

The Gospel According to
Proverbs 4

A Christian Pilgrim's Journey
by Paul Lytle

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Shut up and pay attention!

“Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight,”

-Proverbs 4:1

 Okay everyone, shut up for a minute.

Seriously. When's the last time you just listened? I've been around you; I know you don't do it. I've seen you at meetings, giving your opinion about everything without considering what other people say. I've seen you at church, talking about the flaws in the message. I've seen you with your family, where everyone is talking and not a word is heard. And you've seen me too.

As children, we learn to express ourselves long before we learn to be silent and attentive. We never seem to get that equation quite right. Can you imagine how many more words are spoken in this world than are heard?

Just today at work I was trying to speak to a customer about something, and she didn't listen to a single word I said. It was fairly annoying, especially since she was complaining about something the law required me to do. But before I can get too annoyed, I have to wonder just how attentive I've been to others.

We have a big problem in this age with authority. The very word has a negative connotation now. Even Christians will often deny the right of the government to wield authority, or of church elders to hold them accountable for moral issues. “You can't judge me” has become a common phrase even in sanctuaries.

We talk all day about the right to free speech. Which is great as things go, but what about the responsibility to listen?

Our desire to go our own way extends to the way we treat the Bible. Most Christians don't read it at all. If they do, they ignore certain parts, saying those parts are cultural or doesn't apply any more. We write books and blogs, justifying those low views of Scripture. We keep talking, so we don't have to listen.

Solomon begins this section of Proverbs with, again, the call to listen. Pay attention, he is saying. This is important.

Authority is not a bad word. The right authority over our lives will save us from a thousand bad decisions and a thousand hurts. A good model of virtue will keep us from the wrong paths. A standard above us will draw us every upward.

Even Jesus, when He was on earth, placed Himself under the authority of the Father and Scripture. He studied the Word, learned it, and obeyed. When He was tempted, the Word provided His answers. When He was tested by the Pharisees, the Word gave Him His guidance.

He above us all could have claimed all the answers. In fact, He had them. But as an example for us, He walked in obedience to the Father. He listened, and He paid attention.

Have you been trying to go your own way in life? It may work for a while, but it won't work forever. If it doesn't catch up with you sooner, one day you'll face death. And in death, there are only two paths – one that leads to God, and one that goes your own way. One that leads to life, or one you will stubbornly take to destruction.

Listen. Pay attention. This is a question of life and death. As a dying patient will put himself under the authority of a good physician, so should you place yourself under authority of He who can save you. Repent and believe, and you will be saved.

Good advice, and the problem of taking it

[Listen,] “for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching.”

-Proverbs 4:2

When I was very young, my father built a great fort for me in the backyard. It was two storeys tall with walls and everything. We had it for several years, but I grew up, and there really was no need for it anymore. So he decided to take it down.

Since it was going to be destroyed, I asked permission to alter it for a few weeks. Just for fun. I made it more rugged and military-like, with a rope to climb to the second floor rather than a ladder, and boards taken out for easy water gun fire. I was generally making a mess. There were boards all over the backyard.

My dad was upset at this, and he told me to, promptly, clean up the mess before I stepped on a nail. I argued that I wasn't going to step on a nail and rolled my eyes, but he would have none of it. Finally, I stormed off.

And as I was walking, I realized that there was a board stuck to my shoe. I had stepped on it as I stormed, and the exposed nail had gone into the sole of my shoe. I kept walking, hoping that my father had not seen it, since that one board had justified every word he had said. In fact, he didn't notice, but I had. I cleaned up the yard right away and told him the story years later.

It was a rather silly point. I cannot tell you why I was so opposed to cleaning the yard. I suppose I was just interested in my own thing, and that got in the way.

Is that how we view the Bible? As something that gets in the way of our own thing? In truth, the world is filled with pitfalls, and the Bible, in part, is designed to help us avoid them. It is designed to lead us to life.

Sometimes we are just too involved with what we are doing to notice that board in the yard with the nail sticking out. We say, “But I want to do this!” not realizing that something more important is at stake. Something larger than our petty lusts and desires is going on.

When Jesus came, He came so that we could have life. But the words He was saying rubbed certain people the wrong way. They were only interested in this small issue, or this tiny pleasure. They were so blinded by things they were doing that they did not understand that something huge was going on.

So they killed Him.

Do we avoid the Word of God because we're too busy with our own thing? Do we ignore some of its commands? We may think we would lose out of some pleasure if we turned to Christ, but we wouldn't. Instead, we would gain something so much greater.

My duty to the future of baseball

“When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,”

-Proverbs 4:3

I don't know that a day goes by where my dad doesn't have some sort of influence on my life. And I don't mean that he's calling me up with advice all the time or showing up at my home. No, even if he's not around, his influence is there. It's the influence of someone who took raising me seriously.

If I play softball with friends, I use the batting stance he taught me. Same with tennis. If I listen to music, I know that my tastes began to develop from the radio in his car. When I go to a restaurant, it is almost undoubtedly a place to which I went with him first.

Those issues are trivial, but that influence goes a lot deeper. My father is a very honest, honorable man, at least as far as men go. I like to think I was influenced in that area too. I see his working habits, his focus, and his reactions in my own every day.

When Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom, and that wisdom was granted. Was that a sudden influx of wisdom, or had God placed Solomon on a path from birth to seek wisdom more than the normal man? By the very fact that Solomon was wise and humble enough to ask for wisdom suggests to me that he already had quite a bit of it.

The foundations of his hunger for wisdom is revealed here. Solomon, right in the middle of giving his son advice, pauses to recall a time with his parents, when he was the beloved son, listening to his own father, David.

And you know what? The advice David will give him in the following verses sounds a lot like the advice Solomon would later give his own son.

See, the issue here isn't just about a father trying to guide his son. It is that, of course, but it is more. The issue is about God's people influencing generations to come. It's about David's commitment to the Lord, and how that translated through Solomon and down the line.

When I teach my son, if God sees fit to give me one, a batting stance, it's going to look a lot like my dad's. My grandson's stance will probably be pretty close as well. Those things we teach our kids don't just last as long as Little League does, but continues through generations. What I teach my kids about God may one day result in generations of people devoted to the Lord. That commitment might bring about missionaries, pastors, or evangelists. I may meet hundreds in heaven that were influenced by my commitment to teach my son about Jesus.

Or, if I don't say anything at all, it may result in generations of lost people.

And people today wonder why it's really important to have a father around? I tell you the truth – this world is going to feel the effects of our fatherless generation for centuries.

It matters. It matters beyond just your son what you decide to give him.

In the same way, Jesus came down from Heaven with the truth of His Father. It was His influence here that began everything. His death on the Cross means salvation for all who repent and believe. When we believe, we become adopted sons of the Father, who will teach us as a Father should. Through the Holy Spirit, we will grow and mature in Him. That heavenly influence spreads through the generations and over the nations, blanketing the earth with Grace. If you have not, turn to Him, repenting of all that time you only sought your own pleasure rather than His Glory.

Finding a better source than my feelings

“he [my father] taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.’”

-Proverbs 4:4

“**K**eeep my commandments, and live.” Stop and think about that statement a minute. How can any man make that claim? How could any father tell a son that, that his words are the way to life?

Do you understand how bold of a statement that is? Seriously. Imagine if I said to you, “You want the way to eternal life, just obey what I say.” The first thing you would ask is, “How in the world are you the authority on life?”

On my own, I can’t even see beyond my next sentence, much less forever. I can’t tell you what the weather is going to be like tonight. Neither could David, who was Solomon’s father. So when David tells Solomon in this passage that his words will bring life, he’s either egotistical to the point of delusion, or he’s got a source greater than himself.

You meet people every day who will tell you, with absolute certainty, what eternity is going to be like. On one side, you have devout atheists who mock those who believe in God. On the other side, you have people who just assume that God is love and will let anyone into heaven.

Ask them where they are getting their information. Ask them about the sources of their “wisdom.” Chances are, it’s just a feeling they have. Chances are, it’s just what makes sense to *them*, and they think they are smarter than everyone else. Atheists cannot disprove God, because it’s logically impossible to prove a negative like “God doesn’t exist.” All you can prove is that you haven’t seen any convincing evidence. So they ultimately have no source for their beliefs, just an instinct. Universalists have come up with a god they like (a warm, fluffy god who doesn’t expect anything of us, like, you know, being a decent person) and believe in him, but that’s only a god based on themselves, not on a reliable source. They too are left with their feelings.

With great arrogance and foolishness they stand and say, “Believe me, and you will live.”

This from people who don’t even know what they will eat tomorrow.

That’s not what David or Solomon is doing here. Not at all. The only way either one would say such bold statements is because they know something outside themselves. They have encountered God – the God who created the world, who moves history, who is the source of all things good – and God told them Who He is. He has given us His Word, a Word that will stand forever.

And beyond that, He stepped into human history as the man Jesus. When we were lost in our sins, fatally fallen from the glory of God without a hope to recover, Jesus died in our place. Do not be fooled by those who say that everyone will get to heaven. In truth, every sin must be

punished, because if we were dragging our sins into heaven, we would make it into a hell. But everyone will be punished, and that means every lie you have told, every moment of hatred, every lustful glance, every greedy ambition. It will all be punished.

But listen to my words and life – Jesus died in our place. He paid for those sins. If we repent and believe, we will find life.

How can I say that, when I don't know what shirt I'll wear this weekend? I can say it because I know God. I have read His eternal Word. I have repented, and I believe in Jesus. I can say this because I have a Source.

What to seek, what to avoid

“Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.”

-Proverbs 4:5

Get laid; get high. Get a cool car with racing stripes. Get a hot girlfriend. Get a wicked sound system. Get a great job and make tons of money. Get ahead; get up the corporate ladder. Get respect; get a gun. Get power; get out the vote. Get a shrink; get some help.

Get married; get divorced. Get some action on the side. Get a bigger TV. Get a drink. Get a new wardrobe; get some new décor; get a face lift. Get a new job with more money. Get stock options. Get a new haircut; get a new life. Get some new friends. Get out more.

Get involved. Get productive. Get some love. Get real.

The world is full of advice of what to get. Sometimes, there are so many voices in a day, you get turned around. You get lost in the crowd. You don't know where to turn.

This verse is a call to remember something much greater. It is a call to seek out the ways of God, to understand His ways and to make them our ways. To look out for those things that will not fade away and turn to dust. This verse is a call to push away that other stuff and make sure you are focused on what is important.

Do not forget. Do not forget the wisdom found in the Bible. No matter what else you are seeking in this world, it is fleeting. No matter if it is the most noble thing out there, it will only last a little time, and it will be gone. All other pursuits will perish, except this one. Except this one.

The reason this one will not perish is because this is the way to life. Do not forget, because everything that happens to you after the grave is going to depend on this one. On this one right here.

We are not worthy of life. You may think you are, but you're not, just like I'm not. We have spent too much time pursuing our own goals, our own lusts, our own pride, our own ambition, our own selfishness, our own anger, and our own hatred. Nothing we can do will make up for that. We are desperately fallen, and we are not good enough for eternal life.

But Jesus came to earth to die on the Cross to take the punishment for our sins. He took the price we could not pay upon Himself and died. And then He rose again to prepare a place for us. If we repent and believe in Him, we will have life eternal. Repent, and believe.

Do not forget. Seek this one out. Get wisdom; get insight. Read the Bible, and keep reading it. Start praying and keep praying. I don't care what else is going on, what else you need to “get,” because this is the issue that will outlive all others.

I had a cool title for this one, but I forgot it

“Do not forsake her [wisdom], and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.”

-Proverbs 4:6

We are a forgetful people in general. Some of us are worse than others. My memory is terrible. If I get a bill from the mail after work, I will have forgotten about it by dinner if it's not sitting out in the open. I am horrible with names. Someone says, “Hi, I'm John. I'm a lawyer,” and I've forgotten the person's name by the time he's done saying “lawyer.”

My wife is better, but still forgets much more than she retains. We all do. No one has a perfect memory.

Our schools are built to cater to that. From day one important information is drilled into us with repetition. I remember writing out my letters scores of times for each one. In Spanish class we repeated the words over and over again (it still didn't help). We have reviews in class, and we go back over notes.

This is how we learn it – repetition, repetition, repetition. I needed help the first few times I tied my shoe, but no more. I can type without looking at the keyboard, but I couldn't for the first few years doing it.

If you've been reading this blog since the beginning, you've looked at the idea of this verse many times. Solomon is beating it into us. This is too important for him to have said once and assumed that we would remember the chapter and verse of where he did.

Do not forsake wisdom. What is wisdom? Let's do this again. Wisdom is the understanding of God's ways and the ability to apply it to your life. Do that, Solomon is saying. Seek out God's ways and follow!

What is wisdom? Wisdom is the understanding that we do not deserve eternal life. Wisdom is looking honestly at yourself and realizing that you can't make it on your own. When you see the sin in your life for what it is – the anger, the lust, the greed, the pride, the ambition, the lies, the deceit, the jealousy – you've got a good start.

Wisdom is seeking God in every moment, because if you don't, you know you're going to get exactly what you deserve. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death. But wait, you say, my sins aren't that bad. Really? The Bible says that if you look at a woman with lust in your heart you are guilty of adultery. If you get unduly angry at someone, God views that like murder. God expects perfection, and any slip makes us unworthy of Him.

Wisdom is falling at His feet and begging for mercy, because you realize that it's the only chance you've got. Wisdom is turning toward Jesus. When He died on the Cross, He took the punishment for our sins. In that death, He paid the price that you were meant to pay.

Wisdom is repenting and believing in Jesus, because there is no other way to the Father but through Jesus. In a previous chapter of Proverbs, we saw that this character called “Wisdom” is meant to be a type and shadow for Jesus. This is why. This is the path of wisdom.

And what happens to those who believe in Jesus? He will keep you. He will cover you in His righteousness and take away your sin. He will protect you and deliver you into eternity, perfected and ready to stand before the Father.

The wise seek Him, for there is no other way. We cannot make it on our own. We cannot impress God with our works. We cannot be good enough. All other religions want you to earn your way to Heaven. The wise know that it’s already too late for that. The wise know they need Jesus.

The seeking, the finding, and the showing

“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.”

-Proverbs 4:7

People tell me that I’m smart. I really don’t think of myself that way anymore. I’m very curious, so I research almost everything I come across. I just really want to know! So I have accumulated quite a bit of information out of just being a curious fellow. That probably makes me appear smart.

But I used to think of myself as *very* smart. I used to think I knew the answers to everything because of my powerful intellect. Frankly, it was one of the most foolish times of my life. I was so foolish in that time because I stopped listening to anyone. I thought I knew it all, or would know it all very soon and without anybody’s help thank you very much, so what did I need to listen to others for?

That’s a big pet peeve of mine – people who think they know everything. Maybe it bothers me so much because I used to be under the same delusion. But even when I was one of those people, I used to hate it when someone wouldn’t listen. You can’t talk to people like that! Your words just pass through their heads and out the other side. They are there to talk, not listen.

And when you live like that, it’s over. That’s it. That’s as smart as you will ever be, because you’ll never move beyond yourself.

What David is saying here (as reported by Solomon), is that the first step in being wise is knowing you need to seek wisdom. I don’t like the ESV translation here, because it’s sort of hard to follow. The King James Version says, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.”

You want to be wise? Seek wisdom, because wisdom is gained in the seeking. Did you catch that? Wisdom is both goal and journey here. It is what we are after, and it is how we get there. In wisdom we set out, and wisdom grows in the walking.

And how should we walk? See, so many religions out there have so many ways to find wisdom. They’ll tell you to go experience the world, which will likely only get you a shot of penicillin. They tell you to go talk to an elderly person, which will get you just as much wisdom and foolishness as is in the person you choose. They tell you to meditate on nothing, which will get you exactly that. They tell you to believe in the book written by the religion’s founder, which again only gets you the wisdom and foolishness of the founder.

What we have to understand is that wisdom, as with all good things, comes from God. Wisdom, by its very nature, relates to who He is. Therefore a walk around the world will only get you as far as the world, but no farther. And a walk with a guru or spiritual leader will show you their world, which doesn’t get you any farther than your own.

This sort of wisdom is not going to be achieved on your own. You have spent too much time ignoring God. You have spent too long following your own desires. It's all you know. In merely lying have you offended His holy character. In your heart you have kept hatred and lust, which cannot mix with the love and purity of the Lord. God demands righteousness, and you have fallen short.

But God came to earth in the form of the man Jesus. Upon the Cross, He took the punishment we deserve in our sins. Then He rose again to prepare a place for us in eternity. He came to show us a way to forgiveness. He came to show us wisdom.

His Grace is good for any sin. If we repent and believe, we will be forgiven. And if we stumble, we will be forgiven again. Believe, and you will have life.

This wisdom must be sought, surely. But truly to be found, it must be shown to you by God. Any wisdom we can discover on our own is only good for this life. Thank God that He was willing to stoop down to show us something greater.

Following Jesus so we can get . . . what?

“Prize her [wisdom] highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.”

-Proverbs 4:8

As I write this, I have been married a bit more than nine months. Hardly enough to be giving marriage advice, right? Well, since when has that stopped me?

I don't fully understand most of what goes on in my house. Ironically, my wife tells me the same thing, and I think I'm remarkably easy to understand. But there is one thing I noticed very quickly – when I show my wife attention, she blossoms. I don't know how else to describe it. She smiles, she laughs, she has fun, she grows. When I ignore her, her mood darkens. (This is a general rule, which doesn't work all the time, but pretty close.)

Basically, I'm going to get out of this relationship in proportion to what I put in. I can't ignore her and expect everything to be lovely and shiny.

Which sounds sort of like what so many preach about Christianity, right? They tell you to give more in the offering and you'll get a raise. Obey these laws and God will like you. Say this prayer and God will be forced to listen. Ultimately, they say, give God His due, and He'll bless you with a lot of cool stuff.

Except that's not how I would describe my relationship with my wife. That's not it at all. See, the words are all there. I show my wife attention and she blossoms. On the other side, give God attention and He'll respond. The difference is, I'm not being kind to my wife to get something in return.

Here's the truth of it – I am kind to my wife because I love her. That strengthens her, and she reacts in kind, which strengthens me.

Ephesians describes the relationship between Christ and the Church as a marriage. And every time my wife becomes stronger because of our relationships, I understand this passage better.

Christ showed His love for us by, while we were sinners and did not deserve it, dying for us on the Cross. When we recognize that love and mercy, we react to it by repenting of those sins and believing in Him. He reacts by giving us His Spirit. We react by growing in righteousness. It is a wonderful cycle of love that strengthens us.

And it all begins with Him loving us when we did not deserve it, just like most of fights in my home end when one of us acts in love rather than anger.

The temptation with this verse is to take it out of context and talk about what we have to do to get blessings. That's not what it's about. The verses all around it tell us to seek wisdom (that is, Christ) for the sake of wisdom. And, oh, yeah, when you seek wisdom, wisdom will respond.

There are benefits to following Christ. There are a lot of them. That's not what it's about. It's about love. It's about following someone who loves us so much that He died for us, even when we ignored Him or made fun of His followers or mocked His Word. He still died for us, though we deserved so much worse.

Love, and side benefits

“She [Wisdom] will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

-Proverbs 4:9

I was married almost ten months ago, and it was a particularly lovely wedding. I know most people say that, and I imagine it's true whenever someone says it for the right reasons.

Too often we say it because of the flowers and the music and the food at the reception. Frankly, I most often judge weddings by the food at the reception. I never mind seeing friends get married, and often I celebrate that, but good food is so critical to my own enjoyment of the event.

By aesthetic standards, my wedding was lovely too. It was in a prayer garden under an oak tree that is well over a hundred years old. The weather was absolutely perfect, and the pastor led us through a number of profound examples for marriage. My wife was beautiful (as she always is, though she will not believe me), and I felt blessed to just be there. It was memorable in every way.

But when I say it was lovely, that's not what I am talking about. I'm talking about taking the woman I love and being bound to her, for better or for worse. I'm talking about becoming a family, trusting God with our common fate, and standing as an example of His love for us.

I became her husband, and that to me is lovely.

I longed for that day, waited for it, planned for it, sought it, and pursued it. Not for the day itself. Too many, I think, forsake the marriage for the wedding. They ignore everything about their relationships except for the planning of that day. No, that's not why I sought it. I sought it because I sought her, and that was the natural and right result of that seeking.

So often I hear in the church that people need to follow Christ for everlasting life. That is true. I often present the gospel that way myself. Others will say He gives peace. That is true as well, though it is often peace in the midst of terrible trial. Others will say God gives wealth. That is sometimes true, though not as often as we hope. After all, Jesus Himself was homeless.

I long for those things. I long for life with Him. I long for that peace. I long for Him to tell me, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” But I don't long for them for the day itself. I long for them because I love Him.

The verse previous to this one says that these things will come about because we prize wisdom highly. When I think back on my wedding day, I understand better. It was a wonderful day, but it would have been terrible if either one of us had sought that day for its own sake. It was wonderful because it was about something greater than itself.

The evidence of wisdom, of faith, is wonderful, but it is mostly wonderful because it points to something greater. When someone comes to me for spiritual advice, I am glad, because

that person has seen Jesus alive in me. When I am asked to do something at church, I am glad, because I can serve Him with it.

Too many come to the Gospel with some great goal. There are preachers who tell you to follow Jesus for money. Money may come, but that's a goal much too small. Some will tell you about peace and life. Indeed! But what would life be without Him?

I spent so much of my life seeking my own ends. I spent them in selfishness and lust and greed. He showed me that these goals were fallen and tainted. In repentance and belief I was saved by His Blood, and that Blood continues to save me every day. I am still lost without Him.

At my best, that faith is like a crown on me. But it is a crown I long to cast at His feet in worship. It's about life. It's about peace. It's about forgiveness. It's about repentance. Yes, it is all of these things. It's about God most of all. Just like on my wedding day, it's not about me. It's about Him.

Want a long life? Talk to dad about it.

“Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.”

-Proverbs 4:10

Do you remember the time when kids used to willingly accept the counsel of their elders? Me neither. I keep hearing about such a time in the past, but I’m not really sure it ever existed.

I’ve read some history and some literature, and it seems to me that people have always been a stubborn bunch. You tell people, “Don’t go over there!” and they’ll start packing for the trip. There is a spirit of rebellion in most people I’ve met that cannot be explained except to say that it is pride. It is pride that tells someone that he should walk where angels fear to tread, that he should use business practices that the world would condemn, that he should drink excessively the night before the midterm, that he should sleep around when such activity has harmed so many before him. It is pride that tells you to seek after your own pleasures and that you can control the consequences.

Over and over again in the Bible, from the Ten Commandments all the way through the New Testament, it is said that we should obey our parents and, in so doing, gain long life. Solomon repeats that same promise here with his son.

Why would this be? Well, let’s take this instance in context. Solomon has just been telling his son to seek wisdom, and if you seek wisdom, wisdom will bring you honor, protection, and life.

Now he is reiterating, saying, basically, “And you can start gaining wisdom here by listening to me tell you to seek wisdom,” which is exactly what Solomon’s father David said too.

The truth is this – if I want to do well at work, I’ll get advice from the people at work who have succeeded. If I want to succeed in marriage, I’m going to get advice from people who have had successful marriages. If I want to succeed in have a long, fruitful life that is focused on God, I’m going to talk to God-focused people who have had fruitful lives. These people probably will have failed a hundred times in a hundred ways, but I’ll be able to use those stories too.

If you don’t want to make the same mistakes your parents made, you probably should find out what mistakes they made.

You need to listen to those people who can say, “I’ve been there, and it’s not worth it.” In our rebellious natures, we don’t want to listen to that, because the activity in question looks fun and adventurous. But if you listen to those who went before, maybe that can teach you something.

The Bible is like that. Just like sound advice from an earthly father, our Heavenly Father has given us the Bible and the Holy Spirit for guidance. He wants us to walk righteously,

because He knows that is the way to life. His Commands are made out of love, because they direct us to the Source of life, which is God Himself.

Unfortunately, we haven't been all that righteous. In our rebellious natures, we have scorned His commands just like we have scorned the commands of our parents. We have rejected God to go our own way. We have disobeyed, and that is called sin.

We can continue in disobedience, but it does not lead to life. That way will end in spiritual death, just like wild living will lead to physical death. But God came to earth as the man Jesus to pay for that death we have already earned. By His Blood we can be saved by repentance and belief.

If I ignore my dad's advice, but I come home, repentant for my mistake, will he shut me out? No. If I do it again, will he shut me out then? No. If we confess our sins to God, He is faithful to forgive in the very same way. We cannot prove ourselves worthy of that sort of love. We just accept it as the love between a father and His children.

Where are you leading?

“I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.”

-Proverbs 4:11

If we knew how much influence we have in the course of a day, I wonder how surprised we'd be. You don't think about it, maybe, when you're driving wildly with a Jesus fish on your back bumper. How many see that and curse God because of it? Or when you pray before a meal at a restaurant and then stiff the waiter on the tip. Did that customer you brushed off a month ago see you in church on Sunday?

I've only given examples of religious influence, but there are so many more. The people you encounter in the world very well may end up being a customer, a future boss, a police officer who will pull you over next week, a political leader, a voter, a substitute player on your softball team. People all the time are seeing you, hearing you, watching you, and what they see and hear will influence them.

Are they seeing Christ, or are they seeing something else?

I've known of several people who have been so good in their influence at church or the world, but then at home, something happens. It's tough, I know, with your family, because you can't always put on a false face with them. They're going to see what you are really like.

Are we leading our kids to Christ, or somewhere else?

There are many hopes I have for any kids I may have. I hope my son plays baseball. I hope they are smart and love to read. I hope they can appreciate good Rock 'n' Roll. I hope they can achieve their dreams.

But most of all, I hope and pray that I will be the sort of father who leads his children to Christ. I hope and pray that I will be able to repeat this verse at the end of my life. I will make mistakes, I know, but if they grow up understanding the Grace of Jesus Christ, then I will be successful as a father, even if all of those other hopes never come true.

We spend so much time with our kids teaching them stuff. From math to a fastball to riding a bike, we are always teaching. How often does God's love come into that?

It's so critical because this life is only this life. We have maybe eighty years and then it's done. We won't be riding a bike very long. We won't be pitching very long. We won't be doing math very long. But what we believe about Jesus will determine our forever.

Jesus tells us that He is the only way to life. Anyone who wants to have eternal life must go through Him. Why? Because we've messed up. It's that simple. See, God is so perfect, so righteous, and so just, that He must impose the rightful punishment for our greed, lusts, and pride. That punishment is death. In those sins we have rebelled against God, and God, being just, must put an end to the rebellion.

A good judge must follow the law. It is only bad judges that let criminals go free without punishment. So it is with God.

But when Jesus died on the Cross, He took our sins with Him. He paid the price we were supposed to pay. So if we repent and believe in Him, He will atone for our sins with His Blood. We will be counted righteous because of Him, not because of ourselves.

That is why the question of Jesus is so important. That is why Grace is so critical. Put down the baseball for a minute and talk to your kid about Him.

Let me tell you about my bruised shins!

“When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble.”

-Proverbs 4:12

You ever have those days you just wish you could take back? Said something you wish you could erase? Did something you wish everyone would forget?

At the time, it really seems important that you say that line that just popped into your head. At the time, it seems so important that it be said. That would just make your point and vindicate you.

Then, later, you're thinking, “Wow. Shouldn't have said that.”

Sometimes anger, lust, or pride just overcomes us. It clouds our thoughts and tells us things that just aren't true. All those stupid things I've said – most of the time I thought they were brilliant before I said them. The hurtful things we do – we don't very often admit to ourselves that someone will get hurt over it.

I had one of those days yesterday. The problem is fixed now, forgiveness given by all sides, but I'm still kicking myself over it. You know what? I have one of those moments at least once a week. It really seems like I'm always kicking myself over something.

I would so very much like the life described in this verse, one where I would not stumble. And it's easy enough to just say, “Just don't do that, ding-dong head!” But the trouble is, if I knew it was stupid when I did it, I probably wouldn't have done it.

The problem with almost every religion is that it says there is something in you that can fix it. It tells you to just do better. Be good, and God will like you. The self-help gurus tell you the same thing – reach within yourself and achieve!

And I tell you what, it's not there. You tell me to reach inside myself to overcome by pride, anger, and lust, but all I find within is more of that stuff.

A lot of Christians will take this verse out of context and tell you to work hard so you won't stumble. But what is great about this verse is that it's not like that at all. Take a look at what's being said around it. It takes about the gifts wisdom will *give* you. It is talking about the way that is *taught* to you.

In other words, this is something external, not internal.

The Christian life is not about working harder and going farther and having your best life now. It's about confessing, repenting, and accepting Grace. We cannot earn God's favor. We mess up too often and too badly to impress a perfect and just God. But Jesus can, and He did. He lived a perfect life and died in our place for the forgiveness of our sins. He died, so that we may live. By His Blood we are washed and made new.

That is the wisdom Solomon is talking about.

When we confess our sins and believe in Him, His Spirit will come to indwell us, and that Spirit's lead will keep us from stumbling.

That is also the wisdom Solomon is talking about.

The Spirit of God teaches us and guides us. He moves us in the ways to righteousness. I don't always listen, and I put my foot in my mouth like I did yesterday. But the Blood of Christ does not fail there either. I can mess up, but I will still be judged by His righteousness. It's like I never stumbled at all.

The one way street of eternity

“Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.”

-Proverbs 4:13

Have you ever driven the wrong way on a one-way street? As a passenger on the way to a tennis tournament, our bus driver overlooked the sign, and turned left when she should have turned right. Luckily, no one was there. I did it myself only just a couple of months ago in San Antonio. Of course, it was completely by accident, but I came very close to panicking in that moment, even though I got off the street without incident.

On several occasions have I been going the right way down a one-way street and seen someone coming the wrong way at me. That is a frightening experience. In all cases was a crash easily avoided – the other driver wasn’t drunk or anything, he was just trying to take a shortcut. But when you see someone coming at you, and you don’t know his state of mind, it’s frightening.

When we drive, we constantly see signs that could literally mean life-or-death for us. A one-way street is a great example. We have large signs warning us of dead-ends so we don’t drive into a lake. Stop lights warn us that another car has the right-of-way.

Most of us look for these signs and obey their instructions. We understand the danger in ignoring them. There are many who do no such thing. In Texas, where I live, we have a big problem with drunk driving. It seems like there is another news story about a drinking-related fatality every few days.

It does surprise me, though, with so many people being so careful with their mortal lives, that we don’t have more people worrying about eternity. We take such care to not lose a moment of the eightyish years we have on earth, but we don’t give much thought to the forever that begins after these eightyish years are done. It’s like 99% of the population is driving drunk spiritually.

The Bible is our warning. It is that sign that tells us we’re going the wrong way on the road to eternity. It gives us a list of things that God expects of us. It tells us some very basic things, like we shouldn’t steal or lie or kill people – things most of us would admit aren’t good.

But then it tells us that God expects us to follow these rules perfectly. And more than that, God tells us that He will also judge our hearts, and those things like lust, pride, selfishness, and hatred are enough to get us to hell.

So many people just assume that they are fine with God. They just figure they are good enough, and they don’t worry about it. If you are doing this, you are ignoring that warning sign when eternity is on the line.

The truth is this – none of us are good enough. There is no one who has not messed up in thought, word, and deed. There isn’t anyone who has achieved God’s standard for goodness.

This is so critical to understand, because when you understand this, you will also understand why trying to be a good person will not get you to eternal life. You'll understand why not all religions are leading you to God. You can't just get it right most of the time and make it.

But in the death of Jesus we have a way to life. Jesus lived a perfect life and did not deserve death, but He died in our stead. It is through Him that we can get to the Father, by repenting of our sins and believing in Him, and it is *only* through Him that we can make it. Any way that requires us to be good enough for God isn't going to work.

Once you have this bit of wisdom, this instruction, hold on to her! We are saved by His Blood, by His Grace, and we never stop being saved by that Grace. Even though I've been a Christian for years, I still mess up constantly. But the Blood of Christ still saves me, and it is *only* by that Blood. It is a truth I cling to, because without it I have no hope.

Seeking pleasure, or seeking life

“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.”

Proverbs 4:14

What is it we value in our society? What character traits do we seek to emulate? You know, if you ask people who they admire, you’re going to get the strangest mix of egotistical sports figures, power-hungry politicians, movie stars that can’t seem to stay married to the same person for more than a year, and then like the Pope or Mother Teresa. Or you’ll get some really ambiguous group like “single mothers.”

You’ll begin to realize that we don’t admire people anymore for their character or their bravery. We admire them for their position or wealth. Then we throw in Mother Teresa so we don’t look callous. Or we name a group so we look noble, but again, that group is not admired for the worth of character, but for something else. After all, can we really say that all “single mothers” have the same strength of moral character? Can we say that they are brave, or all strong, or all good? Obviously not!

We have become so hardened in our thinking about morality, and right and wrong, and character, that it doesn’t even enter our heads when voting for a politician or following an actor or wearing the jersey of a particular athlete. That’s doesn’t come into the equation at all.

I ask all of this because our society has accepted a great deal of what previous generations have scorned. We have allowed and embraced behavior that we never have before. We have applauded those who seek their own pleasure above all else, and we think that’s a good way to live.

The verse we’re looking at today has some simple advice. “Don’t do evil.” Our society might reply in a number of different ways. It may say, “Evil is subjective; it doesn’t really exist.” Or it may say, “As long as you’re not hurting someone, what’s the harm?”

But there is evil. There is wrong. And those people who try to deny it will still get angry if they are cheated out of some money. Why? Because in their hearts they know that some things are just wrong.

Right and wrong are absolutes. They are objective, not subjective. They are like that because they were set down by God and defined. These are things that are right, He said, and these things wrong.

No matter what this society says, this verse really does remain a simple one. Don’t do evil. Don’t go down that trail. Turn to good. This is what God expects of us, and He will judge those who do wrong.

Which is all of us. See, it’s not just the completely immoral person who will be damned forever, but everyone who has sinned. Even pride, lust, and greed taint us far too much for Heaven. God is holy and just, and He demands that we be the same way. Only we haven’t. We have sought ourselves; we have chased our own lusts; we have crawled for more, more, more.

The good news is that we can turn back in the right direction. We can come back to God. We can't do it alone. No, we cannot earn His love. But in mercy, He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on our behalf for the forgiveness of sins. He took our punishment upon Himself, and He rose after the third day to provide the way for us to rise too. If we repent and believe, it is His righteousness that will provide our path back home.

We all, at times, turn onto the path of evil. Jesus can move us off that path and back to the path of life, because He *is* that way, and it is only through Him that we can escape that way of the evil.

The road most traveled

“Avoid it [the path of the wicked]; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.”

-Proverbs 4:15

Most of the time, I know it’s coming. I know I’m starting to get angry. Some of the time, I recognize that I’m getting angry and I take a walk or start praying. Sometimes I ignore all off that and lash out.

Afterward, I wonder at how stupid I was. I never get out of a fight with my wife, family, or friend thinking, “That was good. I really stuck it to him!” No, I always regret it. So why can’t I remember that for the next time?

Sometimes we think of sin like a line that we cross. I was fine until, oops, I stepped over the line. I sinned. That’s true in a lot of cases. But I love how this passage describes it more like a road.

I was taking a very long drive one morning, making really good time, when I realized I had missed my turn about twenty miles behind me. Sin can be something like that. The second I missed my turn, I was heading in the wrong direction, but the more I drove, the worse the problem got.

The thought enters our mind, and already we have a problem, but it wouldn’t take much effort to pull over and turn around. It’s pretty easy to concentrate on something else, start praying, or something. But soon it is consuming us, and then we let it out. With anger, it can begin with something very small – “That’s not right! I need to defend myself.” Within a few minutes I am in a full blown fight that I will regret in an hour.

A glance at a suggestive image can lead rather quickly to pornography or adultery. A little shame can lead to lying – just like that! A little ambition can lead you to neglect your family for your work. A little pride can cause you to turn completely within yourself.

James tells us, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (1:14-15). It’s a road, my friends, and it leads to death.

Do not go on that road. Don’t even start down that path. Turn away and walk somewhere else.

The trouble is this: the road looks mighty nice at the beginning. At the beginning, when we are really hurt and our emotions are running deep, and there are just so many things we want and think we need and have to say – that road looks like the best one.

Whether it be birthed from anger, lust, hatred, pride, selfishness, or greed, that looks like such a great road, and everyone is walking on it. And sometimes we even have a just cause to push us down that road – some injustice that needs correcting.

But God tells us that those things are for Him to work out. Our job is just to believe and obey.

Except there's a problem. We've been down that road so often that we don't really know how to get off. We think we're turning down somewhere else, but it is just a different road that leads to the same place. We cannot will ourselves out of sin. We are trapped. We cannot stop sinning.

But God succeeds where we fail. Jesus came to earth in the form of a man and died on our behalf. In essence, He took us off the road to death and walked it in our place. At the same time, He sets us on the path of righteousness – His righteousness. By His Blood we are now able to walk it. With repentance and belief in Him, we can walk it.

And that Blood continues to pay our way. Even now we try to be righteous, and we cannot, but every time we stumble, His Blood pays for that too. We can walk to eternal life rather than death because He died for us.

Why we need a guide, and how to get a free one

“For they [the wicked] cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.”

-Proverbs 4:16

I sat down to write about this verse, and I had to take a little time just to meditate on it. Solomon is describing an evil that I never want to know. He is talking about someone who wishes harm on other people, someone who loses sleep when his enemy is safe. This is the sort of wickedness we sometimes see in dictators or unrepentant murderers, but I don't like thinking of this possibility for me.

And that's what Solomon wants us to consider. He has just finished telling his son not to start down the paths of the wicked, and this verse tells us why – because the wicked end up like this. This warning is meant for just normal people.

And then, as I considered these words, I began to remember all the times I did, in fact, act like this. Times when I could not go to sleep after a fight with my wife because I wanted so badly to say something cruel to her. Times when I wished a certain person at work would get fired because he was annoying. Times when I would plot and scheme to achieve my own ends, even if it hurt someone else (or sometimes *because* it would hurt someone else).

Like it or not, we are capable of the worst evils known to man. Most of us keep it in our heads most of the time. Some of it spills out into our words. For a few, these terrible evils come out in actions. But it's there for all of us. Our hearts are filled with murders, dark plots, and violence that would shock even the most hardened of criminals. Think what you will about how good of a person you are. The truth is, if the desires of our hearts came about, we would all be Hitlers.

When Jesus came to earth, He was so truthful in His assessments of others that He was murdered. The people gathered together and strong-armed the Roman representative in Jerusalem, a representative who did not want Jesus crucified, but bowed to the political pressure. They had Him killed. And I wonder if I would have been any different. If Jesus had pointed to me and revealed the darkness inside of me, would I have repented or called out for Him to be placed upon the Cross?

But Jesus didn't point out those sins to be a jerk or something. He was telling them something we all need to hear. You think you're okay, but you're not. You think you're a good person, but you're not. You're a sinner, and if you don't repent, you're lost. We need that, because we're not going to admit it on our own. We need Him to point it out, and we need Him to tell us how to make it better.

In that massive miscarriage of justice, Jesus did something wonderful. He died for us. There isn't any way to “make it up” to God for all the wrong we have done, said, and thought.

There isn't a way to make it better. But Jesus died in our place, so He could pay the price we owed in sin. If we repent and believe, we will find Grace.

In showing us our sin He has proven a good guide. But He goes beyond that, for He paid our way to eternal life by atoning for our sins, even when we don't deserve it. And He commands us follow Him. How do we do that? By His Grace, and by Grace alone. In mercy, He paid for our sins, something we could never pay alone, but that doesn't mean we can now earn God's love when we couldn't before. No, we walk by Grace, for His righteousness is imputed to us. It is only by that Grace that we can stand.

Where did lunch come from?

“For they [the wicked] eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.”

-Proverbs 4:17

In my line of work (insurance), I occasionally come across people who are trying to defraud my company of how ever much money we are willing to give them. Strangely, they don't seem like total jerks at all (well, most of them don't), but when the chance for some quick cash arises, it has an odd effect on them.

Some of these are really obvious. Others are not. For some, it just seems like they are acting a little more hurt than they really are. A groan here or there will do it, they think.

I came across two interpretations of this verse, the second of which we'll take a look at next time. In the first, the bread and wine mentioned are gained through unjust causes. Honestly, I was going to skip this interpretation completely. I immediately thought, “This isn't about me. I work an honest job, and I worked it honestly.” And I doubt many of my readers are thieves either, though I could be wrong. Maybe I shouldn't be quick to make assumptions on that one. Still, I really wanted to just pass to the second interpretation. But after a little soul-searching, I realized that I shouldn't skip it at all.

It's true that I do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. But that's not where I slip. I slip, like some of those hurt people I deal with, when an unexpected opportunity for gain or loss comes by. Do I exaggerate the truth when it fits my purposes? Do I hold back when I think it may get me into trouble? I remember several times when I withheld a bit of information when returning an item to a store or calling customer service about my bill. Can I really say I was that honest when it came to getting that money?

For some of us, our jobs may not be that honest. It's probably legal, and it probably doesn't involved violence, but that doesn't mean it's honest. Does our daily bread come from taking advantage of people? Does it come from misleading them at all? Does it come from clever sales pitches and pressure sales? Does it come from overly inflating prices?

I can think of a few times even recently where my daily bread didn't come out of hard work and love. It came from something else.

These little lies, these little misrepresentations, they come from a lack of faith. See, God told us He would provide our daily bread. It is He that gives us our jobs and income, and it is also He who knows where our next meal is coming from. So it's only when we doubt this provision that we resort to dishonesty to get more money. If we really believed that God would keep His promise, we would continue to work in honesty and uprightness.

That bread and that wine are temporary. Tomorrow you will need more. And so we have to begin all over again in dishonesty and, Heaven forbid, violence.

Jesus provides the water of life, which is eternal. He offered His own body and blood up as a sacrifice for us, which, remember, He first offered to His followers as bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Even when we, in our lack of faith, turn from God and to our own devices, Jesus died on our behalf so we could live. To the woman at the well He said, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

God not only is our provision in this life, but for eternity. We have sinned, each one of us, and none of us deserve life, but Jesus took the punishment for our sins upon Himself on the Cross. By His Grace we can have the life we did not deserve.

It is His death we remember every time we take Communion. Such righteousness does Jesus possess, and like His body and blood, it is righteousness He gives to us.

Where did lunch come from? (Part 2)

“For they [the wicked] eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.”

-Proverbs 4:17

We looked a little at this verse last time, but I wanted to suggest an alternative reading of it. And the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that Solomon had this in mind just as much as the interpretation we looked at in the last post.

There is something about people that we don't really want to admit. We will deny it every chance we get, but that doesn't mean it's not true. It is this: there is a darkness in our hearts that is always seeking its own gain. We are driven by our own desires. The results of that drive are not always bad. Greed could drive us to go to work every day. Now, the greed is bad, but going to work isn't.

Sometimes, our activities are not so good. Lust can drive us to pornography, premarital sex, or adultery. Pride will cause us to hold a grudge against someone over a very small slight. Ambition may drive us to sabotage a coworker. In essence, evil is like food for us – something we seek out in every day.

We are enslaved by our lusts, pride, selfishness, greed, ambition, and hatred. They control us. Even when we are doing so-called “good things,” we are often doing them for recognition or reward.

The Bible tells us this frankly: “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” (Titus 3:3).

You can try, by sheer force of will, to stop sinning. You won't be able to. The reason is very simple – you are a sinner, and sinners sin. It's something we sinners seek out like bread or wine. We feast upon unrighteousness in our hearts, even if we put on a noble face for the crowd.

But listen to how Paul continues this thought:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

-Titus 3:4-7

We may be sinners, but Jesus is not. We may seek unrighteousness like bread and wine, but He never did. He did not deserve death as we do, but in His death He took the punishment that should have been ours.

In repentance and belief, we are freed from the Law and given His righteousness. We don't need to earn the love of God, for Jesus has earned it for us. Therefore we can stand before the Father without fear of His wrath, for we have been washed clean by His Blood.

The light of full day

“But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.”

-Proverbs 4:18

I get excited when I look back on my life as a Christian. Frankly, for the first year after becoming a Christian, I wasn't terribly active in the church or growing spiritually very quickly. I got involved in a small group because I had some friends there, and that helped a lot. It forced me to at least think about Jesus during the week.

There was one girl who was going to that group because of her boyfriend, but she wasn't a Christian at first. But one day we learned that she had converted, and suddenly she had a lot of questions. That rather forced the rest of us to get more involved just so we could find answers for her. All of a sudden, we were all researching during the week – not for our own sakes, but for hers!

Soon after that, a great trial in my life drove me to God even more. I had nowhere else to go. I thank God constantly for that time, because I became more at peace in Him than ever before.

There have been other events since, forcing me to study one aspect of Christ or another, or forcing me to pray more. But now it's the study itself that drives me. Once I reached a certain point, studying the Bible simply became a joy.

That's what makes me excited about it. When I look back, I see the long path that got me here. As this verse says, the path of righteousness begins like the dawn, but the light grows. The Hebrew here tells us that the light is both clear and bright. It is pure.

It's not yet midday for me, I am happy to say. There is so much more left to learn, to see, to do. I am still so fallen and so flawed. I sin so much, but this road is working it out of me gradually. That day will only come in the resurrection, and it will just get brighter until then.

But here's the thing – this road of righteousness, it's not mine. I did not do this in my life. I am not able to make myself a good person. I cannot work my way close to God.

The path belongs to Jesus. In His perfect life, He forged this trail, and in His death, He lets us walk it. If left to myself, I would be lost in darkness. My mind and heart are filled with evil lust, greed, selfishness, pride, and hatred. I do not deserve life with God.

But Jesus died in my place, taking my sins upon Himself and paying the price I owed. That's why I can keep walking this path, no matter how often I slip. His mercy picks me up, and His Grace leads me farther into the light of day.

It is that Grace I want to proclaim, not my own accomplishment. The message of the Bible is not that we can earn our way to Heaven. The message of the Bible is that we absolutely cannot earn it. Our very natures have been taken over in sin, the thoughts of our hearts always on evil. The road we forge can only go to darkness.

Repent of that road and believe in the One who made a better way. By His Blood we can be forgiven. By His Grace we can have everlasting life, though we do not deserve it.

Stupid root!

“The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.”

-Proverbs 4:19

During the day at work, I like to listen to sermons. I can't do that all day, of course, but I will listen when I can. Over the years my lineup of pastors has changed quite a bit. When I started out, I liked certain pastors, but as I grew in understanding of the gospel, I discovered that these pastors were not always teaching the truth of Christ but some variation. I had liked them at first because they seemed knowledgeable and were very good speakers, but I discovered that their doctrine was pretty bad. So I would remove one and add another. In time, my list was refined to a group I very much enjoy and really learn from.

But lately I've intentionally listened to a bunch of different preachers who have it wrong in some way or another. Some think that God will let everyone into Heaven. Some harp on the Law, saying we have to “get right with God” or we'll burn in Hell.

I've been doing it to get an idea of what sort of teaching is out there, but it's been frustrating for me. I often get upset, because I can picture a well-intentioned congregation that is following this pastor, and the pastor is leading them down the wrong path!

Sometimes, it makes me want to jump up from my chair and yell out, “What are you doing? Don't you see what's going on here?” Which I don't do, of course, because I listen at work.

But then I read this verse, and I realized, no, they don't see what's happening at all. They're in the dark.

And I was there too. It wasn't too long ago that I was at a church that did not preach the Word, and I was listening to pastors who had it wrong. As God increased the light on my path (see verse 18), I began to actually see those things that were causing me to trip in the dark.

When you are in the dark and know nothing of the light, the smallest things can get you off track. The tiniest root can cause you to trip. You'll latch on to anyone who seems to know where he is going. You'll follow anyone who seems to know about the light.

But Jesus is our true light. He tells us this Himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). When this verse tells us that the wicked walk in darkness, it's talking about us. None of us have walked in righteousness. None of us can claim holiness. We have all sinned in thought, word, and deed. We have been lost in the darkness of pride, lust, and greed. We have followed after the desires of our hearts, and we have lost the way.

It is Jesus that provides the light. It is Jesus alone who walked in righteousness. It is Him alone who deserved life, and yet still He died. In that death He took the dark punishment

we deserved for our sins. If we have any hope to walk in the light of life, then it can only be by His light, because He is the only way to life.

There are religious teachers out there who are convinced that they know the way to life, but they are just as much in the dark as you are. The only way is Jesus. Have you realized that you will not make it by your own actions? Have you come to see the wickedness of your sins? Repent of them and believe in the Light. Keep walking in Grace until the end, when, as Proverbs 4:18 suggests, you are in the full day of His Glory and Majesty.

I've written this blog somewhere before . . .

“My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings.”

-Proverbs 4:20

It really feels like I've written about this verse a lot.

Those of you who have been reading this blog from the beginning know what I'm talking about. Solomon has stopped several times so far to urge his son to pay attention, to listen, to keep these words near to his heart.

Frankly, when I decided to write my reactions to Proverbs verse-by-verse, I really didn't expect to write about what is essentially the same verse over and over again.

And beyond that, you have to wonder about this kid, right? I mean, if Solomon is having to stop every twenty verses or so to say, “Listen to this,” you have to wonder if his son had heard a single word.

Or you have to wonder if we are listening, because he's directing this to us as well.

And that's the thing. We probably aren't listening at all.

Almost all of us have a Bible at home, and we know we should be reading it, but we usually don't. We all know we should go to church, but we usually don't. We all know that we should be focusing on God every day, but there's just so much else to do!

You have to wonder if we really know any of these things. If you really believe your very life depends on whether the words of this book are true or not, I imagine that you would be digging through it every chance you got. If you really believe that your pride, lust, selfishness, and hatred would kill you in the end, I imagine you'd be seeking a way out.

If you really believed in a God who would judge you in the end, I'm willing to bet you'd be concentrating on Him every single day.

Listen. Pay attention to my words. I can sum up the entire message of almost everything we do at Christian Pilgrimage pretty quickly – “You're a sinner, and you'll die without the Blood of Jesus. Repent and believe.” Our blogs, podcasts, and other works are all based on that, and it really doesn't get boring for us, because it's important. I don't want to do a series on your finances or sex life because you need to nail this one down first.

God is a just God, and He will judge us all for our actions, our words, and our thoughts. And you're not good enough to make it. You don't have a chance on your own. But He also loves us, and He loves us so much that He sent His Son to die on a Cross for us. See, sin cannot be forgiven without the spilling of blood, and His Blood is an atonement for us.

Repent of your sins. Fall on your knees and repent. Believe in Jesus. There is no other way.

Listen to my words – there is no other way. You cannot earn it, but Jesus can, and He earned it for us.

Forgetting these words

“Let them [my words] not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart.”

-Proverbs 4:21

It surprises me, going through Proverbs verse-by-verse, how much of this book is simply a plea for us to remember these words. Over and over again Solomon has asked his son (and us) to remember, to hold these words in our hearts.

In truth, we are very quick to forget what the Bible tells us. We are so fast to go about our way into the world without thinking about it at all.

It's almost like when you go to the store for one thing, and you leave with ten things, but had forgotten the very thing that you went to the store to get. We get so distracted with the lesser things of the day that we forget what God has told us was important.

Or we just don't care, which happens far too often. We figure that we know the important part, but the rest of it is just a little dull.

Whatever the reason, it is all idolatry. It is putting something else before God, the One who created you. It is having a god before Him.

You may be surprised that I use such stern language to describe something so mundane as failing to read and remember the Word of God. Most of the population is *not* reading the Word today, or even this week. Does this particular problem (for most wouldn't even consider it a sin) really require such harsh language?

Yes, it does. And don't misunderstand. I'm not advocating some sort of legalism here where you are required to read so many chapters every day. That's not the problem. The problem is putting other stuff before God. The problem is making Him the last priority of your day, behind work, family, the news, and surfing the internet. That's the issue here.

What else would you call it when someone ignores the instruction of the God who created the world and everything in it so he can watch a football game? Isn't that putting something before God? That is idolatry. What else would you call it when someone decides that his time is better spent in his own pursuits than in seeking after God?

If you believe that the Bible's claims are true, then how could anything be more important? How could anything come in the way of seeking God's perfect Word out at every opportunity? And if you don't believe its claims, then let your soul tremble, for you cannot say what lies beyond the grave, and what Judgment awaits you there. God is a jealous God, and He does not allow those who seek after their own lust, pride, anger, and hatred to darken His Heaven with their sin.

In truth, without this Word, we would have no assurance for the life to come. It's not that the book saves us, but it points us to the One who does.

Perhaps we could try to be good people, but that would not make up for all the evil in our thoughts, words, and actions. Perhaps we can just hope that there is no God, but that will be no

excuse when we face Him on the Day of Judgment. Perhaps we can say, “Oh, God is good, so He will let me into Heaven,” as though any good God could fail to punish sin.

But if the words of this Book are true, then we have hope. It is not a hope in ourselves, but a hope in the only Son of God, who though He was perfect took the punishment for our sins upon Himself when He died on the Cross. In Jesus we have hope, because he paid the price for us. If we repent and believe, we will be granted life. So says these Words.

Remember that, and keep it close to your heart. There is nothing more important.

It's not about what you do

“For they [my words] are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh.”

-Proverbs 4:22

There have been so many times lately when I've heard someone talk about the Gospel message (the Good News) as a set of behaviors or a way of life or something of the like. And that makes sense, right? This is the way the world works – it tells us that if your message has meaning, it will change something. If your business has value, then you'll start getting more money. If your philosophy has value, then people will find purpose and meaning in what you say. If your marriage has worth, people will see it in the way you and your spouse are together. All these things give you a better life, and that's how we know they're important. So the world says.

And so our sermons seem to follow after this formula. On the far right, preachers are preaching about obeying all of these moral laws. On the far left, they are preaching love to everyone. And they're right, to an extent. We should be loving people. We should be morally pure.

But that's not the Gospel message. The Gospel message is not about actions at all.

The world doesn't understand this, which is why everyone is looking really closely at the lives of the people delivering this Gospel to make sure they are living right. And if a pastor is caught in adultery, and so many begin to question the message.

So I love it when Solomon starts talking about how his *words* “are life to those who find them.” His words. See, Solomon was one of those guys who could have destroyed the faiths of thousands by his actions. He married hundreds of women who tempted him to false gods. And this is a guy who helped write the Bible?

But it's not the actions of Solomon that leads us to life. It's the words.

And don't get me wrong. These specific words do not have some sort of magical properties we can use as an incantation or pagan mantra. That's not it at all – it's the words that direct us to Christ.

By our actions, we're not going to get anywhere. We are so tainted by lust, pride, anger, selfishness, and hatred that we are spiritually dead, unworthy of life. We can't “try harder” and make it to heaven. In our sin, we have offended a just and perfect God, and His justice demands payment for those sins. By our actions, we are lost.

But the actions of Jesus can save us. He was without sin, perfect in every way, and yet He died, though he did not deserve it. He died upon that Cross to pay for our sins and provide for us His righteousness so we may be saved. It is through His righteousness that we can finally act as we should. His Spirit will guide us to love God and others as we should. But these things do not save us – only His Blood can.

You can probably find out plenty of information to discredit me by my actions. But my actions won't save anyone. The value of the message doesn't depend on the messenger who delivered it; it depends on what the message is. Listen to my words: Repent and believe in Jesus. That is the way to life.

It's about what you believe

"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

-Proverbs 4:23

Most of us are aware of how important our hearts are. Some of us even monitor it when exercising or at certain times throughout the day. They always take your pulse and blood pressure at the doctor's office, because the heart keeps the body going. Once the heart is gone, you're gone too.

It's rather appropriate that we use the word "heart" as a personification of our emotional center today. If your emotions are wounded enough, it often seems like you cannot go on at all. The ancient Hebrews used "heart" in a verse similar way, though they often identified your heart with your intellectual core rather than your emotional one. That's a good analogy too, because we have all seen those who have ruined their lives over a wrong belief.

When Solomon tells us to keep our hearts, he is telling us to guard closely what we believe. He is telling us to make our beliefs a foremost concern, worthy of considerable time and effort.

And what's really interesting is that he says that from these beliefs flow the springs of life.

God says he will judge the heart (Jeremiah 11:20). Frankly, if what is in my thoughts is exposed to God and He were to judge them, I can guarantee that there wouldn't be any talk of springs of life. There would be a lot of talk about punishment. I don't even deserve that life by my actions, and my thoughts are much worse.

And yours are too. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19). Yeah, this is pretty much the way of things. So what is this talk about springs of life?

It's because our one shot of life doesn't come from what we do, but on what we believe. Jesus Christ came to earth and lived a perfect life, even in the thoughts of His heart, and yet died a death He did not deserve. In that death He can pay for our sins, those things that should otherwise get us punishment.

This is not something we could earn, and so God asks us to repent and believe and in that we will have life.

Jesus comes in and cleans out the heart with His Blood. His Spirit indwells us then to guide us in righteousness and life. It's not by our power at all that we can have eternal life, but by His.

Once we are His, the Holy Spirit will indwell us, and the Spirit will convict us, guide us, and teach us. Guard your heart, because this life coming forth is from God Himself. He is trying to guide you in the ways of righteousness. He is refining us to reflect more of Him.

Guard your heart. Watch carefully what you believe. Hold all of it against the Word of God. Your life depends on it.

My enemy, my tongue

“Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.”

-Proverbs 4:24

I used to work at a place that thrived on gossip, and I really didn't know to be on my guard until one particular day. I was ill and about to leave early, when I saw something my boss had put up in the breakroom. I was looking at it and muttering something to myself and then moved on. There was one other person in there with me, but I didn't know she had heard me, and I hadn't really said anything to be worried about. It wasn't a criticism of anything.

Until I got an email from my boss, telling me that if I had something bad to say about her, that I needed to talk to her directly.

It took a while to get everything straightened out, but basically the other person in the room heard part of what I said, put a bad spin on it, and ran to my boss.

That's one time when I got a scolding I didn't deserve, but there have been a hundred times, probably this year alone, where I've deserved a scolding for something I said. I can't tell you how many times I've had to apologize to someone after saying something stupid – usually something I didn't even mean, but had said out of anger.

Solomon, in the previous verse, told us to guard our thoughts. Now he is telling us to guard our words, and he'll follow it up with a plea to guard our actions. That last part we all understand immediately. We want our lives to be judged by our actions, and so we hold ourselves back from doing something constantly. Every day I consider my actions and decide on the best course. I make moral decisions all the time.

But when we learn that we will be judged not only by our actions, but by our words and thoughts, we may not be so confident in where we stand.

While we may not slip up in our actions all that often, we are a bit more free with our tongues. Some people even count it as a virtue. “I just speak my mind,” they will say, usually because they know they are being jerks but don't want to change. We lie to get out of awkward situations, or we'll hold our tongues when we're in the minority. We gossip, brag, and slander.

James tells us that “the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell” (3:6). If you consider how much pain you have caused by your words, you'll understand what he means.

The tongue is not something we can harness alone. It is not something we can simply control. When Solomon tells us to avoid devious talk, he is not thinking that we're just such amazing people who can flip the switch and not be gossips anymore. No, if we're going to understand this properly, we're going to have to go back in his discourse to what started this – listening to his words (as in, the Word of God) for eternal life.

It is only by the Blood of Jesus that we can stand in righteousness. Without Him we are slaves to sin, but because of His death on the Cross we can be forgiven. It is He who intercedes for us, and by His Spirit guides us. And when we slip, it is by His Blood that we are forgiven again.

Let us, by all means, tame those tongues. We've caused too much hurt already. But you can't do it by looking within and drawing on your own strength. We do it by turning it over to Him.

Focus!

“Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.”

-Proverbs 4:25

I was a very athletic kid, and I played a lot of sports. (Those who know me now may be surprised to hear this.) There was a certain skill that you tried to learn in many of these sports, and that’s the fake. You pretend to go one way when you’re planning to go another. The defense falls for the fake, and all of a sudden you’re in the clear.

Except when you’re a kid, you’re not very good at it. You fake one way, but your eyes are glued to the spot you’ve planned to go. I had some good coaches who taught me to look at someone’s body and eyes rather than his hands and legs, and doing that, I became pretty good on defense.

The reason kids at that age are looking at where they are going is because they’re not coordinated enough to do the play without watching themselves do the play. If they look one way and dribble another, they’ll end up kicking the ball out of bounds.

There’s a lesson in that, and one I still have trouble learning. I used to try to do my homework or write while watching television. Guess what? I watched a lot of television and didn’t get much work done. More recently, I’ve tried to start praying on my way to work. It was a fine idea, but the road would distract me from my prayers, and I would end up being hopelessly lost in what I was saying. Then I tried to start praying in the shower, and I would get lost there too. Maybe it’s because I’m getting older, but I find that I have to park myself to really pray.

Some people have the ability to do otherwise. Personally, I don’t think it matters all that much where you pray. If you have a good conversation with God from the shower, I’m all for it.

My point is merely this – it is so easy to get off on a rabbit trail when you aren’t looking at where you’re going. We, as humans, have this amazing ability to be distracted by any shiny object. This is true in our spiritual life as well. We can be distracted from God by a lewd advertisement, a party, an argument, a project at work, a trip, or anything.

We can even get distracted by religion. It’s true. Some churches do this by becoming legalist. They focus on following the Law perfectly without even mentioning the work of Jesus. Others go the other way, focusing on our social efforts and how we love one another. Actually, this is still legalism, because you’re trusting your spirituality and your works.

There’s only one way to walk this trail, and that is by the Blood of Jesus. Whether you have been pulled off by sex and greed, or simply pulled off by a busy day, it is the righteousness of Jesus that can put you back where you need to be. If you’re pulled off by reliance on moral works or following the rules, it is still His work that can provide your way.

Christianity is not a religion where you earn your way anywhere. You can’t. We have already fallen short of the glory of God. Whether we have fallen by moral failures or by trying to be as moral as possible and losing sight of God in the process, we are unworthy of Him. But

Jesus has succeeded where we have failed, and in His death He has taken the punishment for our sins. Though we have not deserved eternal life, He has given us a way to Heaven.

That path is not laid by our works, but by His. It is not walked by focusing on ourselves, but on Him. The moment this walk becomes about something other than Jesus, we have stepped off the trail.

But by His Blood, we will survive even that.

What's your doctrine like?

"Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure."

-Proverbs 4:26

This verse took me a little by surprise. I mean, as many times as our Christian life has been described as a walk or a journey, I don't know that I've ever had a pastor tell me to "ponder the path."

Isn't it usually the other way around? People will tell you it's not about the destination, but about the journey. Or they will tell you to be passive in this walk, just moving by the Spirit. Or they will tell you to not be so single-minded about the path at all, but embrace other paths that people may travel.

Not so here. Solomon tells us to concentrate on where we're walking.

Now, I'm a doctrine geek, but people look at me funny when I start talking theology. It's not in the vocabulary of many Christians. Their theology goes only as deep as knowing John 3:16 and some of the Ten Commandments. A few will have graduated to knowing some praise and worship songs.

You mention a word like propitiation (a word that is in the Bible), and you'll get blank stares.

But this path matters. The way we walk matters. Doctrine is not a bad word (check out Hebrews 6:1) – it simply means what we believe about God. We all have a doctrine. The question is only this – where do you get that doctrine? Do you get it from pop culture, a new book, a praise song? Or do you get it from the Bible with the interpretive help of the Spirit?

Some will tell you that what you do is more important than what you believe. That sounds good, but it doesn't work that way. We should do good works, yes, and that is a form of worship, but our worship must be formed out of a proper view of God. John 15 talks about the fruit we bear when in Christ, but it is in Christ where we bear real fruit. God has given us that glimmer of Himself in His Word. He has taught us these creeds so that He may be honored in our worship and faith.

And before we think this creedal path is some sort of legalistic formula we must follow, we should be reminded that Jesus Himself is our way, truth, and life. Our path is forged by His righteousness, by His Blood. We should concentrate on our path, if for no other reason than to concentrate on Jesus. Any other thought, any other focus, any other step is one away from God, no matter how good and nice it may seem.

It is not a path you can walk alone, but only in Christ may we stand. We have no righteousness in us, but in His death He can impute His righteousness to us. By His Spirit He can lead us. And in the end, when we stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment, we can stand by His sacrifice on the Cross.

Here is the true danger of not paying attention to doctrine – we will not know whether we are standing by the good idea of another man, or by Jesus. No matter how wonderful it seems, the former is the wrong path. And no matter how hard it gets, the latter leads to life.

So many places to swerve

“Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”

-Proverbs 4:27

In the verse previous to this one, we mainly spoke about doctrine, and how doctrine is something that is really critical in this Christian walk of ours. Coming right after that exhortation, this verse reiterates – pay attention and keep to the path. Anything else is wrong.

We could very easily here talk about the rules God expects us to follow, the complete righteousness we are supposed to achieve. We could talk about how we’ve all messed up and turned away from this holy path.

And we have. This is all true. We have not lived up to God’s perfect standard for us. We have all sinned in lust, pride, hatred, and greed. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.

In this way, we have all jumped right off the path to eternal life and run away from it as quickly as possible.

Or we could talk about how we need to love our neighbors, and how we’re not doing enough in the community. How we need to give more time and money and help people.

Which is true as well. Christians often close themselves off too much. We could all be doing more in the community to love people and help those in need.

But I don’t want to talk about those things, because both will run you right off this path if taken alone.

See, you can leave the path to the right or the left. One way is total sin and debauchery. We all know that part. The other way to leave it is total legalism.

If your salvation is based on your doing everything right, you aren’t going to be good enough. In the same way, if your salvation is based on loving people enough and a social gospel, you’re not going to love them enough. You won’t make it.

The truth of the narrow way is Jesus. Paul tells the Galatian church, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one” (Galatians 1:6-7). The Galatians were doing the same thing we do today – adding something to the Cross.

But the Gospel is simple. By our sins we have earned death. We are guilty, and we are unworthy to be in the presence of God. It is a debt we can never fully pay, but in love Jesus paid it for us. In His death, He took on our sin and paid the price for them so we could be reconciled with God.

That is the doctrine to which we cling, for it is our only way to life. It’s not that plus more love, or that plus being really moral. It’s not that plus anything, because Grace is not something we can earn.

Do not turn away from that, for Jesus is the way to life.