



WISDOM FOR LIFE: A CHEERFUL HEART

Proverbs 17:22

November 12, 2017

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

The ancient world, like today, was filled with short sayings meant to impart wisdom for life. Sayings like “liars when they speak the truth are not believed” from Aristotle and “he who will not economize will have to agonize” from Confucius offered help that is just as useful today as it was thousands of years ago. The Bible also has its share of sayings and some of them are curious like Ecclesiastes 9 “Better a living dog than a dead lion” and others outright surprising like Proverbs 31 “Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish!”

But the ancient world went one better than our modern one. Whereas we have self-help books that offer something more than a sentence or two of advice, they had Wisdom literature. Unlike our modern works which are mostly pabulum wrapped in the aura of authority, all manufactured by the publishing industry to do more help to the author’s and publisher’s bottom line, these wisdom works generally had no official author and were collections gathered over the course of centuries that offered true, lasting insight into the human condition. Steer clear of the former. You cannot trust them. Cling to the latter. For they have stood the test of time.

The Bible has several books within the Wisdom literature tradition of the ancient world: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. For the month of November, we are going to explore the insights of Proverbs’ wisdom for life.

The core of the entire book of Proverbs, and in fact the foundation of all wisdom for your life, can be found in one simple and powerful phrase that not only occurs repeatedly in Proverbs but throughout the Bible, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

No single piece of advice will do more to set your life back on track than this dictum. No single piece of advice would do more to set the world back on its feet than these words. And yet, our temptation would be to treat it as a pithy saying that can be absorbed in a minute. No, this would only wreak more havoc and it has. To properly fear the Lord necessitates a lifetime of committed study filled with profound humility.

If we have lost one thing in our modern understanding of the faith, it is this fear, this respect, this awe-filled disposition towards God, and all of life, stemming from our finite, creaturely nature in contrast to the eternal, all-powerful creator. The fear of which the Bible speaks is not about terror, but a proper respect for the vastness of God.

It is with this respect-filled awe that we approach the Lord and listen to His words with a hungry willingness to serve with all of our being.

Our faith should reflect this awareness and to begin living through this lens we will explore three of Proverbs’ admonitions this month:

a listening ear,
a committed will,
and, beginning today,
cultivating a cheerful heart.

Proverbs declares,

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

Our modern world drives the individual to quick anger, snap judgements, and a generalized anxiety that makes us all sick in the mind, sick in the heart, and sick in the soul. A supermajority of our physical illness stems from our emotional distress. The Bible’s prescription, though, is not more vitamins but a heart filled with delight.

If fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then its culmination is joy. Fear is the realization of all the power, wisdom, and holiness of God. Joy is discovering that God uses this power, wisdom, and holiness to bring abundant life. A heart that fails to be cheerful is one that fails to know God.

This cheerful heart is not only pleasure in the grand moments. The first level is found in daily living, the “whistle while you work,” attitude that finds pleasure in the routines of life. The Hebrew word used here means joyful, glad, and merry.

The person rooted in the cheer of life will not tear their clothes when the little things go wrong. Someone whose heart is centered in the everyday joy of life will not allow a delayed package in the mail or a broken transmission to control their feelings or disposition.

She does not let outward events control inward thoughts. Our modern life robs us of this kind of cheer because we have forgotten who made us and for what purpose.

A person of faith finds cheer in these tasks because she knows it is part of God’s intentions for us to play an active part in this world. Unlike a rock or a clump of dirt that simply exists, God has given to humans the blessed gift of work to do things of consequence.

Nothing erodes the human spirit quite so thoroughly as a complete lack of purpose. When we realize our purpose is found in the everydayness of life, we find joy in knowing we are living out the will of our creator.

The second level of this prescription of cheer is not just about an emotion of happiness but a heart centered on joy. If happiness is a bite of your favorite cake, then joy is giving someone else a slice. Joy is the Christian emotion that finds delight in the prospering of others.

Since our world is filled with injustice and evil, bringing others good news is hard work. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the gospel with boldness and incurred the wrath and scorn of many. Obviously,

that means occasions of fear and even despondency.

In one of their travels, they landed in Antioch of Pisidia. On the Sabbath, they went to temple and, at the time of invitation to speak, Paul stood and proclaimed the gospel. The next week more people came to receive the word and we are told scores of people became believers. Becoming fearful of their success, the religious leaders incited people of prominence to persecute them and drove them out of the region. It is easy to imagine that Paul experienced anger at his fellow Jews, fear for his own life, and frustration with this repeated cycle. It is the same type of eternal frustration and fear the modern world besets us with that makes us so sick!

However, in the midst of everything they must have been feeling, the final verse of this section declares, “the disciples were filled with joy.”

We cannot possibly fix the world. We cannot win this war. Only God can. But we can find joy and we must and we should, when God uses us to bless others. Whether in the grand things of life or the simple pleasure of putting a smile on a child’s face when, after they say “Trick or Treat,” we offer a basketful of the best assortment of candy bars.

Which leads us to the third and final level in our prescription. Our cheerful heart is not only good medicine for us it is a panacea for the world for.

If believers of God in Jesus Christ are not people of joy, why would anyone want to become one?

A few weeks ago, I had the chance to hear Peter Wehrner speak. He was the speechwriter for President George W. Bush and is an occasional New York Times columnist. As it turns out, he is Presbyterian and once attended National Presbyterian Church, where David Renwick now serves.

He spent some time assessing the state of our country and then offered some thoughts about how the church ought to respond. He spoke about the need to regain the virtue of Christian humility and to model trust.

Then he cited a recent study that, though the results weren't new to me and don't surprise me, struck deep. When hundreds of people were asked what comes to mind when they think of Christians, not one person said "grace." That is tragic because it is the unique characteristic of our faith.

It struck me right then that we need to take back our faith. We need to take it back from the doom and gloom preachers. We need to take it back from the prosperity gospel nonsense. We need to take it back from the harsh, self-righteous, twisted version it has become in the popular mindset.

We need to put the Christ back in Christianity. Christ who showed us what true love is, who stopped to heal and show compassion on the lowliest of people, while at the same time redeeming the world.

When my son Matthew was filling out his college applications he claimed his faith but went on to say that he was not too religious. I asked him about that and he said that, in today's world, being religious means being judgmental and closed minded.

People won't come to believe because of the logic of our argument. They will know we are Christians by our love, by our grace-filled love.

Love is what we do. Grace is how we do it.

Think about this for a moment. In a world filled with abuse of power, the one with the most uses it to bless and redeem us. In a world in which people cling ever so tightly to what they have, God gives away everything. In a world filled with the promise of war and death, we claim that God, in Jesus Christ, will end all war, that the wolf will lie down with the lamb, that every tear shall be wiped away, and that death will be no more. We claim to believe that God's love conquers all.

So, if we believe this, people should expect to see it on our faces. They would expect us not to be filled with fear or cynicism but hope and joy. Hearts filled with cheer. Joy at the good news of the gospel

that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.