

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

Teaching #1849 - Sunday, December 20th, 2015 - 6:00 p.m.

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THE GOOD LIFE BEGINS IN THE HEART (continued)

We're continuing our study on the **heart** in the book of Proverbs. Just a quick review might be in order:

- a) ***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."***

The key idea here is the **quality** of life is set and determined at its **source**. This is where the picture of a **spring** or **fountain** come in so nicely. If the water you drink is pumped into your house from an underground spring or well, its quality isn't determined at your **tap**. It's determined at the **source**.

The reason this needs addressing in the Proverbs is this world **trains us** to live **externally** rather than **internally**. And Christians aren't exempt from this temptation. Even spiritual life can be fueled by wrong motives. It can be done from the **outside-in**. Consider the Pharisees. Jesus said they cleaned the **outside** of the cup and left the **inside** dirty. And what Jesus meant by that was spiritual life can't be used to **decorate the unchanged inward heart**. Hence this caution in the book of Proverbs.

Fundamentally, your life can't possibly be any purer than it is at its source. And the Bible says your **heart** is the source of the rest of your life. So obviously, this is where a wise person will place his attention. Your life isn't made by your friends, or your education, or your wealth, or even your physical well being. **You can't create a good life from the outside/in**. The quality of a good life flows from the **inside/out**. Keep your heart diligently.

- b) ***The law of God heeded is what sets the heart in good working 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."***

Note that word **"incline"**. Make the way of the Lord the natural **slope** of your life. Let every part of your personhood flow in that direction. Also, remember, these words aren't addressed to a person who has had no **exposure** to God's Word. They are addressed to a person who, much like you and me, **knows** much of what God's Word says, and probably even **respects** the Bible a great deal.

There is this constant danger of repeatedly hearing the same Word **lightly**. We can grow accustomed to exposure to the Word. Jesus addressed this problem in His parable where the good seed of the Word fell on **"wayside"** soil. This was the same soil as the others, but packed down by much traffic.

But these verses from Proverbs are demanding much more than **knowledge** or **respect**. They are calling us to **emphasize** God's Word - **"Keep them in the middle of your heart!"** The Word is powerless at the **edges** of the life.

- c) ***For the Word of God to rule the heart, it must be practiced with great discipline - Proverbs 23:12 - "Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge."***

Notice, **ears** gather knowledge, but **discipline** transforms the heart. The bare, factual data of the Word is a necessary **starting** place, but will never bring **transforming power** to the bound up heart.

This idea was proven true in the experience of the Psalmist when he wrote these profound words: **Psalm 119:45** - **"....and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts."**

Only *doing* the Word verifies the power and joy of its fulfillment in our lives. Obedience only looks like drudgery when you're looking at it from the vantage point of an ungodly life. Only the obedient discover the joy and life God's law can bring, which leads to the last point we studied:

- d) ***Only God's law can produce a truly joyful heart and life - Proverbs 17:22 - "...A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."***

This really brings us back full circle to our starting point. Make the heart right and you make the life right. Our world's biggest mistake, shared by many foolish Christians, is the empty effort to build a joyful life from the *outside/in*, rather than the *inside/out*. If you aren't happy, look *first* to the heart. That's where the quality of life is established.

Now for tonight's lesson:

- 1) **GOD MEASURES US, NOT BY THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE, BUT BY THE CONDITION OF OUR HEART**

Of course, the most famous passage teaching this isn't in the book of Proverbs at all. The most famous passage is 1 Samuel 16:7 - "But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

This is how God picks candidates for the office of king. But proverbs teaches the same truth regarding all people in the eyes of God: Proverbs 15:11 - "Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the LORD; how much more the hearts of the children of man!"

Abaddon is an Old Testament synonym for the place of departed spirits. Nobody can see that place. But God can. And that's the whole point of this strange verse. God looks at the *unseen* part of our lives. He starts on the inside in His assessment of us.

This is not just given as a point of theological information about God. The writer isn't just trying to tell us that God is smarter than we are. We are being cautioned against being *preoccupied with the outward appearance and attractions of our lives*. If we aren't very careful we can care more about what people think about the *outward appearance* of our lives than what God thinks about the *inward* part of our lives.

In fact, Jesus pinpointed this very thing as being one of the key problems in the people He encountered:

John 5:44 - "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"

Jesus is identifying the obstetrics of unbelief. It doesn't begin in the intellect, as many people falsely think. It starts with *pride*. It starts with the desire to be esteemed and loved and praised by those around us. We want to receive *glory* from other people. And the fastest way to receive glory in this fallen world is to focus on the right fashion, the right group of friends, the right entertainment, etc.

And Jesus said when people care more about the visible part of life more than the part of life *God esteems as the most important*, they will mess up everything else about their existence. God measures by the heart. Put your emphasis there too.

- 2) **FOR OUR OWN GOOD, GOD TRIES AND SEARCHES AND REFINES OUR HEARTS**

Proverbs 17:3 - "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD tests hearts."

Probably one of the best known prayers of the Old Testament deals with this very subject. We used to sing an old chorus with the same words: **Psalm 139:23-24** - "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! [24] And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Because God values the inner life of the heart above all else, He can't lead us in the everlasting way until He has properly made the heart clean and sound. So the Bible tells us that God **searches and tries our hearts for our own good**.

And it's important for Christians to **know** how God does this so they won't misinterpret some of the circumstances God leads us through. God doesn't search my heart so **He** can find out what's in there. God already **knows** exactly what's in my heart.

When God tries my heart, He's trying to show **me** what's deep inside my being. He brings irritating people along who rub me the wrong way. When I blow up at them, God reveals my trouble with temper. He delays answers to prayer that I would really appreciate immediately. When I grumble or give up He reveals my impatience. It's so important, when we **ask** God to search our hearts, to remember **how** He does that and what how we should respond to the things He reveals to us.

These hearts of ours, as this text in Proverbs so clearly points out, need constant **monitoring**. Even in the very best of us, our natures are such that our own hearts can't always be automatically trusted. Always remember to give God the benefit of the doubt. He is a **heart expert**. And, in His wise love, He is out to make our hearts as pure and sound as we will allow.

3) **ONLY GOD CAN CLEANSE AND REMAKE THE HEART**

Proverbs 20:9 - "Who can say, "I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin"?"

This rhetorical question really needs no answer. We can pursue wisdom and righteousness, but only God can make the heart clean from sins already committed.

We must never allow the spirit of the age to diminish our appreciation of the **kind** of work required and performed in our hearts by the Spirit of God.

The Psalmist David gives a good summary: **Psalm 51:10a** - "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Think of Genesis 1 to 3. We know what that verb "**create**" means. This is world's apart from therapy or self-improvement. This is also more than the result of training and education. As valuable as those ingredients are, they can't **create** the new heart.

This is the church's **unique** message. No one else is even offering this to our world. Jesus said that human flesh, even at its best, can only produce flesh. That which is born of the flesh **is** flesh. It can't be anything more in its own resourcing. Only the Spirit can bring about a new spiritual creation. While we are listing this point **last**, of course, in reality it comes **first**. All the other points flow out of this New Testament foundation of conversion by the inward supernatural work of the Holy Spirit of God.

This **creating power** of divine grace is a deep well of hope. It answers to the fear we all bring in our natural selves - the fear that there isn't much to work with in our fallen, self-absorbed hearts. Remember, our God's grace is always a **creating** grace. Bit by bit, He makes people just like you and me brand new.