

WISE PLANNING

PROVERBS 3:5-6

Each of us needs guidance and direction at times. Some of us need all the help we can get! Perhaps you heard about the summer visitor to Southport Island off the coast of Maine who asked a local farmer how to get off the island so he could get back to Boothbay Harbor. The farmer began to explain how to find the road back to the bridge. The tourist said, "But I didn't cross any bridge to get here." The farmer just shook his head wearily at that statement and replied, "Well, now, if you didn't cross any bridge, then you ain't here in the first place, so you got nothing to worry about." It's easy to lose your direction in life. One remedy is to invite the Lord to help you to become a wise planner.

Last week I started a messages series that's considering some of the dominant themes found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. How to live wisely and well! Proverbs teaches that if you want to be successful in life, you need to master the ability to plan wisely. It's good, godly and God-honoring to be as thoughtful as possible when it comes to your family, your career, your finances, your spiritual development and your service for the Lord. God wants you to be intentional and wise about life – how you live it and where you're going in it. No, it's true that you don't have to love God or want to follow Jesus to realize the importance of making wise decisions about your life. But this is an even more important commitment for someone who does love God and who does want to make his or her life count for the Lord Jesus. You have even more reason for wanting God's leading as you make your plans. You sincerely want to know what to do in life, when to do it and whether it honors the Lord.

Today, we're going to look at several statements about wise planning in Proverbs, but you can't find a better overall statement on this theme than our text. The last line is a promise about guidance and direction in life: "... and He (that's God) will make your paths straight." That promise is preceded by three conditions and that's what I want to consider with you this morning. First of all, if you're going to plan your life wisely and experience God's guidance, there must be...

THE CONDITION OF TRUST

There it is in v. 5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart...." Do you know what the future holds for you? Of course not. Then, in what or whom do you trust? Most people – if you analyze their words and actions – end up trusting in themselves basically – their own intelligence, their own ability to work hard, their educational qualifications, their financial assets or their exercise and nutrition plan. Here's one definition of a real Christian to consider: a person who's given up trusting in himself or herself. A Christian has faced the fact that you can't put trust in yourself to get you into heaven nor can you put trust in yourself for living out your life today or tomorrow either. Everyone trusts in something or someone in life. A follower of Jesus trusts in Jesus alone ultimately.

Trusting in the Lord means recognizing, first of all, the sovereignty of God. That's a big word that simply means God's will is never ultimately frustrated or set aside. It's always and ultimately fulfilled. God always has the last word. Of course, God's sovereignty doesn't prevent you from making sinful choices or dumb decisions. But neither your sin nor your foolishness frustrates God in any final way. He's simply too big and powerful! Proverbs is full of this truth. "We plan the way we want to live, but only GOD makes us able to live it.... We humans keep brainstorming options and plans, but GOD's purpose prevails." (Proverbs 16:9, 19:21 MSG)

There's everything right and appropriate about planning your life as wisely as you can. Those verses are not suggesting that you should live a kind of aimless, perpetually spontaneous, "take it as it comes" kind of life because God is sovereign and in control. The ability to plan and execute that plan is legitimate, necessary and God-honoring. It's one way you reflect the fact that you've been created in God's image. God is the ultimate planner. As His creation, you've been given the ability to plan. But there's one major difference. God's plans are never ultimately frustrated, but your planning often is frustrated. Why is that? We already mentioned the fact of sinful or foolish decisions. Added to that is the simple fact that you are ignorant of many things. And – oh, by the way, - there are many things you have no control over.

Your plans – good or bad – never ultimately frustrate God's plans. Is this cause for discouragement? Shouldn't be! It means God is bigger than your mistakes. It means God is bigger than your ignorance. God is limitless where you are limited. You and I need to get a fresh understanding of the immense sovereignty of our gracious, loving God! You can – and must – trust Him with all of your heart because He alone can bring good even out of your bad decisions. The Bible is full of people – Jacob, Moses, David, Peter and Paul (just to name a few!) – who made sinful choices, bad decisions and ignorant plans. But, ultimately, nothing frustrated what God wanted to do in and through those people for His glory. One of my favorite Bible verses says, "God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the day that Christ Jesus returns." (Philippians 1:6 CEV) When God starts something, He finishes it. When God makes a plan, He brings it to completion. And that's exactly why you can and must trust Him with all of your heart.

Trusting in the Lord also recognizes the comprehensiveness of trusting Him. This must become total trust involving every conceivable area of life for both time and eternity. Proverbs says, "Put GOD in charge of your work, then what you've planned will take place." (Proverbs 16:3 MSG) That phrase "put God in charge" can be literally translated "to roll over upon." I like that image! To trust the Lord with all of your heart means you can roll over upon Him all your plans and decisions in life. When you do that sincerely, faithfully and with a clear conscience, you can expect reasonable success for those plans. Now, let's be

careful. God isn't offering some kind of absolute promise here about every single plan you might make in life. Instead, this is a principle for living life wisely. The fact is that sometimes even great plans – plans that you pray over, plans that seem to honor God, plans that you get godly advice for – can fail for reasons you don't understand. But, more often than not, when you truly put God in charge of your life including your plans and decisions, you'll experience success.

It's easy to go to the Bible in search of a technique: how to pray, how to exercise faith, how to be a good parent, how to be a good spouse or how to discover God's will. The Bible stresses relationship over technique. As a result, you won't find a lot in the Bible on how to plan, but you will find a lot about how to love God. In the Old Testament book of Psalms, you see the primary author, David, exalting God, praising God and thanking God. But you also hear Him doubt God, express disappointment with God and even get angry with God. It was about relationship not technique. Regardless of what happened, God was never far from David's thoughts or plans. David intentionally involved God in every major and minor event in his life. That's what putting God in charge means – relationship not technique. Out of that love relationship with God flows His guidance, His leading and His direction as you make plans in your every day life.

It reminds me of a grandfather who took his little granddaughter for a walk around her new neighborhood. They'd just moved in and were getting acquainted with the streets. They walked for about fifteen minutes when the grandfather said, "About how far do you think we're from your new home?" The granddaughter said she didn't know. "Well, what direction do you think we should take to get back?" he asked. "I don't know," said the girl. "Sounds like we're lost," said the grandfather. The little girl smiled and said, "I'm not lost, Grandpa; I'm with you." My friend, if you truly put God in charge of your life, you will never be truly lost. Notice with me just now a second condition.

THE CONDITION OF HUMILITY

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." – what does the second phrase say? – "... and lean not on your own understanding..." That emphasizes the fact that you would be wise to recognize your limitations. That's an aspect of humility, is it not? Proverbs says, "Don't brashly announce what you're going to do tomorrow; you don't know the first thing about tomorrow." (Proverbs 27:1 MSG) Isn't that the truth? You don't even know for sure what the rest of this day will be like! Does that mean you shouldn't make plans – simply because you have no idea what tomorrow will be like? No. What's being rejected here is a kind of arrogant, prideful cockiness about what you're going to do, what you're going to achieve or what you're going to accomplish. You can find just the right attitude illustrated in the Bible itself, "Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If

the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.’ Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil.” (James 4:13-16 NLT)

Do you worry about the future? I daresay anxiety about tomorrow is a bigger issue for most of us than overconfidence about tomorrow. Did you know that worry is a sin? Essentially it’s a failure to trust God. Those passages we just looked at aren’t meant to discourage you from planning, but simply to remind you that tomorrow belongs completely to God. When you face that fact, you are actually released to plan more wisely because it’s done with an eye and a heart to do God’s will. When you plan in humility, you recognize the fact that you’re limited but that God is limitless and He controls tomorrow. You can rest in the knowledge that even when your life takes unplanned and unwanted detours, God is there working out His perfect plan and purpose in your life nonetheless.

The year was 1920. The scene was the examining board for selecting missionaries. Standing before the board was a young man named Oswald Smith. One dream dominated his heart. More than anything else he wanted to be a foreign missionary. Over and over again he had prayed, “Lord, I want to be a missionary for You. Open a door of service for me.” Now, at last, it seemed his prayer would be answered. But that missionary board turned Oswald Smith down for missionary service. He didn’t meet their qualifications. Oswald Smith had made his plans – plans that honored God in every way – but life now presented him with an unplanned, unwanted detour. What would he do? As he prayed and thought, God planted another idea in Oswald Smith’s heart. If he couldn’t go as a missionary, he would build a church which could send out missionaries. And that’s what he did. Smith went on to pastor The People’s Church in Toronto, Canada, which sent out more missionaries than any other church of its day and time. Oswald Smith brought God into his frustrated plans and God turned that detour into a new, wonderful highway of service to Him!

If you’re humble, you recognize your limitations. You also recognize your need for counsel from godly people. Have you ever known a person who constantly says, “God told me to do this. The Lord told me to do that”? People like that make me a little nervous simply because they seem to lack humility. Nor do they seem open to recognizing God’s desire to speak into our lives through the counsel of godly people. Humility demands the willingness to receive wise advice. Proverbs says, “Refuse good advice and watch your plans fail; take good counsel and watch them succeed.” (Proverbs 15:22 MSG) Humility demands a healthy skepticism as to the accuracy of your own perceptions. How important it is in living wisely and well to have people you can go to when you’re faced with a big decision - people who know you well, who love you and who want the best for you! If you want to plan wisely in life, you need to trust God and you need to be humble. Here’s a third and final condition.

THE CONDITION OF OBEDIENCE

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...” – and here’s the next phrase – “...in all your ways acknowledge Him....” To acknowledge God is to obey God. It’s true that even your own sin can’t frustrate God’s will for your life ultimately, but it can most certainly frustrate, complicate and burden your life more than necessary. When you obey God, you offer Him a moral lifestyle. You live life His way. You can’t expect to receive God’s wisdom and direction in life if you’re intentionally living in ways that are contrary to His will. That’s a central truth in the book of Proverbs. “If you do the right thing, honesty will be your guide. But if you are crooked, you will be trapped by your own dishonesty.... Those who follow the right path fear the LORD; those who take the wrong path despise him.” (Proverbs 11:3 CEV, 14:2 NLT)

You don’t ever have to wonder if it’s OK with God just this once to tell a lie, or steal, or commit adultery, or harbor resentment, or gossip or despise a poor person. When you tolerate sin in your life – you find ways to excuse it and rationalize it rather than to confess it and turn away from it – something becomes very obvious to God. You don’t really want His guidance in your life. Yes, you might very well want God to do something for you, but You don’t really want Him to give you direction. God concludes, “If he or she won’t do what I’ve said in My Word clearly and plainly, then he or she puts no value on any direction I might give his or her life.”

Don’t bother asking God to bless your plans in life if you’re unwilling to obey the clear teaching of His Word in how you conduct your everyday life. If there’s something immoral or sinful in your life, confess it and get rid of it before you ask God to bless you or do something for you. That word “path” or “walk” in Proverbs 14:2 could just as correctly be translated “lifestyle.” “Those who follow the right lifestyle fear the LORD; those who take the wrong lifestyle despise him.” When your lifestyle is moral and follows what the Bible clearly teaches, you indicate a proper respect for the Lord. But when you call good what God calls bad, you only reveal how little you really value the Lord. Don’t ask God for His blessing on your plans when you thumb your nose at His rules.

When you obey the Lord, you offer Him a diligent lifestyle. Proverbs says, “The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.” (Proverbs 21:5 NIV) You’re called there both to plan your life and to do it diligently. God is all for planning! The meaning of the word “diligent” there means “to cut, to sharpen”- like when you cut with a blade or sharpen a knife. Diligence is mental and spiritual sharpness. A diligent planner works hard and prepares well by putting together a step by step process and then implementing that strategy. On the other hand, a hasty person just settles for a quick answer that’s sloppily planned and half-heartedly carried. The result is eventual failure.

You need to apply mental and spiritual sharpness – diligence – to making decisions and plans in every area of your life – your family, your business, your financial affairs and, most importantly, your growing relationship with God. You

pray. You read the Bible for guidance. You talk with friends who love God and love you. You wait upon God. All that demands time, effort, discipline and patience. That's hard work. You can't be lazy and diligent at the same time. A diligent person makes careful decisions while a hasty person makes casual decisions about life. Living diligently is part and parcel of obeying the Lord. When you do that, you can expect Him "to make your paths straight."

That's the final phrase in our text: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV) What's a "straight" path? It's not necessarily an easy one. It's simply a God-led life. I think of how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness all the way to the Promised Land. Spiritually, it was a straight path - a God-led life - but not an easy one. I think of Jesus' life and ministry. He knew the Holy Spirit's moment by moment guidance for every area of His life, but that path included persecution, betrayal and – finally – a cross. It was a straight path – a God-led life in every way – but it wasn't an easy path. Keep that in mind as you plan your life and live out your plan. Keep the conditions. Trust God. Be humble. Obey God. Your path will be straight, but it won't be easy. If you stay on it, however, God will lead you safely home.

During World War 2, an American reconnaissance team was scouting German troop positions. Leaving early one winter morning, they had to cross an American mine field along the way. The mines had been secretly and clearly marked for them. Very cautiously, but successfully, they made their ways around the explosives. Just on the other side of the field, the team entered some woods and secretly approached the German positions. They didn't get far before German machine guns opened up on them and pinned them to the ground. For hours they just lay there unable to advance or retreat. Snow began to fall and before long they found themselves in a blizzard. The good news was that the snow made it possible to risk a retreat which they accomplished successfully. The bad news was that the same snow completely covered up all the secret markings in the mine field they'd crossed that morning.

The platoon leader sensed that a German offensive was headed in their direction. He called his men together and told them he was going to lead them single file across the mine field. He ordered them to walk 30 yards behind each other and – most important of all – to place their feet exactly in the boot imprints of the soldier ahead of them. Slowly that group of men made their way across the mine field. Only one set of boot prints was left in the snow. Miraculously, the leader had guessed the right path and the entire platoon made it back safely. The next day it was discovered that the entire group had just barely stepped over a mine miraculously avoiding its explosive, deadly power. They followed their leader and made it safely home. Even with great planning, walking through life is sometimes a little like walking through a mine field. But, take courage, my friend. The footprints of Jesus are right before you. If you follow in His footsteps, you'll arrive safely home.