

TRUST: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL LIVING

PROVERBS 3:1-10

Defining success can be a tricky thing. A poll taken a few years ago revealed that only 25% of adults say a lot of money signifies success and accomplishment. What do most people associate with success and accomplishment? The answers were interesting and open to interpretation. 83%: satisfied with your life; 80%: in control of your life; 78%: a good marriage; 69%: really good at your job; 66%: can afford what's important; 63%: have successful children. How do you define success? A business with constantly improving profits? A team that wins the big games and has a winning record? A marriage that is long, happy and mutually enriching? A person who weathers life's difficulties and emerges healthy and whole?

If you're a Christian, you're interested in being successful, too, although you probably define it differently. You want to discover how being a follower of Jesus impacts your everyday life. You want that relationship to influence and affect your everyday life powerfully and positively. You want it to work! Most Christians are asking versions of these two questions in one way or another all the time: 1) How can I know God's will for my life? 2) How can I be a success for God, others and myself? Over the next three Sundays I want to think with you about the single greatest attitude you need to have to live a successful life as a follower of Jesus. That attitude is trust. It's a matter of trust. Trust is the key to living successfully as a Christian person. Trust is the most important factor in knowing God and His will for your life on a continual basis. Trust is the most important factor in helping to grow His Kingdom and yourself as His steward.

You might call the book of Proverbs "God's Success Manual." It's a collection of wise, divinely-inspired truths about how to live a successful life from God's perspective which is the only one that matters. One of the key passages in Proverbs is the one I want us to consider today. I want to read it and then observe with you three important facts about it.

Three Observations About Proverbs 3:1-10

Now, here's the first observation. A relationship with God is comprehensive not occasional. By comprehensive, I mean that it touches every conceivable area of your life and demands an all-encompassing, all-inclusive response on your part. By occasional, I mean just once and awhile, here or there or casually. That truth is obvious by the words used in these verses. V. 1 says you are to keep God's commands in your heart. That word "heart" refers to the deepest part of you as a person. V. 3 says never let love or faithfulness leave you. "Never" is not occasional; it's comprehensive. V. 5 says that you are to trust the Lord with all your heart. Again, v. 5 says that you are to acknowledge God in all your ways. "All" is not occasional; it's comprehensive. V. 9 says you are to give to God the "firstfruits" of your wealth. That means the first and the best not the leftovers. Not whatever you feel like giving whenever you feel like giving it! "Firstfruits" is a

comprehensive idea not an occasional one. A relationship with God is comprehensive – all of you all of the time – not occasional – some of you some of the time.

Here's a second observation. God's commands precede God's promises. In v. 1, God commands you not to forget His teaching and to keep all of His commands. Then in v. 2 you find a promise – a long and prosperous life. In v. 3, God commands you to act in love and faithfulness always. Then in v. 4, you find a promise – a successful life in the eyes of God and others. In v. 5, God commands you to trust in Him rather than in yourself and to acknowledge His guidance in your life at all times. Here comes the promise in v. 6: God will then make straight the direction of your life. Once again in v. 7 you find a series of commands: don't trust in your own wisdom, fear the Lord and stay away from evil. It's followed by a promise in v. 8: physical and emotional health. Finally, in v. 9 you find yet another command: honor the Lord with your wealth. And it's followed by yet another promise in v. 10: financial blessing.

In every case, God's commands precede God's promises. If you said to God, "Lord, I want to live a long life," God would respond, "First of all, obey Me with all your heart." If you said to God, "Lord, I want to have a successful life," God would respond, "First of all, love Me and be faithful to Me." If you said to God, "Lord, I want to have a clear sense of direction and purpose to my life," God would respond, "First of all, trust Me with all of your heart, don't trust in yourself and acknowledge Me in everything." If you said to God, "Lord, I need financial blessing in 2010," God would respond, "First of all, honor Me with your money."

That's leads to a third observation. In every case, God's blessings are conditional on your obedience. Nobody just gets long life. It's the result of obeying God from your heart. Nobody just gets a God-defined successful life. It's the result of practicing love and faithfulness consistently. Nobody just gets God's will for his or her life clearly explained. It's the result of trusting in the Lord with all of your heart. And nobody just gets financial blessing. It's the result of honoring the Lord with your money. First, obedience; then, blessing. It's true in every area of your life and mine. God's blessings are conditional on your obedience. With those insights into this passage, let me ask you the first of two simple questions:

QUESTION #1: DO I TRUST GOD?

Think about that question before you answer. It's easy to be flippant about trusting God. Do I really trust God for everything? Let's remember that a relationship with God is comprehensive not occasional. Do I trust God for the "big things" (salvation, eternal life, forgiveness) but struggle to trust Him for the "little things" (my job, my relationships, my finances)? Do I trust God for major decisions but not so much people issues? Do I trust God as long as I can get my own fingers into a situation and help Him out a little bit with the solution?

What does it mean to trust God? It's not just believing that there is a God. It's not just having happy thoughts about God. Nor is it just running to God when you get into trouble and then ignoring Him after He's rescued you. Trust is an attitude born of a relationship. You can never trust God until and unless you develop a personal relationship with Him. As you get to know a person, your trust in him or her is built up or torn down. God is a Person who can and wants to be known; therefore, He can be trusted by those who make a consistent effort to get to know Him.

Trust is dependency. So who do you depend upon? Your spouse, your parents, your adult children, your close friends, or maybe just yourself. Why? Because your relationship with those people has given you sufficient knowledge that they can be depended upon for certain things in life. That whole concept of dependency is a little threatening to many of us. It can suggest inability or weakness on your part – not having your act together in some way. Our American culture encourages us to admire independent people even though they are often the unhappiest, least fulfilled and least successful people of all! In contrast, Christians are people who are learning how to depend on God more and more every day for – literally – everything.

Trust is a process. It doesn't happen all at once. It starts the moment you stop trusting in yourself to somehow earn or merit eternal life and you transfer that trust to Jesus who died on the cross and rose again to pay the penalty for your sins. But then that trust continues to develop throughout your entire life as you learn to trust God in new ways. Just when you think you're trusting God as fully as you possibly can, He will reveal areas of your life where you're holding out on Him! It might be your marriage, your health, your career path, your job at present, your kids or your finances. All of a sudden, God will bring you to a moment of realization, "You mean, God, I have to trust You for this, too?"

Trust is love. It's impossible to love someone without trusting that person at some level. By the same token, you can never fully trust someone without coming to love that person at some level either. Trust and love just go hand in hand in any good relationship. You will only trust God to the extent that you love Him. Then, as you grow in your love for God through all the experiences of life and living, you come to trust Him more comprehensively.

Why is God worthy of your ultimate trust? Well, what does God's Word say about God? God knows all things. You don't know what's going to happen to you this afternoon! The Bible says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable." (Hebrews 4:13 NLT) God never changes. People change. Circumstances change. You change. Earlier this month we looked at the Bible verse, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8 NIV) God never fails. The Bible says, "The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin

afresh each morning.” (Lamentations 3:22-23 NLT) In our home, I have a plaque hanging that hung in my parents’ home that has a message that’s very dear to me. It simply says, “Jesus never fails.” God loves you and promises never to leave you. “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV)

Do you remember a TV commercial that aired a few years ago? The commercial begins with a little girl standing alone in a picturesque meadow. The camera then pans to another part of the field where it shows a gigantic rhinoceros. This huge, dangerous animal begins a lethal charge towards the girl, whose serene and happy face remains unmoved. As the rhinoceros gets closer, the words appear on the screen, "Trust is not being afraid." A split second before the rhino tramples the helpless child, it stops, and the girl, her smile never wavering, reaches up and pets the animal on its massive horn. The final words then appear, "even when you are vulnerable." The commercial was designed to tout the abilities of an insurance company to protect its clients from the uncertainties of life. Fat chance! How much more should it describe you and me who, has followers of Jesus, can confidently say with the psalmist, "This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him." (Psalm 91:2 NLT) Now, here’s a second question I want to ask you.

QUESTION #2: CAN GOD TRUST YOU?

In other words, have you proven to be trustworthy in your relationship with God? Let’s reflect on that question by asking it in three different ways. Here’s the first one: am I trustworthy in adversity? All too often that’s where many people give up on God. Frankly, it’s easy to trust the Lord when everything is going well, but let some adversity enter your life – some disappointment, some setback, some heartache, some financial problem – what’s your attitude then? All too often our attitude can become, “Well, God, now what’s the deal here? I thought I was supposed to just trust in You and then You’re supposed to make the road of life pleasant for me!” You can’t have a relationship with God for very long without discovering that He allows adversity to enter your life and, in fact, uses it as a primary way to get you to grow up spiritually. Are you trustworthy in adversity?

Can God trust you? Here’s a second way to ask that question: am I trustworthy in blessing? Have you observed the fact that too much success can ruin a person about as quickly as too much failure? There is an all too human tendency to sort of put God on the shelf, so to speak, when things are going well in our lives. “Hey, the job’s great, the marriage is good, the kids are doing well, finances are OK, my health is super!” The temptation is to begin to coast spiritually and take your relationship with God for granted. You can forget something very important when life is going well. What’s that? God is the ultimate source of every blessing in your life. The extent to which you genuinely thank God for all the blessings He provides – and that thankfulness gets reflected

best in your daily behavior and attitudes – is an indicator of your trust in Him. The temptation you so often face is putting your trust in the blessing God provides rather than in the God who provides it! So people put their trust in their job, their relationships, their investments, their own intelligence, their own work ethic rather than in the One who makes all those possible.

Can God trust you? Here's a third way to ask that question: am I trustworthy with money? I raise that issue for two reasons. First, I'm addressing the issue of financial stewardship in this series of three messages. Second, it's a part of our text today. "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." (Proverbs 3:9-10 NIV) So, what does it mean to "honor the Lord with your wealth"? When you search out the biblical answer you discover that to honor the Lord with your wealth necessitates giving at least the tithe – 10% of your income – to the Lord. And that's not where you end; that's where you start. I can only come to one conclusion. When I give less than 10% - 3%... 6%... 9 and 1/2% - I am not honoring the Lord. I can rationalize and give less, I can make excuses and give less, but the fact is that I dishonor God when I give less.

At the time Proverbs was written, Israel was an agricultural society. Wealth was determined by land and crops not bank accounts and investment portfolios. You honored God by bringing Him the first and the best that your land produced, not the leftovers or what was second-rate in quality. You brought Him the best sheep, the best ox, the best wheat, the best barley – not the sick sheep, not the dead ox, not the littlest stalks of grain. The first and the best. So what's the principle here that we can transfer to our day and time? You don't give God what's leftover in your checkbook at the end of the month and assume that honors God. If your checkbook is like mine, there's not usually a whole lot left over! No, that kind of giving doesn't honor the Lord. In fact, that reveals a lack of respect for God and a lack of gratitude for what He's allowed you to have in terms of material wealth.

What does honoring the Lord with your wealth look like? You refuse to just give Him what's left over. Instead, you figure out what is a tithe of your income and you put it into your monthly budget. Make it the first check you write every time you get paid. "The first and the best." Give it whether you come to church or not. It's amazing how many Christians forget to tithe if they miss a Sunday or two due to illness, vacation or whatever. Do you forget to pay your mortgage when you go on vacation? Do you just send in a portion of your electric bill payment if you're away for a portion of the month? "The first and the best." Here's the point: what you give and how you give it is an indication of whether you truly trust God and whether He can trust you. Am I trustworthy with money? The first and best answer to that question is whether I tithe faithfully.

Is God desperate for your money? Not at all! He doesn't need your paltry little tithe or mine. He owns everything! But the fact is that He does want to bless you.

But, blessing comes to you and me as the result of obedience. Remember the second and third observations from our text? God's commands always precede God's promises. Yes, God does promise financial blessing in v. 10. But that promise is preceded by a command: "Honor the Lord with your wealth." Then, again, God's blessings are conditional on your obedience. Yes, God wants to bless you, but He withholds blessing until you obey. That principle is true in every area of life including your finances. If you're tithing, you can ask God for financial blessing. You're on solid ground. Why? Because you're obeying Him financially. You're walking along Obedience Road now, so to speak, and before long Blessing is going to run into you! But, if you're not tithing, why bother to ask God to bless your finances? You're not obeying Him. It's a little like an 8 year old kid asking his parents to raise his allowance while he's stealing money out of their wallets!

Dear friends, whether its money matters, success in life, relationships with others, guidance in major life decisions – the principles are the same. A relationship with God is comprehensive not occasional. God's commands precede God's promises. God's blessings are contingent on your obedience. It's all a matter of trust. And trust is the key to successful living as God defines success. Can God trust you? Do you trust God? As I close today, I want to shift gears for a few minutes. I believe one reason we find it hard to really trust God is the fact that we buy into all of these small, limited and little ideas about God. What we really need is a revelation or a reminder of the incomparable bigness of our God! Do you know Him? Do you trust Him? Can He trust you? Trust is the key to successful living as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.