

STEWARDSHIP: WHO OWNS YOUR STUFF?

2

WHAT IS PROSPERITY?

Proverbs 3

By Mark D. Coakley

*"It is written: 'Man shall not live by bread alone,
but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"*

Matthew 4:4

"I value all things only by the price they shall gain in eternity."

John Wesley

"I place no value on anything I possess, except in relation to the kingdom of God."

David Livingstone

*"Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal
of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred."*

Proverbs 15:16–17

AIM OF STUDY

- To understand that trusting God and following His wisdom is the key to true success or prosperity in life.

KEY VERSES

“My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my command in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity.”

Proverbs 3:1-2

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. Then read the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to help resource you for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

What does it mean to prosper? The dictionary defines it as “the condition of being successful or thriving; especially economic well-being” (M-W.com). In our culture it primarily means to live a life of financial and material comfort. Many people think the clothes you wear, the car you drive, how big a house you live in, or the size of your income evidences prosperity. How would you define a successful life?

Allow several people to share their description of a good life.

How does God define the life that prospers? Is it only limited to material blessing or is there more included, a deeper and abiding prosperity? If our society reflects what true prosperity is, then some of us might need to rethink that goal when we see the rate of divorce, degree of stress, and confessions of unhappiness tied to pursuing “the good life.” Randy Alcorn maintains that we do not live enough in light of eternity, so we don’t have a grip on what is of true value. We live with the delusion that the key to happiness in this life is building a fortune rather than investing in eternal riches. He states:

Five minutes after we die every Christian will understand that heaven is our home and earth was simply a temporary lodging on the homeward journey. Then we’ll know for certain what was important and what wasn’t. We will see with eternity’s clarity. We will know exactly how we should have lived.

But we don’t have to wait until we die to know how we should live. God has given us his Word to tell us how to live and his indwelling Spirit to empower us to live as we should.

(Alcorn, p. 63)

Alcorn uses the illustration of being on a long airplane flight. You might “...socialize, eat, read, pray, sleep, and maybe talk about where you are going. But what would you think if a passenger in the window seat hung curtains over the window, taped photographs to the seat in front of him, painted murals, and put up wall hangings? You’d think, *Hey, it’s not that long of a trip. Once we get to the destination, none of this will matter*” (Alcorn, p. 37).

In other words, many of us are focusing our time, money and efforts on making ourselves comfortable on the airplane with no thought to our real destination. Let’s see what real success in life means when we define it from God’s viewpoint.

Pray that God would help you gain more of His perspective on what matters in life as you study this chapter.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings collected over several centuries in ancient Israel. Some may come from before the time of Solomon although his name is linked with the book’s title and sayings throughout Chapters 10-22 and 25-29. Others were composed or written down after him since some were attributed to Hezekiah, who lived two hundred fifty years later (Kidner, pp. 25-27). According to Jer. 18:18 and Ezekiel 7:26, three groups communicated to the people on behalf of God: the priests imparted the Law; the prophets communicated divine words and visions; the sages (wise men or elders) gave counsel to the people. Solomon, Agur, Lemuel, and the other authors of Proverbs were among the sages, and wrote during a time when not

only Israel but also her neighbors (Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Babylon) highly valued wise sayings. The rapid spread of Solomon's reputation and the flocking of foreign visitors to hear him (I Kings 4:34, 10:1-13, 24) illustrate the intellectual climate of the time both outside and within Israel.

Wisdom literature in the Bible (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) helps shed light on the perplexities of life. In particular, Proverbs is a guidebook for successful living, showing us how our faith in God can affect our day-to-day lives. Teaching godly wisdom was especially important to each generation of young men who would assume the leadership and influence the rest of the Jewish nation (Hubbard, p. 47). Thus the book opens with a serious theme: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (1:7). Today we might say it teaches "...old fashioned basic values" (Fee & Stuart, p. 195). But we need to be careful in how we interpret the proverbs. Because they are very brief sayings and often symbolic (so they are easy to memorize), we should not take them too literally or expect them to guarantee a certain outcome. They should be read as good guidelines for our behavior, not a firm promise from God that covers any and every situation. Still they are valuable to help us learn to choose between a life of godly wisdom and a life of foolish destruction Fee & Stuart, pp.196-203).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Proverbs 3

1. Let's read aloud from the first section, verses 1-10. What tone or attitude does the author use in instructing his disciples (v. 1)?

He speaks warmly but firmly. The Hebrew "do not forget" and "keep" are both commands. The author is exhorting his disciples to hold onto and protect the wisdom that he has taught them. There is a sense of urgency and importance in this since he has based his words on God's word (Hubbard, p. 70).

2. What commands can you find in verses 1-10?

The commands are: "do not forget, keep, bind, write, trust, don't lean/rely, acknowledge, don't be wise, fear, shun, and honor." "Keep" (v. 1) referring to God's words, "trust" (v. 5) describing our relationship with God, and "honor" (v. 9) regarding our wealth seem to anchor these verses (Hubbard, p. 69-71).

3. What do you think the author means by "heart" (v. 5)?

Dallas Willard writes, "We live from our heart" (p. 13). The Greek and Hebrew for the word "heart" refer to the same concept: the heart is the center or core of the person; the inner man or nature; the seat of personality; the spirit of a man. The heart is where the intellect and emotions come together, and where we make decisions. It is the place where Jesus Christ dwells within the believer.

4. What are the benefits of a heart that is in tune with God's heart (vv. 2, 4, 6b, 8,10)?

A life lived trusting God's wisdom, relying on His person, and honoring Him with all we are and have, is a life in harmony with God. 2 Chron. 16:9 tells us that "the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." For those who love and trust Him, the Lord supports them by:

- Providing them with a life of inner peace v. 2
- Giving them favor in His sight and that of men v.4
- Directing their paths and sustaining them v. 6b
- Providing healing and restoration v.8
- Supplying material needs v.10.

5. What is the key to our relationship with God (v. 5)?

The key to a relationship with God is trust—belief, faith, completely depending on Him. We are saved by faith, and continue to live our lives trusting in Him for everything—even the motivation to choose obeying Him versus turning our backs on Him. The Bible sometimes depicts our relationship with God as children to their loving Father, sheep to a Good Shepherd, and a bride to the Bridegroom. All of these imply intimate love, care, tenderness, provision, and protection, at the very least. God expects us to respond to His loving kindness or covenant love with trust and willing obedience.

6. What does the second part of verse 5 tell us not do? Why can this be a struggle at times?

Human beings are often tempted to think we could be self-sufficient. We might become proud due to our social situation, a good education, success in our efforts, or privileges of power or leadership. At some point, we might decide we know enough to chart the course for our own lives. But Proverbs returns over and over again to the choice we have in life: to humbly trust in God and follow His ways, or to foolishly and arrogantly reject Him and travel the path of destruction. It is an age-old battle of who will be God/god.

7. How does following God relate to everyday living (v. 6)?

We should see God's involvement in every experience, in every circumstance. We tend to compartmentalize our lives and leave the Lord "out" of some areas or decisions. But if we take Him as Savior of all our life, then we must take Him as Lord of all. Whether we acknowledge Him or not, He is not absent, but present in our daily lives. This is important to recognize because we tend to get discouraged and weighed down by life when we believe that we are left on our own. We will quickly become overwhelmed or make poor

choices when we try to live apart from God, which is sin. God makes a way for those who acknowledge that He is with them in all things.

8. What makes it hard to rely on God in all areas of life (v. 7)?

Our pride makes it difficult to humble our minds as well as our hearts and submit to His leadership, His plans, and His agenda—in whatever area.

9. What should we do with our finances and material possessions (vv. 9-10)?

As with our minds and hearts, we submit the wealth we have to God. We put it at His disposal, rather than compartmentalizing our financial habits from our obedience to Him. Ancient Israel was commanded to bring to God the first of everything—firstborn son, first of each animal, first of each harvest. By giving the first portion to God, they were reminded not only of who was the source of all the good things they had, but also that they should avoid clinging to and worshipping what was created rather than the Creator. Note that the teacher predicted we would gain from giving our resources back to God, rather than being depleted or destitute.

9. Why should we accept God's discipline (vv. 11-12)?

Solomon tells us that God disciplines us because He loves us and knows that we are prone to go our own way. Like any loving parent, God needs to point out and correct our mistakes when they could cause us great harm, even threaten our lives. We need to be trained in godliness (see Heb. 12:4-11). God disciplines us for our good, because He produces the fruit of righteousness in us if we will accept His correction.

***What's your usual response to Biblical correction?**

10. Let's read the next section, verses 13-20. What is wisdom (vv. 13-20)?

According to Proverbs 1 wisdom is:

- Instruction or training. Wisdom comes by experience and will be hard-won. It is a quality of character more than high intellect. Correction or reproof is the tool God uses to build wisdom and this process is only for the disciple of Jesus Christ.
- Understanding or insight. This is discernment—to be familiar with the ways of God and how they are to be applied to life.
- Wise behavior. This is making choices about how to live that make good sense according to God's ways.
- Discretion. This knowing the right path to take, planning your way as the Lord leads you.
- Knowledge. This knowing the truth and following it. It is not simply head-knowledge (see 2 Pet. 1:1-3).

11. What in these verses encourage us to live by God's wisdom?

Wisdom is compared to silver—which at times in ancient Israel was more highly valued than gold because it was more scarce (Hubbard, p. 74)—gold and rubies, but it surpasses them in value. Living by God's wisdom is connected with a long life, wealth, honor, and peace—qualities of life that are considered God's blessings. The tree of life is probably an image of the source of life and blessing (Walton et al, p. 562). It also brings to mind Ps. 1, which contrasts the righteous and the wicked ways of life, and uses the image of the tree that thrives and bears fruit for those who delight in and meditate on God's word (Hubbard, p. 74). The teacher also mentions that God's wisdom, understanding, and knowledge were instrumental in His awesome act of creating the universe. If the scope of God's understanding is so great, if the design of the whole universe reflects His wisdom and power, then accepting His word and practicing His ways puts us at a huge advantage over those who don't know or obey Him.

12. Let's finish the chapter by reading the final section, vv. 21-35. How is wisdom tied to a desirable life (vv. 21-26)?

These verses mention the protection of the Lord for those who value and keep His wisdom. Safety, peaceful sleep, not being afraid of unexpected danger all depict a person that can be worry free because of choosing to heed God's word and put Him first. He, in response to our loving obedience, will shield and protect us. Note that the proverbs don't claim our lives will be trouble free; instead, we can depend on God when difficulties arise.

13. How will a wise/godly person respond to a neighbor (vv. 27-32)? How should one view the ungodly?

Just like the generous God we know and serve, we should respond to our neighbor with compassion and generosity. We should also live honestly so that we develop a reputation of being trustworthy. We should always keep the good of our neighbor in mind. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and when we do, we honor our Lord and present the gospel in a credible way. Hubbard also sees in this passage the benefits to us of following God's ways. When we avoid evil, act generously and demonstrate we can be trusted, we promote peace and well being in our neighborhood or part of the world (pp. 76-78).

Regarding those who would be a negative influence in the community or world, the teacher tells us not to envy or imitate him. We are called to be in the world but not to live as the world (the ungodly) lives. The Scriptures repeatedly warn us not to walk the way of the ungodly because it is a path that leads to spiritual death (Prov. 14:12; Ps. 1). Hubbard points out that all

the negative commands in the final verses are summed up in verse 32: avoid what is an abomination to the Lord (p. 78).

APPLYING THE TEXT

- *Put the summary verses of this chapter in your own words (vv. 33-35). What have you learned about a life that God blesses?**
- *How has God prospered you?**
- *How has your life differed from what the world sees as prosperity?**
- *What in this passage has challenged your view of success?**
- *When you die, who will determine if you have lived a successful or prosperous life?**
- *In what way do you need to demonstrate trust in God more often?**

WRAPPING IT UP

The prosperous or successful life is not measured by financial holdings or our possessions. The life that God blesses will be a life that is lived according to His wisdom. Whether financial blessing is yours or not, look at what you have in Jesus Christ. Is there not much more value to the spiritual riches of knowing Him than those of material wealth? If we believe we will be prosperous following God's ways, then our lives should not reflect the same pursuit of financial independence and materialism that we see in the culture around us. Instead, we should be spending our time and money investing in God's kingdom purposes and pursuing relationships so others can enjoy Him as well. In the next study in this series, we'll discuss what it means to be content with what we have rather than running after what the world calls "the good life."

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