

Proverbs

The Wisdom of Steadfast Love

June 11, 2017

So, several years ago, the TV show *Saturday Night Live* was actually funny, and people watched it. Because it was funny. Like I said, this is a long time ago before you and I were born, really, one of the skits was called, “Deep Thoughts with Jack Handey.” After a skit that would break away and cut to this 45 second inspirational picture and text would scroll up, and a voiceover would read these, “Deep thoughts,” or little proverbs, and they were really funny. So, before we get started into our look at through the book of Proverbs, I want to share some of Jack Handey’s proverbs for life:

“To me it’s a good idea to always carry two sacks of something when you walk around. That way, if anyone says, ‘Hey, can you give me a hand?’ you can say, ‘Sorry, I’ve got these sacks.’”

File that one away.

Another good one, I think this is pertinent. It’s theological, at least.

“When you die, if you get a choice to go to regular heaven or pie heaven, choose pie heaven. It might be a trick, but if it’s not, mmm, pie.”

We’re going to be looking this morning at Proverbs.

We all have a lot of noise in our lives.

In chapter 1 we see that wisdom is crying aloud to you, and there’s a whole lot of noise in our lives, and we must decide: will you be attentive to it? Will you choose to quiet the other noises for a moment? Will you take time to quiet the other noises and listen to wisdom crying out in the streets?

So, with that in mind, let’s consider Proverbs 3:1-12

Proverbs 3: 1-12

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. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So, you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. 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 straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Wisdom, the ability to flourish in this world, comes when you know and understand who created this world, and wisdom is a relational experience. It’s a relationship thing. It’s about knowing the person who made all things, and knowing him deeply.

With that in mind, we have a couple of points to think about, but they all hang on the first one.

The first thing Solomon talks about in this is a new identity. And this grounds all of what we’re going to be talking about this series. Wisdom is fundamentally about how you relate to God. Before we can even begin to put things into practice, we’ve got to start here. Before we get into different topics that we’re going to cover

throughout this series, we've got to understand this: Without your identity being in who God is and who he created you to be, wisdom will elude you.

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

To begin to understand what your relationship is with God, and what your identity is in God is that you first must know yourself. You first must know where you are currently. And for Christians, our core identity is found in this: Our relationship with God is not one of enmity, but friendship. Jesus describes this in John 15 when he says

John 15:13-16

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”

Christian, Jesus calls you his friend. And this friendship with God is the foundation for our entire understanding of the book of proverbs. Otherwise, we're going to be tempted to look at Proverbs the way we look at Jack Handey's Deep Thoughts. We hear them, we think about them for ten seconds, and then we move on to the other noise going in our lives.

So, verses 1-2 really set up the whole text, but verses 3-12 is the teaching and the commandments that Solomon has for us.

Proverbs 3: 3-4

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

The first thing to wisdom is to let steadfast love and faithfulness never forsake you.

“Steadfast Love” is a Hebrew word called *bessed*. If there's a cool Hebrew word to get a tattoo of, it's this one. That's just a freebie, but if you're going to get a biblical tattoo, *bessed* is the one you want. Because this is the word most used in the Scriptures to describe how God relates to his people. Steadfast love.

What it means, in its' simplest terms, is that God is covenantally binding himself to his people in mercy and in love.

Solomon is actually using language from Deuteronomy 6 when they're given the 10 Commandments and they're told what to do with them.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One, and you shall love him with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your might. And these words I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children. Talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk in the way, when you lie down, when you rise, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be between your eyes, write them on the doorposts of your house.

Solomon is evoking this language here when he says, “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart.”

Make the steadfast love of the Lord the thing that you are about at all times.

His steadfast love for his people becomes must become the thing that marks you, deeply, if you're ever going to begin walking in wisdom. It's the truest thing about you. It is your reality. It's the story that makes you who you are. The steadfast love of God must be the thing that defines you.

The scariest part about this is our lack of control over it. We are naturally wired to want to be in control of all aspects of our life. We're Americans! We are in charge. Beyoncé says girls run the world, but she's wrong. American's run the world.

The most fundamental thing about you must be the steadfast love of the Lord. His grace for you. His love for you. His mercy for you. His pursuit of you. His forgiveness of you.

Wisdom begins when the steadfast love and faithfulness of God is the primary story by which you're choosing to live your life by. When it's the relationship that defines you. When God's covenant love and faithfulness to you is the foundation of who you believe yourself to be. That's the beginning of wisdom.

So how do we apply it? One of the most common questions I get asked when I'm meeting with people is, "So, what do I do??"

This is it: Preach the gospel to yourself every day. Over and over and over again.

Martin Luther says it this way, he talks about first about the law and then the gospel:

Martin Luther

The law is divine and holy, and let the law have its' glory, but no law ever so divine and holy will teach me that I am justified or will give me life. I grant, it will teach me that I ought to love God and my neighbor, and to live in chastity, soberness, and patience, but it will never deliver me from sin, the devil, and death. And so, I must take council to the gospel, and harken to the gospel, which teaches me not what I ought to do, but what Jesus Christ the son of God has done for me. That he suffered and died to deliver me from sin and from death. The gospel wills me to receive it and believe it. And this is the truth of the Gospel, the principal of all Christian doctrine, Most necessary is it, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.

We've got to preach the steadfast love of the Lord into our hearts every day. And if you don't understand that that's the fundamental dynamic in your relationship with God, then you'll never make headway toward wisdom. If you don't see Steadfast Love as what unites you to God, his steadfast love toward you, his unfailing love toward you, his grace toward you, his kindness toward you... if you don't get that, you'll never begin to grow in wisdom.

If you aren't secure in his redemption and his renewal, then you'll seek to find redemption and renewal in all sorts of things besides him, and its folly.

The things we turn to in our folly, work, relationships, food, video games, religion, National Championship women's basketball teams. Or Football. whatever it is, it's folly because all those things fade and die. So, what it looks like to begin to have wisdom is to have the steadfast love of the Lord define you, and the way that it becomes to define us more and more is to preach it into our hearts day after day.

One of the things that looks like is to have an intimate relationship with scripture. Scripture is fundamentally the story of God over and over and over and over again seeking out and running toward people who are way more frustrating than any of your roommates or parents. He's done it for thousands of years. From beginning to the end of the Bible, God is preaching to us the Gospel. Over and over and over again.

One way that you can begin to grow in wisdom by teaching the gospel to yourself is read Revelation 21 three times a week every single week for the rest of your lives.

I can't get more practical than that. Set your heart on what God is doing. There's coming a day when all that's bad is going to be made right, when all that is sad is going to come untrue, and that God will wipe away every single tear that you have. There's not going to be any more pain or death or cancer or terrorism. There's not going to be any more abuse. There's no more crying.

So, make reading Revelation 21 a part of your life.

Verse 5 Begins with

Proverbs 3:5

Trust in the Lord with all of your heart...

Trust the Lord with all your heart. And if you trust Him, then it's to know that you are clean.

So today, I want to look at how this every day friendship with God speaks into three areas of our lives. Three things. First, our relationship to others. Second, our relationship with our stuff, with our material possessions. And third, our relationship to discipline. (Another way to say it, our relationship to pain, or to suffering)

Every day friendship with God changes our relationship to others, our relationship to stuff, and our relationship to discipline.

The first thing it does is that you now have a different approach to other people. Think about people in authority, first of all. This authority, this can be God's authority or it can be authorities in our lives, our Government, those who enforce laws, etc. "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."

He tells us to not lean on our own understanding, to not think that we understand better than God's word. Because, to some degree, what we're all prone to do, is to do the exact same thing that Thomas Jefferson did.

Some of you may have heard of the Jefferson Bible. Thomas Jefferson opened scripture with a razor blade and he read it. And as things came up and offended him, or didn't fit into his worldview, he cut those words out with a razor blade. Then, he published his Bible that way. You can still get it today.

We're all crafting our own Bibles. I'm crafting my own little Bible. The little Ryan bible says things like, "Love your neighbor as yourself, so long as it isn't too inconvenient."

We're all cutting out things in scripture that we really don't want to follow. Things that we find objectionable to our world view. What that means is that we're not worshipping the One True God, we're worshipping little imaginary versions of ourselves. Because when you're cutting out parts of the bible according to your personality, you're just turning God into a picture of yourself. My friend Sammy Rhodes calls this, "Creating God in our Own Image."

When the steadfast love of the Lord is what defines us, it changes our approach to authority and we sit under his word, not above it. It's a call to no longer linger on our own understanding, and to stop cutting out the passages that we don't really want to follow in the first place.

The path to wisdom means that we become people who are under authority, and submitting to authorities in all areas of your life. "In all your ways acknowledge him."

It's saying, "Know God." Be in relationship with him, and he will make your paths straight.

The command to acknowledge God is just this: Let your friendship with your King and your Creator come to bear in all aspects of your life. In all your ways acknowledge him. Wisdom means that you consider and apply what He says about work, about schoolwork, about your relationships with your parents, your relationship with romantic interests. It means you consider and apply what he says about lust, and leisure, and money, and your social life.

To acknowledge to the Lord isn't simply giving him a shout-out, to acknowledge him means that your relationship with Him affects every aspect of your daily life. And that what he says, speaks into all of it. You stop cutting out parts of his character that you don't like, and you sit underneath his authority.

A friendship with the Lord affects every part of your life. When he speaks, you really listen. Wisdom means that we are people who are coming under authority.

But it's not just our relationship with God, it's also our relationships with other people.

Proverbs 3:7-8

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

It changes our approach to criticism. The call to, "Be not wise in your own eyes," is the call to be correctable. It's about humility.

Are you someone who is teachable? Isn't it interesting that he says if you're teachable, if you don't think that you know everything but instead are corrected often and consider what other people must say, if you're teachable, you'll experience healing and refreshment.

That's the promise associated with being teachable: healing and refreshment.

Here's a really big thing that it's important to get. God's ways are so different than the ways of the world. "Be teachable and accept correction often, and you will find healing and refreshment." That's counter-cultural. That's living differently.

If you're not wise in your own eyes, you get healing and refreshment.

There are dozens and dozens of perfect pictures of this. Having nephews is great for illustrating different principles in scripture. I've got 3 nephews that are 5, 7, and Larkin turns 9 in a few months, and one day I was visiting with them in Atlanta right before my brother's birthday, and so we decided to make cards for Zach. So, they were cutting out hearts to put on their cards and kept drawing a whole heart and then cutting it out. Okay, I'm 28, and I can't even do that. The way you cut out a heart is you fold the paper in half and then you draw half a heart, and cut it out. Everyone knows that. But my nephews kept insisting on doing it their own way, and they were so frustrated with their lopsided hearts.

Then they tried Uncle Ryan's way, and you know what happened? They cut a great looking heart. And they received healing and refreshment in their bones. Just like God promises you and I when we choose to be teachable.

So how do you respond to correction and criticism? My default posture is one of defensiveness. The height of foolishness is to not listen to criticism and correction, because you're just saying that you're wise in your own eyes. So, next time someone brings correction to you, stop trying to defend yourself for ten seconds, and

consider it. Consider what they must say. Don't just react to the fact that your feelings are hurt, but stop and consider what they must say. Discern if there's any bit of truth in what they're trying to say.

If your identity is in the steadfast love of the Lord, if you're walking in everyday friendship with God, instead of being right all the time you won't get your feelings hurt when you're criticized. You'll be someone who's not wise in your own eyes. Because all of a sudden, your identity and your significance is not in your performance, and whether or not you got it right, it's in the Lord love for you. So, you don't have to feel threatened when you're criticized.

Wisdom means that critique received is no longer a threat, it's a gift. And wisdom means that a critique given is no longer an attack, it's a humble observation connected to a willingness to understand and forgive.

If our security is in the Lord, and in his steadfast, never-giving-up, never-ending love for us, we don't have to be threatened by critique. We're freed up to consider critique a gift.

Everyday friendship with God changes the way we relate to others, both God and other people. But it also changes the way we relate to stuff.

Wisdom changes our relationship to things. To material things in the world.

Proverbs 3:9-10

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Solomon uses the words, "First Fruits." Which means that it's the things you harvest first, the best-looking stuff. It's your best and your first. In giving honor and service to the Lord is not to be out of your leftovers, if you have time and energy.

This means that if you do International Ministry, you don't do it if you can fit it in. You do it, and you fit other things around it, if there's time.

It means that when we give financially, we don't wait until the end of the week if you can budget it in. It means you give before you spend anything else.

Wisdom requires us to be liberal with our resources. It's not simply liberality and generosity. It's honoring the Lord, giving weight to the Lord. Showing that his Lordship is supreme in your life, giving your best to him. Giving of your first fruits is a demonstration that you fear the Lord. It's a demonstration of this principle: the reality is that you always give your best to what you care about the most.

My friend's wife was confronting him about his work habits recently, and he was telling me about it. She was frustrated because he was during a busy season at work, and from her perspective, he has been in this busy season for too many months now, and that the season was being prolonged because my friend wasn't saying no to his boss when his boss would ask him to do extra things for work. And she felt like she has been trying to get him to not work long hours, not going in on days off, and yet he kept doing it, because his boss was asking him to. And he wouldn't say no, and his wife felt like she was getting his left-overs.

What she's observing is this: You give your best to that which is most important to you. She's saying, if you're consistently saying no to coming home on time to me, but you're consistently saying yes to your boss when he asks you to do more stuff, that means you don't care about me.

He was giving his best time to his boss, not to his wife.

You give your best stuff to what you care about the most. And if the beginning of wisdom is to relate to God as your Lord, as your King, as your Creator and as your savior, it's about Him being the biggest deal to you, then you will first and not last give your best service to Jesus. And you'll be generous with your first fruits. And you give people in need your attention and care. Wisdom means that you understand that wealth and riches don't come from the accumulation of things but the, "fullness of your barns and your vats that are bursting with wine." He's not giving a description of having a lot of stuff in this world, but the wealth is the love and the favor of the Lord. Honor the Lord with your stuff, and you will find that Jesus was exactly right in Matthew 4 when he says that man doesn't live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Wisdom comes when you stop buying the lie that more stuff will make you happy. I got a new phone for my birthday last year, and it was supposedly the best phone on the market. And you know what? It has glitches. Sometimes it just cuts off randomly. Sometimes my texts won't send. And the problem with me waiting on the Pixel 2 to come out in October is that it won't work perfectly, either.

Everyday friendship with God changes our relationship to others, and it changes our relationship to stuff. And lastly, Everyday friendship with God changes our relationship with discipline.

Proverbs 3:11-12

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

Lastly. Wisdom changes our relationship to Discipline. In James 1, James is talking about going through trials, and he closes the passage with wisdom.

James 1:5

And if you lack wisdom, ask the Lord and he will give it.

He links trials and suffering to wisdom. And his point is this, and it's what Solomon is saying here, "My Son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof. The Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father, the son whom he delights."

If you are in Christ, trials and suffering are not punitive. And you need to stop believing they're punishment. Christian, to believe that your trials and suffering are punishment is to believe that God is unjust, because he would be punishing sin twice. But Jesus paid it all. It is finished. Trials and suffering are corrective. It doesn't mean they're not hard--they're still difficult to bear. But they're not the disfavor of a God who is no longer pleased with you; of a God who is punishing you.

They're the love and care of a father who is disciplining you. Good, loving, Godly parents discipline their children. Because they love them. Good parents put their children through suffering because they love them. They set boundaries, they ground them, they put rules into place to keep them safe.

When the steadfast love of the Lord defines you, you have the wisdom to walk into suffering and not think, "I don't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a husband or a wife at this point in my life because God is punishing me." That's tyranny. To feel like you must check off all these boxes for God to give you good gifts, that's slavery. Wisdom frees you to walk into suffering seeing it as the place where God refines you. Where he works all things for your good.

Working all things for the good of children sometimes involves spankings. When God is working all things for your good, it's going to include trials and suffering, and that's a good thing. That's the love of the father, not the displeasure. It's his correction, not his punishment.

What we've got to see first is that wisdom first is a relational enterprise. Wisdom isn't memorizing cute little Jack Handey sayings. It's not reading a fortune cookie and doing what it says. Wisdom comes, first and foremost, when you know the Person who made you, and made this world.

All the aspects of the path to wisdom are preceded by knowing and experiencing the love, the grace, and the steadfast love of the Lord. The one who held God's word in highest regard, who though he was perfect, was gentle, and lowly in heart. Who gave of himself more than any of us will ever give. Who endured more suffering than any of us ever will know. Wisdom comes when you see that Jesus is all the Wisdom of God for you.