

How to Have a Pleasant Heart

Proverbs 22:17-21

“¹⁷ Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge. ¹⁸ For *it is* a pleasant thing if thou keep them within thee; they shall withal be fitted in thy lips. ¹⁹ That thy trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee. ²⁰ Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, ²¹ That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that you might answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?”

How do you approach a world full of uncertainty and grow your faith in the Lord? How can you be pleasant and confident when everyone and everything else seems to be in an uproar? Wouldn't it be great if you could give answers to the questions the people around you are asking? Wouldn't you like to help them find hope? To answer these questions, Proverbs 22:17-21 gives us three important commands, three rewards for obeying these commands and three reasons for these great benefits. What are believers commanded to do? Let's apply our ears and our hearts to God's Word and get ready to give struggling people Scriptural answers.

Three Important Commands to Get Wisdom, 17

■ Incline your ear

This is a command for humility. The command means “to stretch out, spread out, extend or incline, or bend.”ⁱ God commanded Moses to stretch out his hands (in the great test at the Red Sea, Exodus 14:16) using this same Hebrew word. We are commanded to incline or stretch out our ears. This means to listen carefully to God's Word in our own testing. This requires a humble heart; to do so, you must follow the appeal of Proverbs 3:7, “Be not wise in your own eyes . . .” Sometimes, you will catch yourself inclining your ear this way. You may catch just a little whisper of a sound that causes you to move your ear, almost involuntarily. This command is to carefully listen for every whisper of God's Word, every time you read it, or hear it preached or taught.

■ Listen to the words of the wise

This is a command for attentiveness: “**Hear the words of the wise.**” Let's face it: distractions abound; interruptions are everywhere. But of everything else in the world that there is to listen to, the command is to “**hear the words of the wise.**” Only God's Words will make sense of God's world. We set them aside to our peril, and endanger the coming generations.

Perhaps you read this week about the sad state of affairs at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. But remember their history. “In 1891, Charles A. Briggs, who was being installed as the chair of Biblical studies, delivered an inaugural address in which he questioned the verbal inspiration of Scripture. When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. vetoed Briggs' appointment and eventually deposed Briggs for heresy two years later, Union removed itself from denominational oversight.”ⁱⁱ But Union went on to become one of the most liberal “Christian” seminaries in the world, employing professors such as Paul Tillich and Harry Emerson Fosdick. And just four days ago, on September 18, Union Seminary tweeted the following: ““Today in chapel, we confessed to plants,” it began. “Together, we held our grief, joy, regret, hope, guilt and sorrow in prayer;

offering them to the beings who sustain us but whose gift we too often fail to honor.” Then they asked for an Amen: ‘What do you confess to the plants in your life?’”ⁱⁱⁱ Sounds crazy, right? As you can imagine, humorous critics have had a heyday with this one. What kind of foolishness is this? Adam and Eve wore costumes of plants; Union seminary students confess to the plants. We set the Words of God aside to our peril, and endanger the coming generations. **“Here the words of the wise.”**

What happens when a society departs from the words of the wise? “NBCNews.com also broke out a confessional, with an interactive website titled “Climate Confessions.” NBC explained their brainstorm: ‘Even those who care deeply about the planet’s future can slip up now and then. Tell us: Where do you fall short in preventing climate change? Do you blast the A/C? Throw out half your lunch? Grill a steak every week? Share your anonymous confession with NBC News.’ They created categories of ‘sins’ against Earth.”^{iv} The Word of God defines sin; this world wants to redefine God and redefine sin. God commands us to listen to the words of the wise.

■ **Apply your heart to true knowledge**

This is a command for application. The phrase “apply your heart” or “set your heart” appears ten times in the Scriptures. The Bible does not speak of following your heart; it speaks of setting your heart, or guiding your heart. Here the appeal is to apply oneself to the wisdom gained by humble attentiveness. The words of the wise show you how to apply the knowledge you receive. The British writer, Miles Kington has been credited with saying, *“Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”* History is full of Christians who applied their hearts to true knowledge with remarkable results: Roger Bacon (1214-1294) made discoveries in optics, mechanics and geography; he is widely credited as one of the earliest advocates of the scientific method, still used today. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) introduced the scientific view that the planets are in orbit around the sun. William Turner (1508-1568) is considered to be the father of English botany. Isaac Newton (1643-1727) is still considered to be one of the greatest for his scientific and mathematical discoveries. You may not become a world-renowned scientist, but you will know how to help people who are hurting. To do that, you must apply your heart to true knowledge. Let’s apply our ears and our hearts to God’s Word and get ready to give struggling people Scriptural answers.

According to Proverbs 22:17-21, what will happen if we follow these three important commands?

Three Rewards for Obeying These Commands, 18-19

¹⁸ For it is a pleasant thing if thou keep them within thee; they shall withal be fitted in thy lips. ¹⁹ That thy trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee.

❖ You will have a pleasant heart, if you keep them within you.

According to the Scriptures, here is the first reward for obeying those three important commands: you will have a pleasant heart if you keep them within you. (The Hebrew uses the word for “belly” or “stomach” here, as in Proverbs 18:20; it seems to refer to the process of digestion.) Proverbs 3:24 reminds you what happens when you apply your ears and your heart to wisdom this way: when you lie down, you will not be afraid; you shall lie down and your sleep will be sweet! Verses 25-26 go on to say, **²⁵ Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. ²⁶ For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.** Did you see the

article this week that an asteroid the size of a football field passed by the earth at only 40,000 miles away? And the big news was that NASA was surprised by it. And what could they have done about it? They could have done nothing except excite people's fears, generate lots of news articles and millions in ad revenue. Seriously. How should a believer respond to such real-life news? **"Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked."** Why not? An asteroid that size would have destroyed an area roughly fifty miles wide. What if you were in that disaster field, and you died? If you are a Christian, you know that your eternal home is in heaven. Why worry? One author wrote, "Learning and integrating the wisdom of Proverbs into one's experience leads to a happy life this requires, however, that you "keep them within you."^v

❖ **You will be able to give wise, Scriptural answers.**

There is a second reward for following these three important commands. This wisdom will be ready on your lips. The idea is that you will have answers on the tip of your tongue. In a society where people are terrified, we can follow through on the counsel of 1 Peter 3:14-15, **". . . be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; ¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:"** Let's apply our ears and our hearts to God's Word and get ready to give struggling people Scriptural answers.

This is the pattern of a disciple given to us by the promised Messiah, in Isaiah 50:4-7, **"⁴The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned [disciple], that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he awakens morning by morning, he awakens mine ear to hear as the learned. ⁵The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. ⁶I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. ⁷For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed."**

Jesus learned (Luke 2:52) how to speak a word to the weary in due season. God the Father instructed Him and Jesus did not turn away. In fact, He went to the cross to face the shame and the penalty for your sin and my sin, that we might be spared. He knew that the Father would help Him, so He set His face like a flint. Yes, He died a very real death, but on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead! He was not ashamed; He is not ashamed. If you really want to help others, start here with the Gospel story of Jesus. Now we can have this answer on the tip of our tongues: **"For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."** (Romans 10:13).

❖ **Your faith will grow.**

That thy trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee.

When you use God's Word to face the world, your faith will grow. This is why Romans 10:17 says, **"So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."** Instead of growing more fearful, you will grow more faithful with the Word. The very reason that the Lord made these things known to you is so that your trust may be in the Lord. Bruce Waltke wrote, *"Even the most brilliant moral sayings are powerless without personal application. Today refers to each day of the son's life because he is to have them always ready on his tongue. . . The daily calling to mind of the collected sayings becomes the "today," not just one day in the past when they were first memorized."*^{vi}

Three Reasons for These Benefits, 20-21

“²⁰ Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, ²¹ That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?”

- **The Scriptures are full of excellent counsel and knowledge.**

There are two alternate readings of this verse that take the word “excellent” to be translated as “officers” or “thirty.”^{vii} But the point of the passage is that the Lord has given us superb counsel and knowledge for the days ahead. The Scriptures are full of wisdom.

- **The Scriptures were designed to help you to be certain about their truth.**

The Lord designed the Scriptures to give you confidence and certainty in an uncertain world. Apply your heart to them, and you will know that the Scriptures are true; they will give you the faith to face tomorrow.

- **The Scriptures were designed to give you answers for the questions that people are wrestling with.**

God designed His Word to make you a witness to the world. People around us are longing for answers. You could make yourself ready to give them those answers. Don't spend the best years of your life waiting for the best years of your life. Life is simply too short to be shallow.

How do you approach a world full of uncertainty? How can you grow your faith in the Lord? How can you be pleasant and confident when everyone and everything else seems to be in an uproar? Wouldn't it be great if you could give answers to the questions the people around you are asking? Wouldn't you like to help them find hope? Let's apply our ears and our hearts to God's Word and get ready to give struggling people Scriptural answers.

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ⁱ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 639.

ⁱⁱ Union Theological Seminary, Wikipedia, accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Theological_Seminary_\(New_York_City\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Theological_Seminary_(New_York_City)) (citing Hart, D. G.; Muether, John (2007). *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing. p. 183.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Brent Bozell and Tim Graham, *Earth Worship and Climate Confessions*, September 21m 2019, accessed at <https://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/nb/tim-graham/2019/09/21/bozell-graham-column-earth-worship-and-climate-confessions>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v John Kitchen, *Proverbs a Mentor commentary*, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, Great Britain, 2006. 506

^{vi} Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdman's publishing, 2005. 223

^{vii} The latter reading comes from a German scholar who thinks that Solomon was referring to the wisdom of an Egyptian scholar name Amenemope whose book included thirty chapters.