecclesiastes 12:13: *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.* We conclude that the words mean that the blessed person is the one who gives heed, observes, diligently guards, keeps God’s law. So what does that mean to us in real life in the 21st century?

The Sense of the Text.

In Nehemiah, we find a perfect illustration of the need to publicly declare the law of God and then to give the sense, to teach what it means in life. The account reads, *So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law (Nehemiah 8:2-3).* Then in verse eight of this context we learn, *They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:8).* The sense is the interpretation of the text. What is the interpretation of our text?

There is danger when God’s Word is silent. God gives revelation with the expectation that people will hear and obey. To that end, God sent messages to the prophets so that the people would know how to obey. It didn’t work out that way. Jeremiah declared to the stubborn people, *You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the LORD persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets (Jeremiah 25:4).* Nevertheless, having given His revelation, God expected His people to obey. Moses pointed out, *And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess (Deuteronomy 4:14).*

To ignore God’s Word results in chaos. God our Creator knows what is best for us His created beings. Therefore, God’s revealed

Word is His instruction to us about what is best. If we choose to ignore it, reject it, the result will be rejecting what is best. Very few people in the world or in history would even be concerned about that conclusion. But, the second best choice is not even close to God’s best. It is, as our text says, ruin. It is not just running wild in life, but it is running into eternity to face unceasing punishment. That is the final end of “ruin.”

Conversely, there is satisfaction in keeping God’s Word. As we contemplate how to keep God’s law, we must bear in mind that God’s law is very broad. Some students divide God’s “law” into three categories. The ceremonial law is all that God required in the ceremonies of worship at the tabernacle and temple and such. Those were pictures of the sacrifice which Christ brought to fulfillment in His sacrifice. There was the civil law of God which gave all the rules that God gave to the nation of Israel in order to maintain civility. Finally there is the category called God’s moral law. Those are the rules and laws of God found throughout the Bible that reveal His character. Typically, in wisdom literature “law” is the breadth of God’s Word given to us (we might say, the Bible).

Our text teaches that guarding God’s law results in blessedness. Thinking about the meaning of the word “keep,” the person who is following or observing God’s law is reading, knowing, obeying the Bible. In our day, that is glibly called “legalism” by people who do not know God well. The blessedness that results is the lifestyle of someone who is becoming what God intended His people to be. It is not a lifestyle that is desired by people who are sunk in sin, consumed with the passing foolishness of the passing world. It is a lifestyle desired by all who look forward to spending eternity in the presence of our Creator.

The Illustrations of the Text.

A picture is worth a thousand words. God has given us multiple pictures of what this principle looks like in real life. We discover that sometimes there is no divine revelation. Those times are observed in the Bible. Was that the case from the first sin until after Enosh was born when men began to call on the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26)? There seems to be very little revelation from God until the

time of Abraham. Most notable is that God became silent for 400 years between Malachi and the opening words of Matthew's Gospel.

Times when there was no divine revelation from God are also observed in modern history. There was a "silence" from God throughout the dark ages. His Word was still available. The revelation was still around for those who could read it. It's just that organized religion kept it concealed. The same seems to be true in many parts of the world today. False religions conceal and distort God's truth. Oppressive governments criminalize the declaration of the Bible. Secular society scoffs at God's law, His revelation.

Those are probably all examples of times when the divine revelation is ignored. That is a fitting description of Israel much of the time. God sent His prophets with His messages but the people didn't want to hear it. Still there are places where God's Word is unknown. And that is not just in the deep, uncivilized jungles. Rather, God's Word is ignored in very intellectually astute cultures, and even in many places in America.

Worst of all is that there is no divine revelation because of willful ignorance in many churches. This is the saddest of situations. Mainline denominations and their seminaries have traded the truth of God's Word for the foolish theories and thoughts of self-righteous men and women. Even sadder is that in many churches where the Bible is preached, generations grow up to ignore it in everyday life because they are just too busy to pay attention. Eventually, those people will reject it. The result is not only eternal perishing, but a lifestyle that is characterized by "running wild" according to God's law.

The Application of the Text.

We have prophetic vision and law. God has given us a detailed expression of His will in the Bible. There we learn (whenever we want to) what God has decreed. We should be familiar with what God has decreed. Much of that is often given in the form of systematic theology. We are studying many of those decrees during our Wednesday evening meetings. That is not a popular practice in this day.

Furthermore, in the Bible we learn what God desires. Much of the Bible is a succinct revealing of what God desires for humanity in general. For example, we have referred to one of those expressions often in recent days. God's will is revealed in Paul's instruction: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4).* That is what God desires. We know that. What will you do about it? You can ignore it or keep it.

Also, in the Bible God has given us a detailed expression His character. We know what God is like. Knowing what God is like (holy, righteous, loving, gracious, merciful, mighty, just), we can easily see what we are not. Learning the message of *prophetic vision*, we understand that we need the Savior to forgive our sins. Learning the message of *prophetic vision*, we understand more and more how God would have us take on His character.

So what is the result of our relationship with God's Word? We can be blessed or careless. Multi-faceted ignorance of God is careless. We have no excuse of not exposing ourselves to the revelation of God. The Bible is still the best selling book in history. We have an amazing array of translations in so many applications or devices. You cannot get away from the availability of God's Word. But we put so many other things ahead of our intake of Bible truth that we become ignorant of it. In the lives of many professing Christians "there is no *prophetic vision*."

The warning of our text is that where there is no prophetic vision people "do their own thing." That was the problem during the period of the judges when there was no prophet or preacher, and the priests were as ignorant as the masses. As a result, every man did that which was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25). That is a pretty good description of where we are today. Everyone is an authority. Everyone does their own thing. And doing their own thing, they often appeal to God's grace as opposed to God's law.

In contrast is the truth that God-given blessing is a precious treasure. God desires for us to be conformed to His moral law, the

expression of His character. That conformity creates the “blessed” life. Jesus expressed this so well when, having humbled Himself to serve the disciples, He said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17).

If you are committed to the truth of God’s Word, you will also be committed to knowing more and more about the Bible, knowing more and more how to apply the Bible in your life, telling others the good news of the gospel, encouraging other Christians, and faithful service in the Body of Christ. Are those just a bunch of man-made rules? No, every single one of those “laws” is found in God’s law. It’s the kind of thing that makes for a “blessed” life.

The explanation for unfaithfulness, undependability, irresponsibility in the work of the local church is rooted in ignoring the truth and principles of the Bible. The extreme example of that is the European cultures where there is no prophetic vision. The people are perishing as they do what they want to do. Why is there no prophetic vision? Because the churches have gone out of business. It didn’t happen overnight. It happened gradually as professing Christians ignored God’s revealed truth or reinterpreted it to make life comfortable.

We ignore the understanding and application of Bible truth when we are distracted by the passing things of life or (and quite often), we are focused on our own perceived needs, comfort, pleasure, or happiness (which actually results in no happiness).

Commitment acknowledges that the essence of Divine Revelation and God’s Law is the astonishing work of God’s love in caring for, helping, providing for, saving others. That care and concern for us helpless humans is never demonstrated better than in Christ Jesus’ sacrificial work. *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Hebrews 1:1-2).* When God wanted us to really know what He is like, He sent God the Son who is . . . *the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:3a).*

And what God revealed to us was His extreme commitment to His people. Jesus demonstrated it. Just before He went to the cross Jesus prayed to the Father, “I have manifested your name to the

people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. . . . And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:6,-9,11).

Commitment to fellow Christians demonstrates that you are fully aware of the truth God has revealed, and, in submission and obedience to Him, you apply it in your relationship to others.