

Money and the Game of LIFE

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

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Proverbs 3:1-12 (NRSV)

- ¹ My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
² for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.
- ³ Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
- ⁴ So you will find favor and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.
- ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
- ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
- ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
- ⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.
- ⁹ Honor the LORD with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
- ¹⁰ then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Luke 14:25-35 (NRSV)

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him [Jesus]; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. ³⁴ “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? ³⁵ It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

What is the place of money in our lives?

Is our purpose to acquire as much as possible, or at least the stuff and pleasures it can buy? Is there no cost to our professed discipleship?

In the first week of this series, Rev. Robert Hasley preached in all of our worship services. He asked us to consider our purpose in life. What are we here for? What are our aims? Our goals?

In the Milton Bradley game of LIFE, each player’s purpose is to get the most money over the course of one’s lifetime. Decisions are made and luck plays a big role, but the goal is clear – make the most money. In the original 1960 edition of the game, you finish either in Millionaire Acres or in the Poor Farm. I guess we don’t use the term, “Poor Farm,” very much anymore, so in the latest edition of the game you retire either to Millionaire Estates

or Countryside Acres. In all editions of the game, he (or she!) who dies with the most money wins!¹

Yes, I know it's a game but it looks pretty close to the mark when I see how so many people live their lives and what they seem to value. It is hard to see our bling-drenched pop culture in any other way. What is the advice for youth from the ever-wise Curtis James Jackson III, aka 50 Cent? *Get Rich or Die Tryin.*²

For the students

But today's passage from the book of Proverbs has a very different message. The immediate focus of this passage is a student in a school of wisdom. The teacher hearkens back to our topic in week three of this series: faithfulness. The student wishing to grow in genuine wisdom will heed God's teachings about the life worth living and will remain faithful and loyal to God and to those teachings.

In an image of faithfulness incarnate, the student is to wear faithfulness around his neck and write it on the tablet of his heart. As we saw in week three, faithfulness is keeping one's

Hating??

In this week's passage from Luke, Jesus pulls no punches with the crowds. They may be caught up in the excitement of Jesus' journey, but they better understand the cost of discipleship: there can be no higher priority than Jesus. If Mom calls and says to give up the journey and come home, Jesus warns that you better be prepared to hang up the phone. Jesus comes before mother, or father, or siblings, or even life itself. Jesus' talk of "hate" is not about malice or hostility toward our parents nor is it about self-loathing. It is about being willing to turn away from anyone or anything that would pull us away from Jesus. But there is more.

For you and me, Jesus' talk about carrying a cross (v. 27) is a figure of speech. For anyone in the crowd that day, the cross was a stark reality. Some in the crowds would have been old enough to remember thirty years before when the Romans had crucified thousands of Galilean Jews. The rest would have been told the story. The horror of crucifixion was a very real possibility for anyone who continued on with Jesus. You and I may not face death as a consequence of our faith in Christ, though some Christians still do. For us, the question is whether we can even recognize that there is a cost to our discipleship. If we believe there is no cost, then we are not hearing Jesus. As he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 14:35).

promises and working for the good of the one to whom the faithfulness is given.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart," the teacher says, "do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him . . . do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil."

The teacher then moves from the inward heart to the outward expression of faithfulness to God: worship. It is God and God alone whom we worship and adore, to whom we pay homage. The teacher reminds the student that he is to set aside the best of his harvest for God. How could God get any less than the best – the first fruits? And then it seems that the teacher promises some sort of quid pro quo. Set aside the first fruits and the barns will fill up and there will always be plenty of wine.³ There is a similar passage in the book of Malachi: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (3:10).

But it would be a mistake to read these passages and other similar ones as God's promise of some sort of tit-for-tat bargain. We want to imagine that God says to his people, pay the tithe (the first fruits) and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job.

¹Another change in the game is that the new edition has nine lawsuit squares on which you can land and sue any player of your choosing for \$100,000. Plaintiff always wins. There is some serious social commentary in this change to the game!

²50 Cent's album by this name has sold 15 million copies. That's a lot of preaching.

³I can't let pass the observation that this is one of many biblical passages in which wine is seen as a blessing from God for a faithful people.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes in her commentary on Malachi, “That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to ‘bring the full tithe’ (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven’s richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew

The Cost of Discipleship
By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April, 1945, for his part in an attempt on Hitler’s life. *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) is his most well-known book. Had Bonhoeffer been in the crowd on the day that Jesus turned and confronted his disciples, he would have understood Jesus’ talk of crosses. Listen to these words, written as the Nazi darkness fell across Germany:

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . .”

“Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field . . . it is the pearl of great price . . . it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him. . . . Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. . . . it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. . . . Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life.”

every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom’s goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well.”

Cost-free?

Besides, is there no cost to our discipleship? The so-called “health and wealth” aka “prosperity” gospel promises just such a bargain, as if God is just waiting around to shower you with wealth and make sure you end up in Millionaire Estates. Just name it and claim it!

But the truth is far different, as Jesus makes clear in today’s passage from Luke’s gospel. Jesus was such a great teacher. So often, he would make his point by telling a story and usually a brief story at that. Jesus didn’t use parables because he wanted to obscure his message but because he wanted to illuminate his message. We can participate in Jesus’ stories in a way that we could never participate in a saying or some sort of theological explanation.

After confronting the crowd with the cost of discipleship, Jesus tells them genuine discipleship may even require leaving one’s family for the family of Christ. Jesus tells two brief parables to illustrate a simple point: only fools would start a project without being pretty sure they could finish it. None of us would build a new house without understanding the costs

and doing all we could to ensure that we could finish the job. Similarly, using a military analogy, Jesus notes that no wise king would wage war without the prospect of victory. Jesus wants the over-enthusiastic crowd to understand what they are getting into when they pledge their loyalty to him. Do we really understand what we have gotten into? Have we acknowledged and anticipated the implications of living a life for the benefit of others?

Could we ever be sure that we can pay this cost? No, of course not. Peter would deny Jesus three times. But still, our call to discipleship is to be all consuming. This can be no half-hearted commitment. No part of our lives can be excluded from this commitment, including our wallets and relationships and, as Jesus pointedly notes, our possessions (v. 33). This is the path of the real game of life. Its end lies not in Millionaire Estates but in Jesus Christ and his kingdom, in which there are no blind nor hungry no lame. That’s a purpose worth living for.

How to Go Wrong with the Book of Proverbs

In *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Dillard and Longman remind us that there are a few ways we could go wrong when we come to the book of Proverbs.

First, we can make the proverbs out to be absolutes, as if they are divine promises that always bear out. However, the proverbs themselves reflect truths that will bear out over time. You and I know that the good guys do not always win in this life. But our time frames are not limited to this life. God is a mighty fortress even for those who die at the hands of evil. The Christian and Jewish belief in the resurrection of the body is the concrete expression of our firm confidence that not only is death not our end, but that newly embodied life awaits on the other side of death.

Second, we need to read the proverbs in the context of all Scripture. Read alone, the proverbs would lead us to believe that success in life is God's blessing and suffering is his curse. But the book of Job reminds us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin always carries with it terrible consequences that may not be immediately evident. But at the same time, suffering does not necessarily imply sin. Stuff happens and much of it we don't understand. Job certainly didn't. Proverbs is no different than any other book in the Bible, all of it must be read in the context of the whole of Scripture.

Third, always read the pithy aphorisms that make up much of the book in the context of the first eight chapters which are all about the way of Wisdom. Will we choose Wisdom, God's way through life, or folly, our way through life? Everything starts there.

Memory Verse of the Week

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (NRSV)

Like all Jewish boys of his day, Jesus learned these words as the opening words of his daily prayer, the *Shema*. As an adult, Jesus told a skeptical Pharisee and lawyer that this was the greatest of all the LORD's commandments. Next week, we'll learn the second commandment chosen by Jesus, which is integral with and inseparable from the first.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here are some questions on the subject of our finances posed by Rev. Steve Robertson

1. Did your parents influence/teach you about the management of money? What are some of these teachings?
2. What lessons have you learned about managing finances from "the school of hard knocks?"
3. The Bible warns us not to be a "slave to the lender". What does this mean?
4. How does our culture entice us into becoming such a slave?
5. Why does the Bible speak so much about money?
6. How is God calling me or the group to handle our finances?
 - Do you have financial goals?
 - What's the purpose of your goal? What is your "end game"?
 - How are your finances, both present and future, honoring God?
 - How could you help your children/grandchildren learn healthy values regarding the use of money?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 14:28-29 God's basic instruction about setting aside a tithe.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Kings 19:19-21 Elisha gives up everything (and he has a lot!) to follow Elijah. He slaughtered his livestock so that he can never go back.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Malachi 3:6-12 Will anyone rob God?</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 3:7-11 Everything we think we might lose for the sake of Christ is the loss of so much "rubbish."</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 6:8 – 8:1 Stephen must confront the cost of his discipleship. He was the first of Jesus' followers to be executed.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

