

Wisdom: Living Under God and Unto God

Proverbs 3

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, ² for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. ³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. ⁹ Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. ¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, ¹² for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Wisdom as God-Oriented

Wisdom is first and foremost God-oriented. It's just the nature of the case that wisdom is the skill of living *under God*. If God is, and if he has created us, and if he has built into this world a moral order, and if he has revealed himself to us, and if we are accountable to him, then we must hear his instruction and live faithful under him and unto him. Only a fool would attempt to live otherwise. To ignore God's instruction would be both morally wrong and personally destructive – “foolish” in every sense of the term. But to listen to God's instruction and follow it – that is “wisdom” in every sense.

So again, wisdom, first and foremost, is God-oriented. What we call “religious instruction” is not just one dimension of an otherwise busy life – it is basic to everything about us. We look first to God, and only then do we attempt to live successfully.

As we will see, that is the larger frame of reference again when we come to chapter 3.

The introduction to this lecture follows the same general structure we've seen already. First there is a call to the son to capture his attention – that's verse 1. And then there is the motivational clause, reminding him of the value and benefits of wisdom – that's verse 2.

But this call to his son to capture his attention is worded in a new way in verse 1: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.” This time he doesn't say, “Listen up”; he says “Don't forget.” “My son, do not forget my teaching.”

Forgetting is something all children are pretty good at.

- You tell your child to go to his room and pick up his toys, and he goes into his room and immediately he is distracted from the task at hand and begins *playing* with his toys. You go in thirty minutes later and admonish him, and what does he say? “I forgot.”

- You tell your child that it is his responsibility every day to empty the trash from the kitchen waste basket. So he immediately goes and empties the trash. Next day – “I forgot.”
- You tell him that he has to clean up the yard after the dog every day. And day two it’s the same: “I forgot.”
- You tell him to do his homework immediately when he comes home from school – get that done first. He comes home and is distracted by the toys or the cell phone or the refrigerator, and when you admonish him, he says it again: “I forgot.”

Finally at some point it dawns on you that forgetting is not a mere intellectual infirmity – it has a moral dimension to it. The fact is he *should not have forgotten*. He should have remembered. He knew better, and he must be held accountable. Sometimes he may require a little “reinforcement” of some kind to aid his memory! If he has forgotten, it’s ultimately because he didn’t take your word as seriously as he should have. There was a lack of concern.

Same here with regard to wisdom’s very serious instruction for life – to forget it and fail to live up to it is not just a bad memory – it’s a moral flaw. You knew better. You are not an autonomous creature – you live under God, and you know it. He has given you instruction for life, and you are accountable to him. And to forget that will not work out well for you. “My son, do not forget my teaching.”

That’s the negative exhortation.

Then in the second half of the verse he says it again but in a more positive way: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but *let your heart keep* my commandments.”

Notice, he doesn’t just say, “*Remember* my commandments.” He says, “*Let your heart keep* my commandments.” The “heart,” as you know, is the seat of the personality. It’s the inner you that makes you *you*. It’s your mind, your thinking, your will, your affections – the inner self, as we call it. And the word “keep” obviously has the connotations of *obey*, but it’s more than that. The word “keep” has connotations of guarding, watching over. “Keep” my commands in *that* sense.

So the father is exhorting his son to *imbibe*, internalize, and value his instruction. “Make it yours. Take it seriously. Adopt it as your own. Recognize its value such that it shapes your life from the inside out.” He’s trying as far as he is able to make wisdom shape his son’s heart. Wise behavior, then, will follow as a matter of course.

And then the motivational clause (v.2). Why is it so important that you keep this instruction in your heart and not forget it? “For length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.” It’s what we’ve seen before. “This is in your own best interests.” This promise of long life, like the promise of full barns in verse 10, reflects the underlying promise of the old covenant in which God promised temporal blessing for obedience. God of course remains sovereign, and under his rule and for his own purposes some good people are not given long lives. But the principle is larger than material blessing: it is in obedience to Christ that we find joy, contentment, and satisfaction. We sing, don’t we, that “there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey”? Living according to God’s revealed wisdom is good for us. It’s in our own best interests – both temporally and eternally.

And to drive this point home, in verses 3-4 he gives a corresponding exhortation and promise:

³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.

Here he characterizes wisdom's instruction as "steadfast love and faithfulness," kindness and trustworthiness – corresponding to God's own character. And he exhorts his son to tie these virtues around his neck and write them on his heart – vivid metaphors to emphasize again the need to make this instruction his own.

Notice, then, verses 5-7:

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

Here the father directs his son's attention to God, and clearly his point is the same as verses 1-4 – to pay attention to divine wisdom and live accordingly. In that sense this is just a continuation or extension of the thought of verses 1-4.

But notice that here he does not speak in terms of *obedience*. He speaks in terms of *trust*. Now without doubt *obedience* is what he has in mind – to "acknowledge" God (v.6) necessarily entails obedience. He's telling his son that he must not imagine that he can live autonomously (v.7 – "Don't be wise in your own eyes"). But he casts all that first in terms of *trust*. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." That is, "When what you think or want to do conflicts with God's instruction, trust him. Don't think you know better." Don't think that your thimble full of knowledge will offset the ocean of God's wisdom (Waltke).

We need to make sure we understand this correctly. The father here is not saying here that his son shouldn't think or make plans. That's not his point at all. He's cautioning him against *independent* thinking – making decisions and determinations as though your reasoning were all that is needed. *Obey* God's revealed wisdom for life, yes, but this goes deeper – *trust* him. Trust his judgments and his direction for living: he really does know better than you!

So he's talking about obedience, yes. Of course. But he's emphasizing here that obedience is rooted in trust. If we trust God, we will obey him.

For example, Jesus says, "Do not lay up treasure on earth but in heaven." And he has very good explanations. Treasures on earth get rusty and moth-eaten. They just are not stable. They don't last. They pass away. Treasures in heaven, on the other hand, last forever. There's no moth-eaten clothing there, no rust, no fading of wealth. It makes perfect sense – invest your money for eternity. Now how you respond to that depends on whether or not you trust him. You've never seen the bank vault of heaven, so you're torn. Do you know better? Or does Jesus? Your checkbook will tell us the answer.

You see, obedience and trust are related.

Notice that's just how the father himself makes application in verse 9: "Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce." The word translated "honor," here means something like, "give weight to" – to "honor" the Lord is to *give him weight*.

When my son was a teenager and began to drive, I would tell him not to speed. And I would tell him that speeding will not work out well for him. I'm very sorry to say that when the police officer told him the same thing it carried more weight. (It's more of that learn by faith or learn by hard experience thing.) And the father here tells his son that the *weight* or honor he gives to God is demonstrated by the checkbook: "Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce."

Now notice more closely in verses 5-6 just what the demands of faith are (cf. Waltke).

- First, he says we must trust the Lord *entirely*: "Trust in the Lord with *all your heart*" (v.5a) – with all your being, with a whole-souled kind of commitment. Trust him entirely.
- Next, he says we must trust the Lord *exclusively*: "And do not lean on your own understanding" (v.5b). You ever hear someone try to justify his sin by pointing to some kind of good that will come of it? Satan comes to Jesus and wants to reason with him: "Bow down and worship me, and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth." That might sound like a good deal, but not if you trust God exclusively. If you determine not to "lean on your own understanding" and presume that you know better, you'll just do what God says. Or, as another example, God has told you how to bring up your children – do you know better? God has told you the value of the gathered meetings of the church – do you know better? God has told you of your need to feed on his Word continually – do you know better? Or do you trust him?
- Then in verse 6 he exhorts us to trust God *extensively*: "In *all your ways* acknowledge him." In every situation, the question is, "What does God say about this?" All of life and all its details are governed by this weighty consideration: What has God said?

So wisdom means trusting God (v.5), fearing God (v.7), and honoring God (v.9). And if we trust, fear, and honor God, we will obey him.

In fact, trusting God, fearing God, and honoring God entails not only obedience but also submission to his hard providences. Notice that in verses 11-12:

¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, ¹² for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

God is not an overly indulgent father who just spoils his children. He's determined to see us mature, and so just as a conscientious human father who in love must at times apply the rod of correction, so God at times in providence brings us through hardship to temper us and to teach us to trust him.

Did you know that your response to hard providences is a reflection of your trust and fear of God and that it reveals how much you honor him? There is a category of "lament" psalms, and there is a way to "complain" that is not sinful. But there is a big difference between taking your complaint to God and complaining at him and chafing under his providence. In every situation of life we must trust God and give him due weight.

The Value & Benefits of Wisdom

Now in all these applications the father shores up his exhortations with reminders that honoring God is the wise thing to do – it's in our own self-interest.

- Verse 6: “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall make your paths straight.”
- Verse 8: “It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”
- Verse 10: “then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”

Then in verses 13-26 he presses the point at length:

¹³ Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed. ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; ²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew. ²¹ My son, do not lose sight of these – keep sound wisdom and discretion, ²² and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. ²³ Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. ²⁴ If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. ²⁵ Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, ²⁶ for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.

How many ways can you say it? We heed the wisdom of God for our own good. Yet wisdom is always God-oriented. We live under him and unto him. In all we do we seek to honor him. And in doing so we seek his blessing.

The Responsibilities of Wisdom

Now, wisdom entails horizontal dimensions also – in our relationships and behavior and responsibilities toward others. He spells out some of these for us beginning in verse 27:

²⁷ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.

²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it” – when you have it with you. ²⁹ Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. ³⁰ Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.

³¹ Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways.

The first emphasis here is on kindness, generosity, doing good, helping others. Don't second-guess the opportunity or wait to figure out reasons not to help them when they are in need. Just do it. And don't take advantage of your neighbor's trust. And don't be upset with your brother or maintain ill-feelings or resentment just because you dislike something about him. And don't nurse those secret thoughts that you wish you could do some of those things sinners do. As he says in verse 3, “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.” Live unto God! Live wisely.

And notice again he returns to the motivational reminders:

³² for the devious person is an abomination to the LORD, but the upright are in his confidence. ³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. ³⁴ Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. ³⁵ The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.

So he presses the familiar theme again, just as he has since chapter 1: Live unto God, and you will never regret it.

These are the entailments of trusting God.

Concluding Thoughts

Every one of us who has come to Christ knows what it is to trust God. We came to Christ acknowledging that we have nothing to offer – that we have Christ alone. That's all. And we entrust ourselves wholly to him, believing his promise and trusting in his saving work. And not just for escape from hell. When we first came to Christ we came with head bowed and knee bent, submitting to his yoke. And in giving ourselves to him we committed ourselves to “observe all that he has commanded.” We trust him, and so we obey him. There is no separating out the benefits and responsibilities – we don't come saying, “I'll take you for heaven but not for life here.” No, we become his – we trust him, and so we follow him.

That, ultimately, is what Proverbs 3 is all about. Wise living is living through Christ under God and unto God – for his honor and for our good.

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