

Chasing Wisdom: Incentives for Wisdom

Proverbs 3:1-12

I remember watching an NFL football game a few years ago and it was the last game of the season and the game was almost done, and it was a blow out. I remember watching this game because the team that was ahead kept trying to pass the ball to one player. Why? Apparently, this player had incentives written into his contract that if he made a certain number of catches during the season he would get a bonus of \$500k. And at that point in the season, he was one catch away. Eventually they got him his catch and his money. I think that was the first time I had really heard about incentives being common practice in pro sports but apparently, it is.

You can try to motivate action from a person by warning people of negative consequences if they fail to perform or by giving positive incentives. I think most people would rather have positive incentives, especially if it involves half a million dollars.

We are in the middle of a series on Proverbs 1-9 and this entire section of the book is about motivation. The author is attempting to inspire us to want wisdom and pursue wisdom. He does this using both warnings and incentives and the chapter we are going to look at today gives us positive incentives. Why should you pursue wisdom? The benefits are astounding. Let me just remind you that wisdom is a skill and know how to live well because you fear God and live in relationship with Him. Wisdom goes with the grain of creation. In other words, living in wisdom is living how humans were designed to live and so that brings some natural benefits with it. Let me show you how this works in this section. Each odd numbered verse offers a condition, and each even numbered verse offers an outcome of possessing that condition. Look at verses 1-2 and verses 7-8 for examples. All twelve verses are set up like this.

But keep in mind as we start to work through this passage that with these benefits, this isn't promising a pain-free and perfect life. This isn't the health and

wealth gospel, and we'll see this clearly as we get to the end of this section. Here's what we will find in Proverbs 3:1-12. **3 Incentives to Help us Want Wisdom.**

1. Guard Wisdom for Harmony (vv. 1-4)

Notice the conditions as they are set out in verses 1 and 3. I've tried to summarize them all with this word guard. Solomon tells his son and us, don't forget but keep in verse 1. If you go back and read the book of Deuteronomy you will find Moses exhorting the Israelites repeatedly to remember. We are forgetful people and I am finding that it's easier to forget as I grow older. I used to be able to somewhat decently manage my to-do items and calendar in my head, but that's impossible now. So what do I do? I write things down in a place where I know I will be reminded of them. Look at verse 3.

Where does Solomon want us to write down the teaching and keep it? In our hearts. We tend to think of the heart as the place we experience emotions but the emphasis is a little different for ancient people. In the Bible the heart includes emotions but it is much more than that. Think of it as your control center. IT includes your thinking, your will, your desires, longings, emotions, attention, and reason. It's everything that happens inside of you. God's Word and God's wisdom must become a part of who you are.

You can see this joining of our hearts with God's Word in verse 3. Steadfast love and faithfulness are two qualities that God uses to define who He is. Exodus 34:6. For wisdom to grow in us our hearts must be attentive to God and who He is. One author put this beautifully: *The sage is saying to us, "You know that's who God is. He told you so in the Bible. Okay, let who God is change you." So much American religion is not about who God is. So much American religion makes us the immovable ones, the center around which God orbits. American religion is not about us changing and repenting and adjusting to who God is. It is about God making us feel better about ourselves without our having to change. But the truth is, God is who he is, so that we can become more like him.* – Ray Ortlund

And as we behold God in His character and beauty, we change to become more loving and faithful and we grow in wisdom. Notice the outcomes of this growth in

verses 2 and 4. The word peace in verse 2 is the word shalom. Shalom describes the ideal situation where God, humans, and all of creation live in harmony. Wisdom won't bring that fully into the present, but you can begin to taste it and experience it now in two vital areas. Look at verse 4.

Favor is attractiveness and success is reputation. As you grow in wisdom and learn to navigate life according to God's design and Word you will be able to live in harmony with others better. As you can see, the benefits to wisdom are significant. Let's move to our second incentive.

2. Depend on God for Wholeness (vv. 5-10)

These are some of the most well-known verses in Proverbs and it's easy to see why. We've got the same pattern of conditions in the odd numbered verses and outcome or incentive in the even numbered verses. But notice the major contrast these verses are drawing our attention to. You can either trust or depend on or lean on the Lord, or you can trust or depend on or lean on your own wisdom and understanding.

Notice in verse 5 it says not to lean on your own understanding. The picture here is of someone leaning on a table or counter or even a crutch for support. Picture someone who has had an injury and who needs crutches to be able to move around. They lean on those crutches with all of their weight. They depend on them to hold them up because they know they don't have the strength to stay upright on their own. To lean on your own understanding in verse 5 is the same thing as being wise in your own eyes in verse 7.

Throughout Proverbs the foolish person thinks quite highly of his or her own ability, insight, and wisdom. Proverbs 26:12. But the opposite of trusting in your own insight is to trust in the Lord with all your heart. And He can be trusted fully and this is the response that the Gospel calls us to.

Here's the good news of the Gospel. We can't trust ourselves because we are broken sinners. Our desires, reason, and actions have been bent and twisted by sin and we are all effected by this. We can't trust ourselves to make sense of the world and we can't do anything to rescue ourselves from this brokenness. But

Jesus Christ became a human being to rescue human beings from our sin, brokenness and pride. He humbled himself, died on the cross in our place, and rose from the dead in victory over sin. We are forgiven from our pride and sin by trusting in Him as verse 5 calls us to do and as the NT calls us to do. Ephesians 2:8-9.

And now we grow in character and wisdom as we continue to trust Him in every area of life. Look at verse 6. This means to know Him in every step we take. To understand that Christ shapes all I do and I want him involved in everything I do, including our material possessions. Look at verse 8.

We don't talk a ton about money or material possessions here because I wait for these things to come up in the passages of Scripture we are studying, but it couldn't be clearer here. To honor is to make God look bigger or to draw attention to His name. What does your use of the material things God has given you indicate about the worth of God?

Honoring God with your wealth could include giving to church, giving to the poor, using your resources to bless someone in need, giving to missions, or any number of other possibilities. The NT doesn't set a certain percentage that you must give to your local church. It just says to give joyfully understanding that God will bless you as you give.

Notice the even numbered verses now and how they all point to wholeness and well-being for the one who pursues wisdom by trusting the Lord. Verses 6, 8, 10. Now, let's make sure we understand what is going on here. At first glance this sure seems to be saying that if you just trust God and give some money to the church you will be healthy, wealthy and successful. Are those prosperity gospel preachers correct? Should you turn on late night TV and shell out your money to the guys promising mega returns if you give to his "ministry"? Is there no place for difficulty and suffering in trusting God and pursuing wisdom?

Keep in mind that the book of Proverbs rightly portrays wisdom as going with the grain of creation. If you work hard and in a wise way, that will generally lead to financial stability and success. If you deal with people with love and faithfulness

that will most likely endear you to them and build good relationships. When you honor God with your wealth there's often blessing that follows so that you can invest more in His kingdom. And yet, we still live in a broken world, and the Bible nowhere promises that our lives will be pain free or perfectly sublime. The incentives here are good and to be pursued, and yet, life is complicated by suffering and sin. In fact, learning to have the proper perspective of suffering and difficulty are a major part of growing in wisdom. This leads to our last incentive.

3. Accept Difficulty as Proof of Love (vv. 11-12)

Look at verses 11-12. Life never goes quite like we want it to, does it? And when something unsettling or difficult crosses our paths we are very quick to believe that God is frustrated with us or made at us. We are quick to doubt His care and good intentions to us. But remember what we saw about God earlier. He is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. He is a good father who wants good things for His children and yet, those good things can often move us away from Him. He wants the best things for us and so He will use suffering in our lives to draw us to Him and to shape and form our character to be like Him.

None of that indicates that He is mad at us or frustrated with us. Quite the opposite. *When you are suffering, here is what you must remember: Your sufferings are not evidence against you, nor are they evidence against God. It is the opposite. Your sufferings are proof that God your Father cherishes you.* – Ray Ortlund

This is so hard in the moment, isn't it? When it's hard, we want to get out from under the difficulty. We want things to go smoothly and easily. We want straight paths, but they often aren't straight and this is because God loves us too much to keep us from challenges.

I know some of you have suffered mightily, even recently. C.S. Lewis described the relationship between God and suffering as a master artist and his work. If the artist is doing a quick and simple sketch for a child, he will not put much thought into corrections, erasing, and rubbing out portions of the sketch. But if he's working on a masterpiece, he will be attentive to every detail and will constantly

be reworking, erasing, and scratching out portions of the work. Why? Because he loves this masterpiece so much that he won't treat it casually and the same is true for you. Every difficulty and correction is proof of God's sovereign love for you and His desire to see you grow in wisdom and Christlikeness. Trust the master artist's work as proof of His love.

I'll leave you this morning with this poem by William Cowper who suffered terribly from depression and mental illness throughout his life.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 10/25/26

- Describe a time in your life when a positive incentive motivated you to action?
- The sermon gave a definition of wisdom in Proverbs. What was it, and what makes it different from intelligence or good judgment?
- The sermon pointed out that Proverbs 3:1-12 alternates between conditions and outcomes, every odd verse is a condition, every even verse is an outcome. What does that structure tell us about how the author views wisdom?
- Verse 3 says to write steadfast love and faithfulness on the tablet of your heart. What does that look like for you practically?
- The sermon quoted Ray Ortlund, “So much American religion makes us the immovable ones, the center around which God orbits.” What are the results of this?
- Describe an area where you are tempted to make God orbit around you in your own life?
- What are some ways that wisdom might bring favor with people? (v. 4)
- Give an example of a time when you ended up leaning on your own understanding?

- How would you explain from this passage why the health and wealth gospel gets Proverbs wrong?
- Have you or someone you love been impacted by this kind of teaching?
- Explain what this quote means: “Your sufferings are not evidence against you, nor are they evidence against God.” How can this help you when you are going through difficulty?
- Can you describe a situation of suffering in your life that you now can clearly see the love of God expressed in?
- What about this situation made it difficult to see the love of God in the moment?