

God's Good Ways

Trinity CRC, December 31, 2017 AM
New Year's Eve service

Proverbs 3:1-10

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Dear friends in Christ,

Watching my grand daughter and her dad a week ago reminded me again of how most little kids love the game where they jump off the counter, table or maybe the top of a bunkbed into mommy's or daddy's arms. Often parents coach the little one, "Come on, honey, jump to daddy!" And soon enough the child learns that mom and dad always catch her and before too long she jumps without thinking twice about it. She has complete confidence in her parents.

Similarly, there's a trust-game that is often played with teens. Usually one member of the group is blindfolded, stood up on a table and then told to simply fall backwards with the assurance that 6 or 8 of his peers will catch him when he falls. Through your mind runs the doubts, "Will they be able to hold me up if I fall into their arms? Will they even try? And are they even there as I was told? You have no way of knowing the answer to those questions, except to fall and trust them.

Well, faith in God is like that in some ways. Faith requires that you, in a sense, fall or jump into God's arms but it's based on his promise to be faithful and his record of trustworthiness. It says, "Even though I cannot see him, I will trust him because of what he's promised and provided through Jesus Christ." That brings us to our text, Proverbs 3:5&6.

*Prov 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;*

*Prov 3:6 in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.*

No matter how long you've been a Christian, living by those well-known verses is a challenge. And if you've never made a commitment to serve Christ, then perhaps those verses sound almost absurd to you. So, first of all, this morning, let's think a little about what faith is.

What Faith Is

On this last morning of 2017, it might be good for all of us to reflect on our faith. How has it helped us in this past year? How strong is it? A good definition of faith is found the words of our text.

*Prov 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding...*

Boys and girls, do you think it made sense for a young boy named David to go and fight the giant Goliath? David was maybe 5 feet tall, but Goliath was about 9 feet. But by faith in God, David didn't see the giant as a problem. He just knew — even though he didn't see him—that God was a lot bigger and stronger than Goliath. Meanwhile Goliath only saw physical reality and so he poked fun of David

when he saw how small he was. But David marched ahead in confidence because he knew that God was on his side and God would give the victory.

Or think of Elijah battling the 400 prophets of Baal. One against 400! But Elijah believed with all his heart that the Lord alone is God. And God proved himself faithful and victorious. Elijah defeated the 400 Baal prophets.

David and Elijah illustrate the point of Proverbs 3. We are told to trust in the Lord and *lean not on your own understanding*. Faith sees things through God's eyes, not through our human mind alone, although faith in Jesus is very reasonable. Faith says, if this is God's desire, I'll just do it and trust God to bless the outcome, even if is beyond my human understanding.

One cannot think about Christmas and Lent without seeing that this kind of confidence in his Father's plan and power that motivated Jesus. First of all, he offered himself to become a human being, stepping down from his heavenly glory into our sinfilled reality. His whole life among us he was a misfit. And in the final hours of his earthly life, we read that he wept and sweat profusely while wrestling in prayer with his Father whose plan was for Jesus to die for our sins. In the end Jesus rested by saying, "Not my will but your will be done!"

The struggle of trusting in the Lord with all your heart was real even for Jesus as a human being who was so perfectly aligned with the heart of his Father. If we think our mind is capable of figuring out everything, we are wrong. We're better off doing what God says when our understanding contradicts the revealed Word of God. Human understanding is incomplete understanding. Only God understands and knows everything and how it all works together for our good and his glory. That's why we need to surrender our understanding to God's when his Word speaks to us.

I struggle with this. And I'm sure you do too. Most times when I don't want to do what God's Word says, I find it's because I'm trying to promote my own agenda or I don't want to give up something selfish or sinful. Sometimes when I see a homeless person, my selfish desire says that it's his own fault as if that frees me from helping him. That's when I need to remember that Jesus said what I do for the least of these I do for him. The fact is, even if I don't like what God says, it still is best for me. So living by faith challenges me to continue to learn that God's ways are much higher and better than mine. That's why we need to simply trust his understanding as revealed in his Word. God's ways will never steer us wrong.

Chatting with a member of the congregation last Sunday, he shared how 2017 started off as one of the worst years of his life, a series of tough events. He lost his job and had other serious hardships. But looking back now he said that God had really blessed him. He enjoys where he is living, he has a new job which is better than anything he's ever had before, his family is thriving. He's feeling so blessed after learning though this year that God is trustworthy and faithful. Leaning on his own understanding wouldn't have gotten him through 2017. Instead, even when things looked bad, he kept looking to God's Word, kept trying to do what God

says, kept trying to trust the Lord. And though much has changed, he feels God's blessing in a new and fresh way.

Another young person struggling with an addiction, shared with me that only when he was willing to admit that what he was doing was wrong, did things start to turn around. He first had to confess his actions to God as sin. He had to admit to those he hurt that his actions were wrong. He had to pray daily—sometimes hourly—and seek God's help and strength. He had to get an accountability partner to help him live the new life. And today he's in a much better place. He's feeling less enslaved to sin and more freedom and power through Christ at the end of this year.

So often we approach the Word of God with a bad attitude. We think of it like a police officer who is out to get us, instead of like a police officer who is there to protect us and keep us safe. For example, we want to drink and drive so we resent a police officer watching out for drunk drivers. But if we understand that the law is for our protection, we are thankful that there are police doing their part to keep us safe. In a similar way, we must believe that God has given us his entire Word to direct our paths and we must submit to it—trust him—in order to experience his blessing.

Remember, the proverb says, "*In all your ways acknowledge him.*" Not just some of your ways. Not just in the areas you enjoy living by God's Word, but in all areas—legal, political, social, family, financial, business and recreational. And it's especially true in those areas where you don't particularly like what God's Word says. Those are precisely the places where Satan is sure to tempt you. Those are the areas where the evil one does not want you to surrender or submit to God because in those areas he now has you eating out of his hand, as it were. So Satan will try to convince you, through all means available to him, that God's way of life is not the way to blessing that Proverbs claims it is.

So faith is trusting God's way in all things, regardless of how easy or hard it might be to do what God says.

Two Examples

Finally, let us consider two examples of living by faith. These are given to us in verses 7-10. Two examples of areas where we need to surrender our self-will to God's ways, where we need to obey even if it hurts. One example illustrates that we need to let go of certain sinful things. And the other gives an example of what we need to do positively. The first example says,

Prov 3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes;

fear the LORD and shun evil.

Prov 3:8 This will bring health to your body

and nourishment to your bones.

God, speaking to his children Israel like parents today talking to their kids, might say, "Don't try to get away with evil. Try to get evil away! Don't be content to let evil hang around in your life. Hang evil up because it will hurt you." Sinful

living leads to bad effects. Immorality commonly leads to disease. Stealing leads to a broken life—separation from family and friends while you are in prison. Even ‘smaller’ sins have bad effects. Unfair business practices will eventually catch up with you. Your reputation will suffer and your business will go down. Similarly, slander and gossip will catch up with you. People won’t want to befriend you if you constantly badmouth others. You’ll become lonelier over time.

The fact is that God wants us to do things his way because it is good for us. The proverb is saying that doing things God’s way will normally even result in a healthy body. The link between doing things God’s way and disobeying him has scientific backing. You only have to think of how an alcoholic slowly but surely destroys his body because he disobeys God’s command against getting drunk. The point is that the God who made you has given us the blueprint for a good life. His way is best. So in the first example, the Lord warns us that certain things will hurt us if we don’t stop doing them. And we shouldn’t hesitate to get any help we need from other Christians. The way of wisdom is the way of God, so when God says that you shouldn’t do certain things because they are evil or hurtful, believe him. Stop doing what’s wrong. Stay away from evil so that God’s blessing may flow to you. Think about what needs to go in your life as we wind down 2017. Consider what the Holy Spirit is bringing to your mind this morning as something that you need to get rid of in your life so that you can step more and more into the life of blessings God has reserved for you and me.

Please understand, friends, that as we seek to align our lives with God’s Word, the blessings don’t come because of our obedience. They come because of Jesus. He is the one who turns God’s face toward us in blessing. It’s because of Jesus and his power at work in us that we can even desire, let alone, begin to do God’s will. Our faith in him is what enables us to tap into his strength to do God’s good will, to trust and obey in the confidence that there’s no other way to be happy!

Now for the second example we find in our reading. The first example dealt with the kind of things we need to get out of our life—sinful actions and words—in order to find God’s fullest blessing. But this second area is about those things we need to do positively. And the illustration Proverbs 3 uses is in the area of giving.

*Prov 3:9 Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;*

*Prov 3:10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.*

The proverb says we must surrender our self-will to God in the area of giving. But the principle applies in all of life. Anyone who is not a Christian will never believe vv. 9&10. It just doesn’t make sense that if you first give the best of your crop to the Lord then your barns and wine vats will still overflow. Giving away the best part of our crops would mean less income by human accounting standards. $100-10=90$. But God says, No, not in my plan. With me $100-10=150!$

I’m sure that this example is very practical for all of us. Some of us are giving faithfully and generously. Do you know that 7 or 8 years ago, our church budget was about half of what it is now? And this year it went up a big chunk. But if

you look at the budget update in the bulletin today, you see that we are close to making our budget again. In faith, we committed as a congregation to new things, including paying 100% ministry shares or denominational and classical quotas. It looks like we're going to make that. I'm so thankful that so many of you are eager to give because you know that we can't outgive God. When we give, he blesses us.

Are you doing that? Are you giving in faith? Some people don't give to the Lord and yet they want God's fullest blessing. But that's not possible as long as you don't take his Word to heart. So why not take this proverb seriously as you begin your new year? Whenever you get a paycheque, sit down and immediately write a cheque out for the Lord's work in his kingdom. Determine to put God first in this regard. As God says in Malachi 3:10,

Mal 3:10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

Sounds overflowing! Doesn't it? But it doesn't make sense until you try it and see how God provides and blesses.

The proverb says if you trust in the Lord by acknowledging him in your giving, he will surprise you with blessings! And this is true for every other part of life as well. God is saying, You will see in time that my way is best.

I probably shared before that a man who was close to retirement and who didn't go to church told one of our church members, "You know, I have worked 7 days a week my whole life but you always took Sundays off. Now I look at my life and I think I was crazy because you and your people are just as well off as I am even though you took Sundays off." This man acknowledged what the proverb says. It doesn't make sense on paper. But it's God's way. He blesses us when we live by his word.

Congregation, as we end 2017 and take stock of our life, as we think about changes we ought to make for 2018, our heart's desire should be to give every area of our life over to God—to kill our self-will in favour of submission to God's wise ways. In all your ways acknowledge the Lord. Show him your love in the manner Christ taught. Be disciplined disciples of the Lord. Do not count yourself more worthy than your master. Don't worry about what others might think. God knows the right way to the right ends. Trust him. For today and for the new year, always commit yourself to learn more about how to do God's will. And the more you do, the more you will find the blessing he offers to those who live by his Word. Don't settle for anything less than the best that God is ready to give you. Don't let Satan keep you in fear of surrendering everything to God. Don't let selfishness stop you from getting all the blessings of God that he desires to give you.

Let us thank the Lord for his blessings in 2017. And let us go ahead and jump into our Father's arms, living life his way. He will catch you and shower you with his love and blessings.