

FATHER AND SON

Grab your Bibles and open them to **Proverbs 3**.

We are continuing today in our study of Proverbs, which we titled: a study in CONTRASTS, though as we have dug into it, would have been better as: a study in RELATIONSHIPS. Because as I have prayed about the many characters in Proverbs, and there are quite a few, God has laid on my heart the need to focus on some of the symbiotic relationships, not just the ones that are in contradiction to one another. Today we will be focusing on one of these less than contrasting characters in the Father and the Son.

I say less contrasting, though for some of you there is no greater tension than the relationship between you and your Father, or possibly if you are a Father, between you and your children. The bond of a father and his children is one of the most important relationships, and God designed it this way. God created fathers to have the ability to be the most powerful shaping influence on his children; He also gave fathers the power to do a lot of damage. The father has a unique AND powerful role in the family. While both women and men will decry this influence as unfair (women because they want the power and men because they don't want the responsibility) it doesn't change the reality that sociologists and psychologists continue to repeat in their studies: DADS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD. As we read in our reading of the Law, it is the responsibility of the fathers to pass on the wisdom that they have received.

The idea here is what we call an inheritance: passing along the valuable things that you have. We understand this concept when it comes to physical assets: when you die whatever you have left over will be passed to your children, but we often fail to realize the living inheritance that we are leaving. There are plenty of fathers working hard to add to their children's bank account, that they put little to nothing into the relationship where God has placed the ultimate benefit. If our view of inheritance is on what resources we leave behind, we will be teaching our children how to prepare for death, without ever teaching them how to live.

Proverbs has a lot to say about inheritance. As a matter of fact, I would venture to say that the book of Proverbs is, more than anything else, the inheritance that Solomon is leaving to his children. If you know anything about Solomon's life, you know that things did not end well. At the beginning, he honored God and was given the gift of wisdom. He became so wise that people would come from far away countries just to listen to him.

Solomon then builds the temple and rules over Israel faithfully for a time, but in time decides to trust in the wisdom that God has given him rather than the God who gave it. So he breaks the commands of God, he marries foreign women and then adopts their gods as his own. So God raised up enemy after enemy to punish Solomon and to strip the crown from him. Why do I tell you Solomon's depressing story?

Because Solomon amassed an inheritance that was greater than anything you or I could ever imagine. But it wasn't enough. Solomon was still searching for...something. I leave that undefined because I don't think he knew what he wanted; he just wanted more. It led to his downfall. I believe that the book of Proverbs, at least the first 9 chapters, were written by Solomon at the end of his life as he recognized how his life had been destroyed by his pursuit of finding his joy in the things of this life. He is looking at his sons, who if you continue to read in 1 Kings followed his life rather than his words, and he is pleading with them not to follow in his footsteps. He is pleading with them to see through the cheap alternatives that he bought into and to not get caught by the same traps that he fell for.

We talked last week about how the commands of God are a warning, a guiding hand to save us from our own folly, and this is all over Solomon's writing. But he also spends a great deal of time

pointing his sons to the joy of the Lord. To the promises that come with being in relationship with God. That is where we are going today, so **Proverbs 3.1**:

THE PROMISES

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 firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. **Proverbs 3.1-10***

These are the promises of God. What Solomon has done is given his children the greatest thing he had, which was to bestow on them God's inheritance. Here is Solomon, the rich king, telling his sons that the greatest treasure that he has to offer is not something that he can give them at all. This theme is repeated in the book of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon reveals the short-sightedness of Wealth, Power, Knowledge and Sex, and declares it all meaningless. He concludes by proclaiming:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Solomon's hope for His sons is that they turn away from the things of this world and turn to the promises of God. His manner of revealing the blessings of God is to place them in an IF/THEN format:

1. IF you keep my commands, THEN you will receive life and peace
2. IF you don't let go of unfailing love, THEN you will have favor with God and people
3. IF you trust the Lord, THEN you will have a straight path
4. IF you aren't wise in own eyes, THEN it will be healing and refreshment for you
5. IF you honor the Lord, THEN you will experience prosperity

Christians love these statements because they sound really good. But if we are honest, we have to admit that we don't really believe what is promised here. We want to believe it. We hope that Solomon's optimism holds some truth. But we know better. We have known good people, faithful people, those who have trusted in God, and their lives have been less than wonderful. The promises here seem distant from the reality of the world that we live in. The question we ask is: DOES PROVERBS PROMISE TOO MUCH? If the promises of the Bible do not match the reality of the world, then we need to figure out where the disconnect is. There are three options:

1. Error in the promiser (Solomon)

We could put the blame on Solomon. We could decide that Solomon was just a man who made promises for God that were false. He overshot a bit. But that can't actually be the fact, because we believe that this is the inspired word of God, and additionally we are talking about a man who was given his wisdom directly by God. So we can't blame the promiser... so maybe

2. Error in the promise (God)

We could put the blame on God. The second possible assumption is that God either didn't intend on keeping these promises or doesn't have the power to do it. That they are not something that we will actually experience. The problem with this approach is that it goes against the character of God. God is faithful. He does not promise things unless He intends to keep them. If He intends to keep them, He has the power and authority to do it. So we can't blame the promiser, or the promise, we may have to admit that...

4. Error in the pragmatist (us)

The error exists in us. The problem is not that the promises of God are questionable, but that we don't understand what it is that God is promising us. So we stand back and we judge God for not living up to the standards we created for Him. The reason for our confusion on these promises is that our view of the world is very human, we can't really help that. But what we can do is recognize where we err, so that we might be able to see through the veil to reality:

We have a short-term rather than long-term view

When we read the benefits of God we want to see them come to fruition yesterday. Even though many of us know that God works on a different timeline than we do, we still tend to measure His faithfulness by where we are right now. So when times are tough, we begin to doubt the outcome. We begin to wonder if the wicked really will see justice. We question how the faithful really do have favor and good success. In all of it, we lean into the reality of a sovereign God; *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* I quote that a lot, both in my preaching and to myself when no one is around. That verse is God saying I WILL BE FAITHFUL TO MY PROMISES!

We have a stuff-based rather than a spirit-based perspective

We believe in what we can tangibly feel. As we said before, when it comes to inheritance we tend to think of the physical benefits. When we read wealth, favor, success, we tend to translate these things into our accounting. We take commands that God has given to conform our hearts into righteous worshippers, given to help make us more like Christ and we reduce them to statements of how we can acquire assets.

We are independent rather than relational

When we read the Proverbs we tend to read them in a vacuum. In other words, we read them independent from one another: not taking into account how they hold each other together. We read them as something to be practiced independently, even though the many of them are actually about how we relate to one another. But the place where we mess up the most, is that we read the laws independent from the law-giver. What we do to the great promises of God, is we make them an end in themselves. We make the results of the promise (which are misunderstood in the first place) the focus of our faith. The Bible puts the focus instead on the relationship between us and God. The larger story that the Bible teaches is of a people who were created in relationship with God, pursued independence and gave up this relationship, only to have God pursue and rescue them by bringing them back into relationship. The benefits in this life and in the life to come are numerous, but they can never be divorced from relationship we have in Jesus.

IN JESUS is an important note. We have been focusing up to this point on a proper understanding of the THAN of the if/than situation. We have been looking at how we are to understand the promise, the effect, but we need to remember that we have no hope of upholding the IFS, the causes, outside of Jesus Christ. Our best attempts to fulfill our part of these conditional statements falls short, but our relationship to God, secured in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, opens us up to the benefits, the promises of God. Just as the Cause cannot be detached from Jesus, neither can the effective blessings. WE WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND THE BLESSINGS OF GOD IF WE SEPARATE THEM FROM HIM. This is made clear here in **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.

This is the verse that this whole section hinges on. If we are going to understand the ifs and the thans, the causes and the effects, then we first have to grasp our relationship with a holy God. Solomon does two things here with the closing verse of this section.

1. He relates discipline and reproof with blessing.

Solomon is not trying to give us a pain pill to get us through the suffering, he is giving us a basis with which to view our entire life. If God reproves, disciplines, and in reality, brings shaping pain into our lives, than our suffering is good. NOT JUST TOLERABLE: good. It is a blessing. It is a gift from God. So when we with our independent, short-term, stuff-focused minds confront difficulty, we see it as an enemy to be conquered. We pull out power verses like: *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* I will survive. Power to the people. But Paul is NOT trying to tell us that we can overcome all difficulties, but that for God's people the difficulties are given to strengthen our faith and help us to rely on God more and more. The strength that we receive is not that we avoid trouble, but that in Christ we are given the perspective to deal with it. Which leads to the second big idea in this verse:

2. He defines our relationship to God as a father to a son

We started today talking about the relationship of father and son and specifically between Solomon and his sons. The great reveal here at the end is that Solomon was never talking simply to his sons about the relationship that he had with them, but he was trying to inform them of a greater relationship. He is trying to shift their reality from stuff to the spirit. He is trying to get them out of the moment with a view towards eternity. He is trying to get through to them that having everything in yourself is a poor excuse for giving it all up to have relationship with God.

Relationship with God is how the Bible defines wealth. Jesus secures for us this adoption into the family of God. When our relationship with God goes from enemy to son, we go from being the recipient of His wrath to His delight. We go from being people who are scraping to accumulate wealth to those who receive an inheritance. We go from being people who need to work for our identity, to people who can work out of the identity that we have been given. Living for God is not just some duty that we owe for what we have been given; the new life is God's gift to us. We now get to live in the continual strengthening of our confidence and assurance, that we ARE the family of God. With this we receive the promises that seem to good to be true. We will close by looking at the promises of God, given by Solomon to his sons, and we will view them through a gospel lens, that we may understand what it is that God offers us:

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Keep my commands: Life and peace

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.

In Christ we have been given the gift of righteousness. When Jesus died, His righteousness was granted to us. Because of His perfect life and sacrificial death, we are declared holy in the sight of God. This reality gives us life and peace.

Life, because we can live out the rest of our life doing what we were created to do, following the commands of God as an act of worship.

Peace, knowing that our standing before God has nothing to do with how good or bad we are, but has everything to do with the fact that we have been called HIS.

Don't let go of unfailing love: Favor with God and people

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.

Love is a repeated theme in the Bible, but one that gets lost in translation. The love that God gives to us, the love that defines us, is summed up in the act of Jesus giving His life up for us. **1 John 4.10-11** defines this for us:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

This love that has been not only displayed to us, but given to us, allows us to step forward and love others in the same way. If our life is up to us to define, than love is impossible. But if the love of Christ has been transferred to us. Then we can freely give of ourselves, letting go of self-centeredness. As we do our relationships will be transformed. We will have favor with God and man because we finally have the capacity to live with them rather than against them.

Trust the Lord: Straight path

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.

As we lean into Jesus, as we give Him credit for what He has done in our lives. As we acknowledge the work that He did on our behalf, our minds change. Our own ideas and wisdom simply do not seem as important or worthy as those of the God of the universe. As we attempt to act on His commands, God will use our feeble attempts to help us see our need for Him in a growing way. Our straight path is not a life free from harm, but one in which we do not worry, knowing that He who sustains us is faithful. This may sound too simple to be a reality, but the truth is if you do not live in the trust of a holy God, you will find yourself always worried about whether or not your path is straight. AND overwhelmed about what you need to do to make it straighter, for fear that God's love depends on your rightness. Trusting in God means taking hold of exactly where you are and doing what you can in this moment. Trust in the Lord frees you to, as Marc put it in his sermon: *attempt bold feats of obedience.*

Don't be wise in own eyes: Healing

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.

Seeing our place in relation to God is painful, at first, but quickly becomes relief. We all know we are not as wise as we are told we should be. We read lists of things should all be able to teach our sons and daughters, books every person should read, and we fall short (sometimes we even cheat to make ourselves look better). The false belief that many of us hold on to is that there IS someone out there who does have it all together. That we CAN reach a point where we have all the answers. You will never be able to achieve perfection. What shall we do then, throw in the towel? BY NO MEANS. You should turn away from evil. But I will never have all of the evil purged from my life. No, but that leftover sin, the battles you still have to fight, do not need to be viewed as the blemishes that keep God from loving you. They are the difficult realities of life that God is working in you. Even your sin then, in the light of the gospel, becomes healing and refreshment. They remind us that this is not the end. They remind us of how much the death of Christ gained for us. They remind us, that God loves us enough to continue to work in us. And as promised: *that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1.6).*

Honor the Lord: Prosperity

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

This is where it gets a little dicey. This verse, and others like it, are where people develop the belief that if you give to God, He will bless you in this life. That if you have the faith to sow a seed, God will make you rich. There is a reason why they go there, because that is what it seems like it is saying. As long as we forget about the next verse, the one that talks about God disciplining those He loves. This verse is not telling us that if we give to God He will make sure we never struggle. It is the promise that if we pursue God, He will change us. It isn't that God WILL show us prosperity, it's that He already has and we don't acknowledge it. The great gift of God is pulling the veil off of our eyes so that we can see how blessed we are.

The inheritance given to us by God: adoption into His family and the benefits that come with it, are above practical details. It is the gift that allows Christians to stand boldly before lions. It is the gift that sees men singing praises to God as they are burnt at the stake. It is the gift that allows people to suffer through illness with a smile on their faces. The inheritance of God allows you to live in this world with the worries that this world brings.

So I leave you with a challenge today: live like you believe the promises of God. Stop thinking that you can kinda trust God and as long as you cover the difference with prayer and good Christian lingo, no one will know better. That you can show to church and do good things and have no real relationship with Jesus. Because that way of living offers nothing. God is offering us a great treasure and we are far too content pretending to accept it. Believe it and live it. I promise you this:

Living out a life of faith is the greatest legacy you will ever leave. A consistent life of trust will instill in your children and friends that Jesus actually does make a difference. The friend that I mentioned last week who was dying of cancer passed away this week. Yesterday, I went to her memorial service which packed out a church. Her son referenced her witness as the reason he was a believer. People from her work, her neighborhood, from all parts of her life said the same thing: she believed in Jesus and her love for Him was effective. May our children and friends be able to say the same about us.