

WISDOM FROM HEAVEN FOR LIFE ON EARTH - Practical Studies From Proverbs - Part ten

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THE GOOD LIFE BEGINS IN THE HEART

It would be almost impossible to overstate the importance of the heart in the book of Proverbs. The heart, of course, is rarely mentioned as the organ that pumps blood in your chest. By "heart" the writers of Proverbs are referring to ***the inner you***, the ***spring of your thoughts and affections***, the ***place where priorities and decisions*** are settled and established.

No one else sees this part of a person. You can't examine it in any hospital or medical center. Yet the Bible says it's the most important part of wise living. If everything else were perfect, but the heart was wrong, the whole life will eventually corrode and fall apart.

On the flip side, though life be trying and difficult, if the heart is kept pure and grounded in God's laws, nothing will be able to steal the joy and inner blessing of the Lord. ***Circumstances*** don't control or define the life. The ***godly heart*** is the control center for sound living now, and on into eternity.

Here's what Proverbs has to say about the good life and the godly heart:

- 1) **IF YOU CONCENTRATE ON BEING RIGHT IN YOUR HEART, YOU WILL AUTOMATICALLY BE RIGHT IN THE REST OF YOUR LIFE**

Proverbs 4:23 - "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

In a sense, the secret to a good life is simple, not complex. The secret lies in knowing what to put most of your attention on. If you major on the ***external*** portion of life - financial prosperity, education, leisure, entertainment, success in business, getting a good house, advancing your career, and the like - you will be leaving the ***core*** of your life unattended.

God starts life at the ***center*** and works His way ***outward***. Notice the emphasis on the heart functioning like the ***spring*** or ***fountain*** for the rest of the life. In other words, life can't be any richer or sweeter on the ***surface*** than it is at its ***center***. The ***quality*** of life is established and fixed at the source - the ***heart***. From there it never changes or improves. Life can never be better on the ***outside*** than it is on the ***inside***. The heart is the controlling factor for the rest of life.

This is why ***suicide*** is the leading cause of death among teenagers in North America - where we have more freedom and financial prosperity than anywhere else in the world. Even young people are finding out too late that you can't live life from the ***outside/in***. The externals can't satisfy because God never ***meant*** for them to satisfy. Life only works lived from the ***inside-out***.

This is why ***marriages*** fall apart faster today than they ever have before - even in the church. Certainly there has ***never*** been a day when we've had more expertise at our disposal to counsel and save marriages. Married couples today have more ***outside*** help for their problems than at any other time in history. But you can't save a marriage just with ***outside*** help. Marriages are made with people. And people all have hearts. And those hearts control the rest of the life.

This text - **Proverbs 4:23** - may be the greatest life text of all. ***Nothing*** can ultimately go right if it is ignored. And ***nothing*** can ultimately destroy you if it is applied. It really is the key to everything in God's order.

- 2) **THE LAW OF GOD IS WHAT SETS THE HEART IN ORDER**

Proverbs 4:20-22 - "My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. [21] Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. [22] For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh."

These precious verses describe a ***problem*** we all have and a ***solution*** we can all profit from:

- a) ***The problem is our tendency either to ignore or forget the law of God.*** Look at these words carefully. They aren't addressed to a person who has no ***exposure*** to God's laws.

This is a person who, like most of us, has a certain **respect** for the Word of God. He or she probably would **acknowledge** the Bible as **being** God's Word and worthy of intake into our lives.

But, for all of that, the Word isn't changing his **heart**. He **feeds** on the Word (perhaps in daily devotions) and then **leaves** the Word he has just read. In other words, there is no **continuance** in the **way** of the Word. After he **reads** the Word, he **neglects** the Word. He's **in and out** of the Word repeatedly.

So what's to be done with this person? How is the Word going to reach the heart - the control center of his being?

- b) **The solution is simple, yet challenging.** The person must start - and start right where he is, and right at this moment - to **"give attention"** to the Word (20). He must start, right where he is and right at this very moment, to **"incline his ear"** (20) to God's laws. Instead of coming and going from God's Word into the rest of his life, he must keep God's laws **"within"** his heart (21).

That last phrase is perhaps the most descriptive. This person must stop pushing God's Word to the **edges** of his life. He must bring it to the **middle** - call it regularly to the **head of the table** - of his heart.

The Word has no power at the **edge** of the heart. It only functions at the **center**. God's Word must be the CEO of the heart.

Now, there are forces that make this decision more difficult than it sounds. Many people simply fail to **choose** to give God's Word its only rightful place in their hearts. There are **forces** at work - in fact, **set to work** by the Devil - to complicate and subvert this process of centralizing God's Word. We've already studied some of them in this series on Proverbs:

Sometimes **pride** will keep the Word of God unfruitful. There are people who are too stubbornly bent on having their own way. They won't listen to anyone. Not even God. They will die internally, long before their funeral.

Many people are **too influenced by their friends** to heed the Word of God. They will cooperate with the Word up to the point that it begins to cost them their popularity. Then the power of the Word is choked out in their hearts.

Some people are too in love with **success, power and wealth**. Jesus clearly identified these are the most common thorns choking out the seed of the Word in our hearts.

Some people are just too **lazy** to study the Word on a regular basis. It is easier to watch television and more enjoyable to play golf, so the Word gets far less time than it deserves.

For all these reasons, I said the process of enthroning the Word in your heart is **simple** (not hard to understand) but also **costly** (no one will do it without paying a price). But make no mistake, there is no other way to have a heart that pumps living water up to the surface of your life.

So we've seen two very important points about the heart: **First**, the heart is the source of the quality of life that will be experienced. The chief thing, therefore, is to keep the heart with all diligence. **Second**, the heart is set in proper order when it is ruled by the Word of God. If anything else takes central stage in the heart, nothing but disaster will ensue.

Now for the third point along this same theme:

3) FOR THE WORD OF GOD TO RULE THE HEART, KNOWING ITS CONTENT IS NOT ENOUGH

Proverbs 23:12 - "Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge."

Notice how the **ears** and **heart** are both mentioned in this verse. And notice the corresponding object to which each is linked. The **ears** are for the gathering of **knowledge**. The **heart** is what must be applied to **discipline**.

The important point here is that **knowledge**, by itself, has no effect whatsoever on the heart. **Discipline** is what reaches the heart. What you know from the Bible won't give you the kind of heart that fills the whole life with peace and joy.

I have a friend who has had some heart problems lately. He went to the hospital where they wired him up and looked at the inside of his heart. This gave the doctors ***knowledge*** of the condition of his heart. But just that knowledge doesn't ***fix*** the problem. For the heart to be fixed that knowledge must be ***applied***. Sometimes surgery is needed. Sometimes change of diet. Sometimes medication is the remedy. But just the ***knowledge*** of the condition won't help anybody.

This is how the Word works in our hearts. It shows us what our true problems are. Without the truth of the Word of God we will constantly ***mis-diagnose*** our true condition and it's remedy.

The New Testament uses a different picture, but gives the very same message:

James 1:22-25 - "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. [23] For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. [24] For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. [25] But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

The insanity of this illustration is obvious. What is the point of looking in the mirror when you get out of bed in the morning if you do nothing about your appearance? Fixing what needs fixing is the whole point of using the mirror. The mirror really serves no useful purpose at all if this isn't remembered. The mirror doesn't fix anything ***all by itself***. It won't shave your face, fix your hair, or do your make-up.

James says this is why people have a hard time ***remembering*** what they read in their Bibles. However ridiculous the man in the mirror illustration is, James says he's no ***more*** ridiculous than the person who thinks that just by ***reading*** his Bible, or ***going*** to church, or ***having Christian parents***, he is going to obtain a godly heart. The real problem is he doesn't ***use*** what he's learning from God's Word ***quickly*** enough or ***often*** enough. Only ***applied*** truth has transforming power to shape the heart.

4) **IF ALL OF THIS SEEMS LIKE WORK, IT IS. BUT IT'S ALSO THE ONLY ROAD TO A TRULY JOYFUL LIFE**

Proverbs 17:22 - "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

It is a very commonly made mistake to think that life is easier when we don't have to pay the price of keeping the Word of God in the center of our hearts through study and obedience. It ***seems*** like this is a costly duty indeed. And for that reason many nearly-converted church-goers draw back from serious discipleship.

But, in fact, just the opposite is the case. The heart that finds its joy in the will of the Lord will have the effect of medicine on a sick body. Everything else will, over time, come to deeper and richer health and strength.

But for the person who shuns this path because he thinks it too costly, or too much work, the writer of Proverbs says a horrible discovery awaits. Sooner or later the impostor will find he can't live with himself. His heart will gradually poison his whole system. That's what the verse means when it says his very "***bones will dry up***."

The bones are what support the whole body. This is a poetic way of describing the ***structural collapse*** of the entire life.

Think of that when God's will seems challenging at some point. Remember this image when you're tempted to turn to short-term selfish pleasure over the long-term joy of walking with God.

Medicine is better than rotten bones any day of the week!

We'll continue looking at what Proverbs says about our hearts next study time.