

November 1, 2009
What's Important in Life?
Proverbs 3:3-6

If you were giving wise counsel to a younger person about what is important in life, what would you say? Would you talk about how important an education is? About career decisions? About good health choices? There are many important things we would want to pass on. I want to suggest that two of things that we should really care about passing on are:

1. **Faith in God.** I believe that nothing is more important in my life is my relationship with Jesus. That is foundational to who I am. I cannot imagine myself with Jesus as the centre of my life. If someone could ever take that out of my life, I couldn't even begin to comprehend who - or what - I would be.
2. **Character.** Living with God's values - integrity, joy, peace, hope, love - are critical. Without these, again, my life would be nothing.

What do you think? Are these important?

Some of the best known verses in Proverbs speak specifically to these issues: *"Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."* (Proverbs 3:3-6)

This is great counsel for life. As we gather today to celebrate the Lord's Supper these are good words for all of us to spend time with. Let's look at the "results" first:

You will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man

This is about building relationships. If we follow this counsel with will have a good relationship (favour) with God and other people. And we will live with character (have a good name). Those are pretty good "ends" to work towards, aren't they?

He will make your paths straight

The other (perhaps unanticipated) consequence of good relationships with God and people, and godly character, is wisdom for the journey of life. A couple of weeks ago our washing machine died a very noisy, grease-spotty death. When the new one arrived (one of those new-fangled front-loading ones), I read the instruction book (OK - the *Quick Start Guide* ... they're getting smart now: knowing few of us actually read the WHOLE book, they have an "executive summary" for us these days!). Why did I read it? Because it looks more complicated than the 20+ year old one we'd had! And the salesman had warned us that things are a bit different with this new kind: you have to use a certain kind of detergent ("he"); you can pile more clothes in, etc. I didn't want to destroy the thing the first time I used it, so I decided it would be wise to follow Kenmore's instructions ...

God knows best! If we want our lives to go well, we pay attention to God's wisdom

Let love and faithfulness never leave you

Proverbs advises that when it comes to relationships - with God and with other people - it's all about love and faithfulness:

What does "love" mean? How would you define it? We can think of "love" in two directions

1. **Love for God.** *"The greatest command is this," says Jesus, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."* What does this look like? Ultimately God Himself is our greatest object lesson in love. *"For God so loved the world,"* go the familiar words of John 3:16, *"that He gave His only Son ..."* In Philippians 2 we read a wonderful celebration of the love of God ... This is love: you are willing to give yourself completely to that person. Our challenge - our calling - is to love God that completely ...
2. **Love for one another.** *The second greatest command is this," says Jesus, "Love your neighbour as yourself."* Just as we are to love God completely, we are to love one another. The familiar words of 1 Corinthians 13 help define this for us ...

It's about "love **and faithfulness.**" "Faithfulness" refers to what? The two concepts go hand-in-hand. Faithfulness means love is not just a here now and gone in a moment. It is a constant. It never changes. Just as I know that God's love for me is not more at one time than another, my love for God and other people should not go up and down with the time of day, day of the week, or season of the year either. It is possible to love God ... Sunday mornings ... but the rest of the week to never give him a thought. And it is possible to love other people for a moment, but then forget them. What does that say about our love? Can love really exist without faithfulness?

What is wise counsel for a younger person? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, AND love your neighbour as yourself. And be faithful - completely faithful in that love. That's a good start, isn't it?

Bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart

When I was at Canadian Baptist Ministries Board meetings last week, we installed a new president (Brenda Halk, from Waterloo, ON). As part of the installation service, she was presented with a Bible (reminding us all of who we are), a gavel (as a symbol of her leadership), a towel (recognizing that this is a position of servanthood), and an African tribal chief's ceremonial collar (a beaded collar) and wisdom stick. In Kikuyu culture, the chief always wears the collar - it identifies him to others as someone respected for wisdom AND it is a reminder to him that he is called to be a wise "elder" in the community. He is to bind God's wisdom around his neck and never forget that he needs God's help. If you "bind something around your neck" the idea is that you never take it off, it is visible for all to see, and it is a reminder to you ...

Do people see you "wearing" a collar of love and faithfulness? Are those values fundamental to who you are?

Inwardly, are love and faithfulness written on the tablet of your heart? Are the foundational to who you are? When you get up in the morning and look in the mirror, can you say with integrity: "Good morning, ____, you person who loves God with all your heart and loves your neighbour as yourself!" OR "Good morning, here is ____, a faithful person"?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart

It is great to love someone - it is great love God - but do you trust that person? Do you trust God? At the CBM board, Peter Reid, Executive Minister of the Atlantic Baptist Convention, told a story of a young boy who fell into a lake. His father jumped off the wharf to find him. On the third attempt to locate his son, the Dad found him up, under the wharf - terrified - but holding onto a piling for dear life. For the father to rescue his son, the boy had to let go of the piling, hold onto his Dad, and trust this father that when they went down, under the water, they would come up on the other side. If you were the boy, what would you do?

Are we willing to trust God with that same kind of love? Do we believe (1) that God loves us, so that as we trust Him He really has our best interests in mind; do we believe He really knows best, and (2) that God is able to actually help us; that He has the power to save us?

Lean not on your own understanding

I'm a reasonably intelligent person - as are all of us here. God has given us all wonderful brains, capable of great thoughts. God has given us the blessing of educations which contribute great skills and knowledge to our minds. When we are facing challenges, we can do a pretty good job of figuring out what to do. That's great. God expects us to do so. But at the end of the day, I am not - nor is any of us - all-wise, all-knowing, or all-powerful. In humility, while we can - and must - make wise plans, we also need to come before God in humility and seek God's wisdom.

In all your ways acknowledge Him

I compartmentalize my life. When I am at work, I focus on work. When I am at home, I am fairly good at focussing on being home. The challenge for those of us who compartmentalize our lives is that we can also compartmentalize our relationship with God. God can be someone we remember Sunday mornings and (possibly) a few moments most days ... but He is not a fundamental part of our daily lives.

The challenge of this Proverb is that I need to acknowledge God - the King of Kings, the All-Wise One, the All-Knowing One, the All-Loving One, my Wonderful Counsellor, my Teacher - in all aspects of my life. Whether I am at work, driving to the grocery store, relaxing at home, dealing with a difficult person, making a financial decision, even choosing whether to recycle that piece of paper or not, I need to remember that God is with me. God cares about the decisions I make.

This is an area where we need to rethink our theology. The reality is that nothing I do is trivial, unimportant, or "unspiritual." I may think of some things - some times, some places, some

activities - as spiritual: things like going to church, reading the Bible, praying, etc. And I may think of others activities, times, or places as non-spiritual: perhaps work (and relationships with people there), going to a movie, playing hockey, etc. But this isn't the truth. God cares about the decisions I make and how I live in all these areas. I need to be faithful in living my ethics and values all times and in all places.

I can also be an ambassador for Christ - His light, His presence, His hope - in every circumstance in which I find myself. It all depends on how I look at it.

With pastors and missionaries we go through a formal "ordination" or "commissioning" process. This is great - in Scripture people are often "set aside" for specific purposes. But all of us should really be commissioned to the unique calling we have in our lives. Scripture sees all of us as "God's ambassadors" as gifted servants. Are you an accountant? We can commission you as God's ambassador to your workplace and the world of accounting. Do you coach hockey or volunteer in the community? We can commission as God's ambassador to the hockey world! We need to get over seeing a distinction between spiritual and non-spiritual. All of life is sacred. Everywhere we are is holy ground. Every relationship provides us with an opportunity to minister God's grace and love. My vision, my passion, is that each of us would see ourselves as God's "field staff" wherever we are. We don't just "live," we live for Jesus. We don't just walk through life, *"we walk in step with the Spirit."* My job is no more spiritual than yours. Your time with the guys playing hockey is no less spiritual than the time you spend in your small group Bible study.

Let's take rethink our theology and look at life differently:

- When you volunteer in our children's ministries, see it as an opportunity to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND love your neighbour as yourself,
- When you go to work tomorrow morning, see it as an opportunity to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,
- When you play soccer or bridge, see it as an opportunity to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND love your neighbour as yourself ...
- When you are waiting in the doctor's office, see it as an opportunity to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND love your neighbour as yourself.

What do you want most for those your love? For yourself? I believe that a faith in God and a godly character are two of the greatest blessings we can pass on to anyone: *"You will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man and he will make your paths straight when you*

- *let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.*
- *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him.*

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