

Stay on the Path

WISDOM FROM DAD • PROVERBS 4:10-19 • PART 2

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If you were with us last week, you might remember that we started a series within a series on the book of Proverbs, and we are looking at the words of King Solomon in Proverbs 4. Last week, we had something of a backwards sermon, where we started at the end of the passage and looked at the benefits of wisdom, then we looked at where we get wisdom (it is often passed along to us from previous generations), and then we closed with the command (that came at the beginning), that we are to get wisdom - this is an intentional quest. Wisdom is something we need to be actively pursuing. And then we had some practical applications.

Today, we continue with Proverbs 4:10-19, and as we are about to discover, as King Solomon continues writing to his children, he describes wisdom as choosing a path. We have choices to make in this life. We can make good and wise choices, or we can make some terrible choices. And as we get into this passage, I would emphasize that Proverbs is a practical book. So often, it's easy to think that we can divide our lives into the spiritual and the secular. On one hand, we come to worship, we enjoy the fellowship of our Christian family, we sing, we pray, we study the word, and then on the other hand, we have everything else - we have work, and school, and maybe family, and perhaps it is tempting to think that these areas are separate. In Proverbs, though, we are reminded that our faith is practical. Our faith impacts how we live. Life itself is a series of choices, and those choices are probably quite a bit more spiritual than we realize. Are we hard-working on the job? Do we get our school assignments done on time or do we slack off with that? Do we get mad over stuff that doesn't really matter? Do we blow up in family disputes? Do we listen to advice? What about going too far with a girlfriend or a boyfriend? What about the use of alcohol? All of these life choices have a spiritual component. We might like to think that we can draw a line between the spiritual and the secular, but Solomon in this passage is reminding his sons that all of life comes down to a series of choices where we choose to go in one of at least two very different directions: Either we choose to honor God in the way we live, or we choose to go further down a dark and dangerous path. And so, in a sense, life is described as a journey. In the New Testament, we think of the Christian life being described as a walk. We are either walking with the Spirit, or we are walking in darkness. We are heading in one of two very different directions. Most of us here this morning are pretty familiar with the concept of walking - one foot in front of the other! Some of us are a bit faster than others, but we understand that walking involves making choices. We can go this way, or we can go that way.

By the way, the picture on the wall up here is from Castle Mound Pine Forest up near Black River Falls. Back in July, when I took the canoe up north, I left home at maybe 4 a.m., and I got to Black River Falls right as the sun was coming up, and my goal was to hike up to the top of those rock formations. I had studied the map the night before, so I had some idea of where I was going, and there was a point on the trail where I had to make a choice - on one side there was a shorter and fairly level nature trail, and on the other side there was the narrow and more challenging path up to those rock formations. So, I am using this particular fork in the path to illustrate the fact that as we live our lives, we have decisions to make, and in today's passage, Solomon makes this argument with his sons: He wants them to choose wisely.

So, let us, please, notice Proverbs 4:10-19, let's notice the path imagery, and then let's take a few moments to try to apply these words to how we live our lives today, so many years later - Proverbs 4:10-19,

- ¹⁰ ***Hear, my son, and accept my sayings***
And the years of your life will be many.
- ¹¹ ***I have directed you in the way of wisdom;***
I have led you in upright paths.
- ¹² ***When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;***
And if you run, you will not stumble.
- ¹³ ***Take hold of instruction; do not let go.***
Guard her, for she is your life.
- ¹⁴ ***Do not enter the path of the wicked***
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
- ¹⁵ ***Avoid it, do not pass by it;***
Turn away from it and pass on.
- ¹⁶ ***For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;***
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.
- ¹⁷ ***For they eat the bread of wickedness***
And drink the wine of violence.
- ¹⁸ ***But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,***
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
- ¹⁹ ***The way of the wicked is like darkness;***
They do not know over what they stumble.

As we allow the word of God to change us this morning, I would simply ask that we think about the choices we make. As we make moral decisions in this life, we often have two very distinct options.

I. And I want us to notice, first of all, how King Solomon describes the WAY OF WISDOM.

So, on one hand, we have the good path, and Solomon seems to be almost begging his son to follow this path, the path of wisdom, ***"Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,"*** he says. As parents, our prayer for our children as they grow and mature is that they will make good decisions. Like Solomon, our hope and our prayer is that our children will chose the path of wisdom.

As we learned last week, there are some benefits of wisdom, as Solomon reminds us again (in verse 10) that, ***"the years of our life will be many."*** Obviously, this is a proverb, not a guarantee. All of us know good people who suffer. But, generally speaking, choosing the wise path in life will save us tremendous pain and heartache.

In verse 12, for example, Solomon reminds his son that if he chooses the wise path in life, when he walks, his ***“steps will not be impeded.”*** To be ***“impeded”*** is the idea of being “restricted” or “cramped.” A year or so ago, I took a step I thought I’d never take: After doing a lot of reading, I finally took the plunge into a mummy-style sleeping bag. Up until a year ago, my hang-up had always been the fear of being restricted. I need to flail around as I sleep. But I also needed a bag that was lighter weight and warmer. Everything kept pointing to a mummy bag, but I was resisting. I don’t want to be a mummy! Mummies are dead! Mummies don’t need to move! So, I went to REI, and Fontana, and Cabela’s, and I started crawling in some mummy bags. After some extensive research and testing, I finally landed on the Marmot Trestles 30 degree mummy bag, but I had to order it extra tall and extra wide! And now I finally have the warmth, and the lighter weight, and can still move while I sleep! I don’t know about you, but I don’t like to be restricted. Taking the wrong path in life has a way of restricting our options. If I pay attention in school and get good grades and stay out of trouble, I have options. But if I slack off and start blowing off classes, my options start getting restricted. So, in verse 12, when Solomon tells his son that if he walks in the good path, his ***“steps will not be impeded”*** (or restricted), he’s reminding his son that making good choices actually gives us more freedom. The world tries to tell us that their way gives us more freedom, but that is not really the case.

And here at the beginning, we need to notice again where wisdom comes from. In verse 10, wisdom is tied to Solomon’s ***“sayings,”*** and these sayings must be ***“accepted.”*** In verse 11, wisdom comes from Solomon’s ***“directions”*** and from his ***“leadership.”*** Personally, I find it interesting that Solomon shifts to the past tense in verse 11, ***“I have directed you,”*** and ***“I have led you.”*** It seems that Solomon is acknowledging some repetition here. He is reminding his son that what he is telling him now is what he has always told him. These words are consistent. And then, in verse 13, we find that wisdom comes through ***“instruction.”*** In other words, wisdom isn’t just looking into ourselves and doing what we personally think is right, but wisdom comes from listening to good advice, and in this case, inspired advice, the wisdom that comes from God.

And in verse 13, Solomon tells his son that he must ***“take hold”*** of it. He needs to hold on for dear life. Once you obtain it, ***“guard”*** it, Solomon says. Staying on the straight and narrow path may be difficult at times, but it is worth it, and so we need to hang on to it. We need to put in the effort. Do not let go of it. “Trust and obey,” as we sometimes sing. We accept God’s message, we obey it, and we hang on to it. We continue walking in the way of wisdom. One author has described the Christian life as “a long obedience in the same direction.” We make a decision to get on the right path, and then we continue walking in that direction. After all, in John 14:6, Jesus describes himself as the ***“way, and the truth, and the life.”*** The Christian life is a journey. We are moving from one place to another. We are traveling on a path, and even as God’s people, staying on this path of wisdom is a decision that we make almost constantly. We learn, and we grow, and adjust our behavior. So, first of all, King Solomon describes the way of wisdom.

II. **As we continue looking at this passage, we also find that King Solomon goes on to describe the PATH OF WICKEDNESS.**

And the path of wickedness is the complete opposite of the way of wisdom. Instead of leading to life, this path leads to death. Instead of leading to freedom, this path leads to stumbling and violence. And King Solomon is just as urgent with the message that his sons stay on the right path as he is with the message that they avoid this path.

But there is something new as he describes the path of wickedness, and it comes in the warning about those who would drag us down this path. We have some evil influences in the second part of this passage as

Solomon warns his sons about these **“evil men”** who cannot sleep unless they do evil, unless they cause others to stumble. They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. Sleeping, and eating, and drinking are things we do regularly, and Solomon uses these basics of life to try to show us that some people influence others to do evil with the same regularity that many of us sleep, and eat, and drink. These are all gifts of God that have been twisted and abused. That’s what sin does. It takes a gift, a blessing from God, and turns it into something twisted and evil. That is what temptation is.

But the emphasis here is that the path to wickedness is not neutral. It’s not just sitting over there somewhere waiting for us, but there are people all around us who are actively pulling us in that direction. We are surrounded by evil influences - steering us, enticing us to take what appears to be a very appealing path. And I know it is hard for us to accept that the people we know and love might be pulling us in that direction, but of all people, King Solomon had some experience, didn’t he? For being such a wise man, King Solomon made some incredibly stupid decisions. In his case, he married the daughters of a good number of foreign kings. And I’m assuming it made some sense at the time. These were powerful alliances, these were beautiful women, promises were made, and so on, but over time, these relationships led to the downfall of the kingdom. As Christians, we want to assume the best of people, but we also need to be careful. We need to be careful that we are the ones doing the influencing, and not the other way around.

When we feel ourselves getting pulled aside, Solomon’s advice is: Don’t go there! **“Do not enter the path of the wicked,”** he says in verse 14. **“Do not proceed in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by it; turn away from it and pass on.”** That’s pretty clear, isn’t it? We are to avoid being influenced by evil just like we might avoid some kind of contagious disease. A number of times, I’ve gone to visit some of you in the hospital, and there is a warning outside the room that says that gloves, and masks, and gowns need to be worn before entering the room. And sometimes, I don’t know if that’s for your benefit or my benefit, but I don’t care! If there is a contagious disease warning on the door, wrap me in saran wrap! Put me in a giant zip-loc bag! And maybe that’s the warning here about sin: Stay away from it. Do not go down that path.

And the danger here is that we stumble and fall. Isn’t that what Solomon warns about in verse 16? If we allow ourselves to get pulled down that path, we are in danger. So many things seem so harmless at the beginning: Just a peek, just a sip, this is harmless, I can control it. And before long, we stumble and fall. We think of Lot wanting those greener pastures, and before long, he was sitting there in Sodom in the city gates and basically had to be dragged out of that city as God destroyed it. We think of King David looking over the palace wall at a young woman bathing, and before long, he was committing sexual sin and murdering the woman’s husband. There are so many examples in the Bible of people starting with some small thing, and they head down that path just a little bit, and before long, they are stumbling down the path, just as Solomon warns about here. But most of us can probably look at our own lives as well. That’s how we’ve stumbled. We did some seemingly insignificant thing, and before long, we found ourselves quite a bit further down that path of wickedness than we ever intended. We think of what we’ve seen on the news here in Madison just this week with the director of MSCR. Supposedly, he has admitted that he started Googling images of women in bikinis, and now he has stumbled down this path that Solomon is warning us about here.

We need to remember, though, that the path to wickedness does not necessarily look dark and menacing at the point we get on it. We think of this path on the wall up here. If it weren’t for the sign, we might not see a huge difference between the trail to the right and the trail to the left. And when I was there, I didn’t hear any banjo music coming from one direction. I didn’t see a scary clown over there behind a tree. And that’s the point: I needed guidance and direction from someone who had been there before me. The same is true

spiritually: Sin, also, is deceptive, especially at the beginning, and we need God's wisdom to guide us in making these decisions. We need the word to guide us. And this is setting us up for so many of the random proverbs that come later in this book. ***"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death"*** (Proverbs 14:12).

Conclusion:

As we come to the last two verses, I want to wrap this up by emphasizing that both paths are progressive. Both paths are going somewhere, and so it is very important that we make a choice sooner rather than later. On one hand (in verse 18), ***"The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,"*** Solomon says, ***"[it] shines brighter and brighter until the full day."*** The path of the righteous, then, is like a sunrise. This past Wednesday, I mentioned hiking out to the shore of Lake Superior to watch the sunrise a few weeks go. What an awesome experience! I started out with a flashlight and a headlamp, made it to the shore with the crashing waves, and then over the next hour or so, I got to watch something absolutely amazing. It just got better and better, and the trip back to the trailhead was much safer in the light than it was in the dark.

On the other hand, ***"The way of the wicked is like darkness,"*** Solomon says, and ***"...they do not know over what they stumble."*** Some have compared this choice we face to the difference between a sunrise and a sunset. If I were looking at a photograph, I think I would have a hard time telling the difference. I don't know. I've never really thought about it! But at any given moment, a sunrise and a sunset are basically the same. The difference is what comes next! The sunrise gets brighter and brighter, but the sunset gets darker and darker. And that's about what happens on this path we're talking about. We take the way of wisdom, and we get more clarity as time goes on, as we gain experience, as we learn and as we grow. But on the other hand, if we take that path of wickedness, life gets darker and darker, until we stumble headlong into the darkness of eternity. The point of this passage is: We have a choice to make. And these are choices we make over and over, every day. And ultimately the choice is as distinct as light is from darkness. Those who choose wisdom walk in ever-increasing light, but those who choose wickedness lose that light bit by bit until it is gone completely and they are lost in the darkness.

We started this morning with the reminder that the Bible is a practical book and that our everyday choices are probably quite a bit more spiritual than we might want to admit. And what I mean by that is: God cares about how we live - not just when we come together for worship, but when we go home today, when we go to work, when we go to school tomorrow. He cares how we treat people. He cares what we look at and what we think about. He cares whether we honor our parents. He cares about how we treat the poor. And the good news from our text this morning is that we always have an opportunity to turn back. One of my favorite quotes that's not from the Bible comes from C.S. Lewis and what he said about progress. All of us want to think of ourselves as being progressive. Here in Wisconsin, our state motto is, "Forward!" We are some forward-thinking people. Thinking about this choice between paths, C.S. Lewis said this,

Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the [one] who turns back soonest is the most progressive....

When we take a wrong turn, the sooner we turn back the better, because the farther we get from the fork in the road, the more difficult it is to return. With this in mind, I want us to close this morning with the passage

Reid read for us earlier, first spoken by Jesus on the side of a hill nearly 2,000 years ago. His command, his encouragement, is that we, ***“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”*** We have come together this morning to encourage each other to stay on the straight and narrow path to life. We need the reminder. And if you are not yet on that path to life, we invite you to join us. The way is narrow, but we are not alone. If we can encourage you in some way, we want to do that. If you are struggling with a sin and need us to pray together as a congregation, let us know. If you need to pray privately with the elders of the congregation, let us know.

If you are ready to obey the gospel, we would love to help with that as well. The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to this earth to offer himself for us. We reenact his death, burial, and resurrection in baptism. We turn from sin, we confess him as being the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be baptized, buried in water, not because our sins have already been forgiven, but for the forgiveness of sins. If we can encourage you in some way, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com