April 12/13, 2014

The Rewards of Wisdom

Skillful Living

Proverbs 3

Pastor Bryan Clark

Just a reminder that this is your last week to vote on your favorite Psalm. If you weren't here two weeks ago, we talked about over fifteen summers we did all 150 Psalms and people asked, "Are we going to do that again?" Answer is, "No, but we are going to do 9 Psalms this summer, and you get to pick the 9." So there is information on the front of *The Loop* how to do that, and this is your last week to vote. Somebody asked me a couple of weeks ago, "Since when do we get to vote on what you're preaching about?" And my answer was, "Don't get used to it, fella! It's a one-shot deal!" (*laughter*)

Alright, so here's the question of the morning: Why do we so often find ourselves being selfish? Why are we greedy? Why do we have this determination to be our own god? There's only one answer to the question: Because we believe that by doing so, life will be better. Nobody decides to be selfish or greedy or to be their own god because they think that will make life worse. Somewhere deep inside we think, "Life would be better with *me* in charge." This is not a new struggle.

Go all the way back to the beginning of the story—Genesis, Chapter 3— and that was the basis of the temptation from the serpent to Adam and Eve. "Don't you think life would be better with you in charge? You decide what's right and wrong. You decide what's good and evil. You be in charge of your own life," with the implication because by doing so, life would be better. But here's the question: Is that true...is that true?

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 3. I spent a very frustrating week in chapter 3 trying to sort out what to cover and what not to cover. Chapter 3 is just so rich. You could easily spend a month in just chapter 3 alone, but we don't have a month. We have today, so we have to kind of figure out what we're going to do and so kind of my progression in the three weeks was: the first week was to seek to convince us of the *need for wisdom*. We need to live our lives with the highest degree of skill. We only get one shot at life. We need to do it skillfully. The second week was to convince you that if you want that, you have *to pursue it*. You have to desire it; you have to go after it. There's no magic to it. You have to decide this matters and pursue it, and my desire this morning is to talk about the *rewards of wisdom.* It would relate to the question: Is it worth it? It's a lot of hard work, so is it worth it?
Chapter 3 verse 1:

> **My son, do not forget my teaching,**
> **But let your heart keep my commandments;** (*NASB, Proverbs 3:1)

Sounds very similar to our discussion last week that, as you pursue wisdom, it leads to a relationship with God, and it begins to change your heart; it begins to change your soul. This is now what defines you, and it actually comes from the inside out as you travel this journey through life. That's verse 1, so what is the reward of that? Verse 2:

> **For length of days and years of life,**
> **And peace they will add to you.**

Now first of all, it's good to remind ourselves this is a proverb. It's not a promise. It doesn't mean that if you seek God's commandments and have your quiet time every day you're guaranteed to live to be ninety. There are no guarantees in this. There are many godly people who died early in life, but as a general rule, as a proverb, and science would indicate this is true, that if you live your life with skill, most likely it leads to longevity.

Probably the more relevant question is around the phrase **length of days**. I mean, what exactly does that mean? That's really not how we talk at all. As a matter of fact, what we are more likely to say is something like, "I thought this day would never end," and usually that's not a positive thing. Years ago I had a birthday that lasted like thirty-five hours. It started in Bangkok, Thailand, and we flew this way, and it was like, "What day is it?" "It's still the same day!" It's like, "This is a day that's never going to end!" It actually ended with Patti meeting me at the airport to tell me that a dear friend had died—like worst birthday ever!

But that isn't what this is talking about. This is talking about much more the idea—we would say it this way—"I wish this moment would never end." That's more how we would say it. It's the idea that there are these moments in life with your friends, with your family, with your kids—whoever it might be—and they just become special. They're almost magical, and we find ourselves thinking, "I wish this day would never end." That's the idea of this poetic phrase—these moments that define life; that are so meaningful to us. So in other words, by fearing the Lord and keeping His commandments, we create more and more of these moments which I would suggest are glimpses of the world to come.

The second part of that verse ...**and peace they will add to you**. **Peace** is the Hebrew word *shalom.* Shalom can be kind of a difficult word to define. It goes far beyond just the idea of quietness or maybe the absence of conflict. As a matter of fact, I mentioned last week we tend to think so much of this as how it relates to me individually, and yet the Bible would know very little of this individualistic life. Most of Proverbs is not just about *me*. It's about *us*. It's about how we live life together in a community or a society. The idea of shalom carries the idea of wholeness, of fullness, of prosperity. Maybe the best definition is it's the idea of mutual flourishing. It's creating a community, a society where everybody flourishes. That's the idea of shalom.

Now I would say, at the end of the day, that is what almost everybody wants. Think of it this way: If we gathered together the average people in our community, so let's say that we kind of eliminate those on the fringe, and we get out of our head kind of this constant quarreling and bickering and picking that so defines the media, and you just think about the average person next door, the average people that you go to school with, that you work with, and we gather together. I think it would be true that we could agree that, in the name of humanity, there are certain things we want in a community. We want there to be mutual flourishing. We want there to be safety. We want there to be security. We want there to be opportunity. There are things we see in our community and together in the name of humanity, we would say these things bother us. We want to help the homeless and the poor and make sure everybody has enough food to eat. There're things that pretty much everybody would say, "Yeah, that is the kind of community we want."

Where there is conflict as in, "How do we get there?" that's when the conflict arises, and often it's a very heated conflict. But it all revolves around the question as to whether you believe that shalom is a goal or a reward. Is it a *goal*, or is it a *reward*? If you believe it's a goal, then externally you try to make it happen, so you try to create structures and put things in place that externally will create shalom. Most obviously it would be within the context of government. Now I think government

serves a very important role. I think we need to respect that, but the fact is government can never produce shalom. Governments throughout time, for thousands of years, have tried. None have succeeded. None will ever succeed. You just can't do that. You can't just keep passing laws and regulations and put all this stuff in place that is going to force people to love their neighbor. It just doesn't work that way. You can't somehow externally make somebody disadvantage themselves to advantage the community. You can't do that. Therefore, it's not a goal; it is a reward.

When you understand it's a reward, you understand it starts by fearing God and keeping His commandments, and if you choose to live skillfully and to live God's way, it is the outflow of that. It is the reward of that, where people now have a change from the inside out, to look at their neighbor differently, to think of themselves differently, to look at the community differently.

Now when we think about all this, it can seem very overwhelming. I mean, how is that possibly going to happen? There's no way it's going to happen. It can seem hopeless, but I would suggest we think about it this way: It must start with *you*. It must start with you within your home, within the workplace, within your school. Frankly, if you can't bring shalom to those environments, then it's not going to happen. So it starts with you learning to love your neighbor as yourself. But there's actually more to it than that. When we think about the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself, there are two parts to that commandment. The first part is *to love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength.* The second is *to love your neighbor as yourself.* You can't have the second without the first. Here's why. Next verse:

> **Do not let kindness and truth leave you;**
> **Bind them around your neck,**
> **Write them on the table of your heart.** (Vs. 3)

Now if you're reading through Proverbs and you come across the words **kindness** and **truth**, likely you would just kind of skip over that as not that big of a deal. But if you were a first reader—if you're Jewish, you're Hebrew and you're reading this—immediately those two words would jump off the page for you because they are two of the most significant covenant words in the Old Testament. The word **kindness** is a word that means *love*. It means commitment. It means that I will be there for you; I will rescue you; I will reach out for you; I will show favor to you. It is used of God describing God's commitment to those in a covenant relationship with Him. The gist of it would basically be, "I will be there for you no matter what you go through. That's My covenant with you."

The second word **truth** is more similar than dissimilar to the first word. It carries the idea of truth as in trust, trustworthy, faithfulness. "I will keep My covenant." So it's best understood to put the two words together. That's how they would have understood it—that God made a covenant, and the covenant is, "I will be there for you I will walk with you; I will love you; I will be faithful to you; I will rescue you; I will take care of you; I will protect you; I will have your back; I will be there for you, I promise."

Now the only way that shalom is possible is if you have both parts of the equation—to love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength—the second is like it—love your neighbor as yourself. This is why: As long as I believe that I must look out for myself because, if I don't, nobody else will, this is what drives our selfishness. I *must* look out for myself because nobody else will. This society is a gathering of people celebrating the individualized self. It's about *me* and so at the end of the day because I'm functioning as my own god and because this is about me, I've

convinced myself if I don't look out for myself, nobody else will. Therefore, I'm not really free to love my neighbor as myself. I absolutely will not disadvantage myself to advantage the community because if I'm not looking out for me, nobody else is. Therefore our communities are a gathering of individuals that have a greater commitment to themselves than they do to the community, and we suffer the effects of that.

But what if it was different from that? What if I believed, having entered into a covenant relationship with God, that God has promised, "I will look out for you; I will take care of you; I will walk with you; I will protect you; I will cover the bases; I will have your back; no matter what you go through, no matter what you experience, I will be there for you." If I believe that, then for the first time in my life I actually have the freedom to think about somebody other than myself. I can actually give myself away. I can actually disadvantage myself to advantage the community because I know there's somebody there for me, and because God has promised He will take care of me, I can think of others. The only way the formula works is to love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength in order to love my neighbor as myself.

So now think about this: If we as a nation drift farther and farther from God, what is the possibility of shalom? What is the possibility of creating a culture where everyone flourishes? The overwhelming majority of people in our community would agree, "This is what we want. We just disagree about how to get there." But according to Proverbs, unless we fear God and keep His commandments, then there is no basis by which we will ever create an environment where we can all flourish together. That's what he's saying in verses 2 and 3. Verse 4, the result of that:

> **So you will find favor and good repute** (good reputation)
> **In the sight of God and man.** (Verse 5):
> **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.** (Vs. 5-6)

Two very familiar verses out of the book of Proverbs, two very powerful verses out of the book of Proverbs! The word **trust** is a Hebrew word that would have been used primarily to describe either a slave or a prisoner of war. And it was the idea of basically coming and lying prostrate before the king or the master with this idea that you are totally vulnerable to the king or the master. A POW would come and lie down in front of the king and in essence say, "If you want to, you may kill me." Same idea with a master and a slave—it's a statement of total vulnerability. So the idea is with all of our hearts we come before God, and we lay our lives down and say, "God, we trust You. You can do whatever You want with my life."

The alternative is to **lean on my own understanding**. We talked about this the first week where Proverbs defines the fool as a Know-it-all. The fool is one who says, "I don't need somebody else to tell me what to do. I don't need somebody else to tell me how to live. I don't need God's commandments. I don't need anybody else's commandments. I know it all, and I'll do as I please."

So think of it this way: Are you really prepared to tell me this morning that in your fifteen years of life you have gained more wisdom in how to live than the eternal God of the universe? That in fifteen years...twenty years...thirty years...forty years...fifty years...ninety years, that somehow in your years, you are so impressive that you have gained more wisdom than God for how to live life? The God who created the universe with a spoken word, the God who sees tomorrow as clearly as He

sees yesterday, the God who has been doing this since the beginning of time and you really think, in your short lifetime, you get it more clearly than He does? That's what he's saying there. Trust Him! He knows what He's doing. **Don't lean on your own understanding.**

In all your ways acknowledge Him. We talked about this last week. It's a word that means to experience Him, walk with Him, **and He will make your paths straight**. This Hebrew word **straight** carries the idea of straight, smooth, easy traveling. We talked about this last week—that the fool sets up a way or a path—it's crooked. It's full of obstacles. It's traveled in the darkness, full of dangers, when God has offered an alternative—a path that is straight and smooth and well lit, and again, as we talked about last week, if what's at the end of the path is everything that your soul longs for, in other words you would say, "What's at the end of the path is deeply meaningful to me," why would you opt for a path that is crooked? It's dark. It's full of obstacles, and you're guaranteed you're not going to make it, when what's been provided for you is a path that's straight and smooth and well lit. If what is at the end of that path matters to you, why would you not choose the path that guarantees you're going to get there?

Now we talked a little bit last week about this idea of a path, of a way. It's an imagery that's used consistently from Genesis to Revelation hundreds of times. It's used over a hundred times just in Proverbs alone, so think of it this way: The idea of skilled living—wisdom—it is a path. It's not a gate; it is a path. We want it to be a gate because I walk through the gate, and I'm wise. Go home tonight; walk through the gate; I'm wise tomorrow.

In a culture where we want everything instantly, we're in a throwaway culture where we use it, and we throw it away. Everything is instant. We have Google. We have an app that, "Somehow, someway I want it, and I want it now." If you don't believe that, go to the local bookstore and look at how many books promise, "Three ways", "Five ways", "This is the way". "This is the shortcut to what you want," because that's what the culture demands. But nobody goes to bed tonight and magically wakes up wise tomorrow. It's not a gate—it's a path—it's a journey.

And think about how you travel down a path. Is it not one foot in front of the other... again and again and again and again? I am telling you this—trust me with this. At the end of your life, when you look back, you will know that your life has been defined not by the big moments. Everybody gets the big moments. It will be defined by the ordinary, everyday, mundane moments of life, step after step after step after step, every day in the most ordinary circumstances of life, living with the highest degree of skill. That's the idea of a path. Verse 7:

> **Do not be wise in your own eyes** (Don't be the Know-it-all)**;**
> **Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.** (Result?)
> **It will be healing to your body,**
> **And refreshment to your bones.** (Vs. 7-8)

Basically the poetry there is both inside and out it will affect your body. Now there's a lot of science today that would agree with this—that when you choose to live your life with skill, it actually does affect you inside and out in terms of your physical body. There's a reward to that. Verse 9:

> **Honor the Lord from your wealth,**
> **And from the first of all your produce;**
> **So your barns will be filled with plenty,**
> **And your vats will overflow with new wine.** (Vs. 9-10)

Now we just don't have time to say much about that other than it is just simply saying if you wisely steward what God has given you and you're generous toward God and towards others, God longs to be generous to you. The only thing I think that limits God's generosity to us is our own selfishness. It's our own greed. Be generous to God. He wants to be generous to you, but also notice that the promise is not that your garage and your wardrobe will be filled. It's a promise that the barn and the vats, food and drink—in other words what you need for life—will be adequately supplied. Trust Him with that.

The text just goes on with one reward after another. Let me just kind of highlight a few and scoot through this. Verse 13 is "**blessed**." That's a Hebrew word that means happy. Verse 14 moves into financial terms, profit and gain: **"better than silver, better than gold, better than precious jewels"** (verse 15), better than anything that you desire. Verse 16: **"long life, riches and honor."** Verse 17: **"pleasure and shalom."** Verse 18: **"life and happiness."** Down to verse 22: **"life to your soul."** Verse 23: **"security."** Verse 24: **"You don't have to be afraid. Your sleep will be sweet."** Verse 25: **"Don't be afraid."** The text goes on and on and on.

It'd be interesting to go through that list and ask people, "Is this not what your soul is longing for? Isn't this what you want? Isn't this what we want for a community?" So how do you get there? It's the outflow. It's the reward of pursuing God and keeping His commandments. So here's the question: Why is this such a hard way to live? Why do we struggle with this so much? And I would suggest to you it is because it means living contrary to the culture. It is always very hard to swim upstream, but remember that the wisdom of God is greater than the foolishness of man.

So let me see if I can connect this to Palm Sunday and Easter next week. On the first Palm Sunday, as Jesus entered into Jerusalem, there was great celebration; there was great rejoicing; there was great worship. But I would suggest to you that what dominated the thinking of those people was the wisdom of man. They had in mind what this King would do and, according to the wisdom of man, this King had come to deliver them from the tyranny of the Roman government and set them free, something they had waited for, for generations. You might say they worshipped with an agenda but, when it became evident that that was not going to happen, their excitement turned to disappointment; it turned to anger, and that same crowd would soon shout, "Crucify Him"! In that moment—the very first Palm Sunday—they could not have imagined the foolishness of the plan of God.

Take it all the way back to the Christmas story. Have you ever asked yourself, "What is the deal with the Magi?" Among the most iconic of the Christmas figures, sometimes people refer to them as the *kings*. You know, we sing "We Three Kings," but they weren't kings. They were *magi*, and a magi was a wise man. They were the wisdom elite of their day. So what is the point when they come to the Christ Child? The point is this: the wisdom elite of the day came to an insignificant small town, to a baby who had been born in a place where there was no room in the inn, so he had to be born in a stable and laid in a manger. Everything about that, according to the wisdom of man, seems foolish—in the words of one songwriter, "What a strange way to save the world". But when the wisdom elite, the magi, found the Christ Child, what did they do? They bowed before Him. The whole point of the magi is that the wisdom of man bows in submission to the foolishness of God—that God would save this world in a way no one could have imagined.

This week there will be thousands and thousands and thousands of people around the world who will laugh at the notion that you could be so foolish to believe that a child born in a manger, that a man crucified on a cross, that a claim of resurrection could actually affect your life two thousand

years later. How simpleminded, now naïve, how foolish do you have to be to believe that? And throughout this next week, they will have a good laugh about the foolishness of the story of Jesus.

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, and listen to how this relates to Proverbs and Easter.

> **For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,**
> **"I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,**
> **AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."**
> **Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.**
> (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

To the world the message of Christmas and Easter is foolish. It is ridiculous. How simpleminded and naïve do you have to be to believe that? But, "T**o those of us who believe, it is the power of God unto salvation**". We say together that this is a message that has changed our lives. "**I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation."** The wisdom of man bows before the foolishness of God.

Jesus said it Himself. *"If you listen to Me and believe, you are like a wise man who builds his house on the rock, and when the storms of life come, you will endure. But if you don't listen to what I have to say, you're just a fool, and you will build your house on the sand, and when the storms of life come, your life will be washed away."* **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a fool that despises wisdom and instruction.**

> *Our Father, we're thankful that Your words are true. Lord, I have no doubt that through this next week there will be many who will laugh and make fun of such a ridiculous notion of a crucified and risen Savior. Lord, they'll see it as a myth, as a superstition, as just this desperate attempt to find something to comfort us in a difficult world, but, Lord, we together would say that it is the power of God unto salvation, that it is the message that has changed our lives. Lord, help us to understand that what our hearts long for is the reward of trusting You and keeping Your commandments. Lord, this we pray in Jesus' name.*

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2014 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.