

A Sampler From Proverbs

Proverbs 3:11,12; 4:20-27; Hebrews 12:3-13

Last week, we saw the Lord Jesus through the eyes of a Roman soldier in Matthew's gospel, who only ever looked for Jesus because he was in trouble. The centurion in Matthew 8 was about to lose a loved one, a dear servant, and so this Roman officer took to the Jewish countryside and found Jesus and begged Jesus to invoke whatever influence he had with God so that his servant would not end his days paralyzed and helpless, in pain and fear and hopeless on a bed.

And Jesus' willingness to serve and help an enemy of his people, the decisive-ness Jesus showed in volunteering to go to a foreign house against all custom and instinct reminded this Roman of a commander in battle, faced with an unexpected turn in combat, but so certain of his duty, so familiar with his orders, that Jesus knew exactly what the situation called for. So the centurion responded with a decisiveness of his own.

He said, in so many words, "Lord, you're in command here. There's no need to leave your station and come all the way to my house, when you can give the order right where you stand and God will supply the healing my servant needs. "*I, myself,*" the centurion said, "*I, too, am a man under authority!*" And so we talked some last week about this notion that the Father's love comes to us interwoven with the Father's authority.

Because every time the Father opens his mouth about Jesus in the gospels, at the baptism in the Jordan, at the Transfiguration on the Mount, the Father speaks of Jesus as his "*beloved...the Son whom [he] loves*", the Father keeps saying.

And yet the Son had been sent here on this indescribably tough mission, not to triumph over everything in his way, not to rule over everyone in sight, not to receive the gratitude and praise to which he was entitled. But in his own words, Jesus was sent "*not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the many.*" It was a mission that could only end on a cross which is why, in John's gospel, Jesus' last words were "*It is finished.*" In other words, mission accomplished.

And so this letter to the Hebrews was written some thirty years after the Cross at a time in the first century when the ages were starting to pass. Old Testament Israel, God's people for 1400 years were circling the drain. The Romans were getting riled, the Jews were getting riled, and Christians were finding themselves in a kind of no man's land. Not really Jewish, not entirely Roman, neither fish nor fowl in a situation where standing out and being different was about to become particularly dangerous.

For them, it was an unexpected turn in combat and our author hopes that his readers will remember their orders: “*...let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles and run with endurance the race set before us...*”.

But you can’t run the race if you don’t know the course. So our author tells them in so many words, look for Jesus, do what he did, run where he went, “*...fix your eyes on Jesus, the Founder and Finisher of the faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God.*”

But what he’s teaching here is a little more specific than the old “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelets that Christians used to wear a decade or so ago. Because figuring out what Jesus would do can be challenging when we’re in the soup and he’s gone to be at the right hand of the Father. And so what our passage invites us to do is to “*consider*” in light of Jesus’ story that the love of the Father will often lead us into missions that are difficult, land us with orders that are hard to follow.

“*Consider Christ,*” our author tells us, “*who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.*”

In other words, the rejection we might suffer for faithfully following conscience and observing the commandments is not unique to us. Christ suffered more for standing out and being different than any of us even though he was intensely loved by his Father. “*In your struggle against sin,* our passage reminds us, “*you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.*”

And, here, John Calvin picked up right away that Christ’s struggle to redeem and save us was different than our struggle against sin. What Christ had to lay aside was a normal, wholesome desire to live. He found himself in the Garden, praying to his Father, not to have to suffer on a cross, not to have to die at a time of life when young men are full of energy and health and dreams and plans. But the mission his Father sent him to accomplish required him to give up what was joyful and wholesome so that we could be saved from the judgment that sin and sinners had coming. He took the condemnation we had coming. That was his mission.

And my guess is that you could scarcely count the joyful, wholesome experiences of life Jesus gave up to be faithful to his Father and to his Father’s dreams and plan for us. The point being that even though Jesus was untouched by sin, he was touched by discipline. It was not in his nature to do the things that so easily entangle us and lead us to injure others. He knew no sin, but Jesus did no what is was to want something good and have his Father tell him that it was not for him.

And that discipline, that sense of duty is all the more necessary for us because sin tempts us to want things and to get entangled in things that introduce a world of confusion and upset and injury into our circumstances and relationships. And so our passage teaches us to look for discipline and direction in the same place where Jesus got his, in a give and take love relationship with a very real, very alive Father in heaven.

Of course, we don't know and love and want the Father the way Jesus did. The eternally begotten Son of God loves his Father in a way and on a level that we will only begin to grasp until after we've learned our life's lessons and see God face to face in heaven. But even so, every soul, every sinful man or woman who has ever believed in and given his life to God becomes God's child and gains God as a Father.

We know this because the author to the Hebrews directs us to a passage written by Solomon to his sons almost a thousand years before Christ. "My son," Solomon wrote, "*do not despise the LORD's discipline nor loathe his reproof, for whom the LORD loves he reproves, just as a father the son in whom he delights.*" The point being that the commandments and promises and principles of Scripture only make sense, they only come together when we recognize them and take them to heart as a message from a living, breathing Father.

Now learning Scripture is an intellectual exercise to be sure. God speaks to us through inspired human authors who wrote history and poetry and letters. Some of them saw visions and described them in details that can only be grasped through practice and experience, analysis and intuition combined. But even after all that, even after learning from Calvin and Luther and Bonhoeffer and the rest, loving and knowing and following Christ is about more than just what is in the book.

The one fact I got right when I began my own walk with Christ almost 46 years is that opening my Bible is as much an act of worship as it is a study. Think about it! A sixteen year old kid staring at a Bible, trying to understand love and relationships and purpose and direction when my whole life had been a train wreck to that point. Some of what I thought and did in those days was positively goofy. For a long time I was all slogans and verses and trying to patch the whole thing together too fast. Hadn't found church. Hadn't found checks and balances.

Still, I think that entering the process, opening my Bible to read and my heart to pray just about every day has saved my life, kept me on the rails in the 46 years since I started. And I hesitate to talk about it because I know it can sound like I think I'm some sort of superior person, but honestly the longer I stay at it, the more aware I am about how bent and broken and confused I can be, Word Of God and all.

The point being that God didn't give us his Word, he hasn't sent his Spirit to live in our hearts, he didn't become our Father to make us superior to the people he's called us to love. The truth be told, learning right from wrong, being taught wise from foolish by a heavenly Father is an inexact exercise. Trial and error is involved. Uncertainty is part of the process. Sins and mistakes come into play and forgiveness becomes necessary even when we had the best of intentions.

The reason you can't measure a person's faith by their functionality is that we all begin with Christ from a different starting line, we all engage with God through different wiring. We're different! Some of us have brilliant heart intuition, born to engage with people, sensing in a

moment what someone else might need years to grasp. Other of us make our way following an analytical mind, patiently and brilliantly sorting a world of facts into a big picture that clarifies and guides.

We all come into the game with strengths, but it is also true that none of us is complete. Sin has broken and bent and wounded all of us in ways we can scarcely understand. So whatever our successes are, we still need parenting from heaven. And we need each other, we need feedback and encouragment, tough talk and forgiveness from brothers and sisters who are bound by covenant to stay on with us when our own wiring confuses our minds and tangles our feet.

We need Scripture. However difficult the commands and promises and principles of Scripture are to digest, Solomon promised us in our Call to Worship that the words of Scripture are “*life to those who find them.*” None of us will know God, none of us will keep track of right and wrong without engaging our minds in God’s Word. But most of all we need our Father. We are designed to learn in relationships and the words of Scripture express the thoughts and character and affections of that one Person whose approval and help can bear us through anything.

Of course, the tool God uses to discipline his children is conscience. Which is a tricky business. Because of how we’re wired and how we came up, human conscience is always off at least a few degrees and very often more than that. Sometimes our conscience goes hyperactive even when there’s nothing really wrong. Other times conscience is blind and deaf to things that are really wrong and positively dangerous. But in Hebrews 5, we’re taught that mature disciples “*have their senses trained by constant practice to discern between good and evil.*” In other words, keep bringing our wants and needs and thoughts and affections to our Father and he will sort it out so that we can navigate through it.

Of course sometimes the sort is painful. God has often made me painfully aware when I’ve failed my wife and kids, the church, my friends. And it’s tough to be disciplined by Someone you can’t con. But on the other hand, I can say that I have a Father in heaven who has never given up on me, never withheld forgiveness, never stopped loving me no matter how big the problem or how deep the mess.

God is good, the Bible teaches from cover to cover. It says in Psalm 130, “...*with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.*” So, strangely to the modern mind, it is safe to fear God, safe to allow him into those corners of our conscience where trouble lives because he’s come there to forgive and heal, not to run us into the ground with how wrong we are.