

Keeping Faith

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last week of a seven-part series

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Proverbs 3:1–10 (NIV)

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
² for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.

³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
⁶ in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
⁸ This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.

⁹ Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
¹⁰ then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Proverbs 22:17–19 (NIV)

¹⁷ Pay attention and turn your ear to the sayings of the wise;
apply your heart to what I teach,
¹⁸ for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart
and have all of them ready on your lips.
¹⁹ So that your trust may be in the LORD,
I teach you today, even you.

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!”

Philippians 3:12–14 (NIV)

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 4:7–8 (NIV)

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

“Let love and faithfulness never leave you, . . .” (Proverbs 3:3)

In preparing us for this series on Wisdom and the book of Proverbs, Rev. Lauren Gerlach provided the preaching team with a few thoughts on this final week:

Proverbs is written with a unique way of viewing the world: “God, as creator, has made the world with certain rhythms, regularities cycles, and patterns. In order to live well, therefore, ‘wise’ people will pay attention to those rhythms, regularities cycles, and patterns and align their lives to them. Deeply knowing and understanding the way the world works helps us to live enriching, balanced and fulfilled lives” (Roy Heller, Perkins Seminary). Now that we have experienced this series, what does it look like to keep them? Just as the modern proverb says, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.”

So, we turn to Proverbs 3. The immediate focus of this passage is a student in a school of wisdom. The teacher points the student toward the bedrock of our relationship with God: 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. Faithfulness is keeping one’s 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.” This is the meaning of wisdom.

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.¹ 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. We hear it something like this: Send in your money and you’ll get that promotion or new job.

¹ I 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 excellent commentary on Malachi, “That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to ‘bring the full tithe’ (Malachi 3:10). 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 [see Romans 12:1], it is surely true that heaven’s richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew 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, our keeping faith? 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

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.

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 faithfulness 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). 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.

Running toward

The apostle Paul found his purpose when Jesus came to him (Acts 9) and he never lost sight of it or stopped striving to fulfill his purpose. In Philippians, Paul knows that his end may be near, and yet he continues to run the race.

In 3:12 Above, Paul turns his attention to the prize we all seek – true and genuine reconciliation with God. Paul draws on the metaphor of a competitive foot race, which was common and very popular in ancient Greece. But there is something a bit odd here. When you read verses 12-14, it is hard not to get the idea that the prize he seeks is something he can attain by running a good race – as if we haven't been made right with God by Jesus' faithfulness but by our own good works. But surely this isn't what he means. Fred Craddock helps us here:

In verses 12–14 Paul is again the runner (2:16). The metaphor is familiar but is it a contradiction of his strong declaration only a few verses earlier, that righteousness is by faith and not by works? No, not in Paul's mind. Faith for him involved running, wrestling, striving, and fighting, none of which would end until the day of Christ. We must remember that for Paul all that effort was not for merit but was rather the activity of one who had abandoned all claim to merit. Trust in God's grace did not make Paul less active than the Judaizers but rather set him free now to run without watching his feet, without counting his steps, without competing with other servants of Christ. His goal is clear: to be with Christ in the resurrection. To that end he can seek, because he has been found; he can know because he has been known; he can apprehend because he has been apprehended. In a word, Paul sought to lay hold of him who had already laid hold of Paul. If the Judaizers were offering "Jesus plus Moses equals perfection of faith and total assurance," then the Philippians need to know that Paul is not offering that. The work begun among them will not end until God brings it to completion (perfection) in the day of Christ (1:6). Lest any miss that point, Paul portrays himself in the least relaxed, most demanding posture he knows: as a runner in a race. His language is vivid, tense, repetitious: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls. One's first impression is that Paul may be describing a life so demanding that the Philippians may turn from him to the Judaizers who, even with a gospel of works, offer an easier path; but Paul must be honest. Beyond that, however, he probably knows that smiling presentations of the gospel as the way to be healthy, wealthy, and wise are finally insulting to those who wish to be taken more seriously than that.²

The race Paul runs, this journey of faith, is one that requires training, not mere effort. This is something a lot of Christians don't want to hear, but we need to. Those in our congregation who've run marathons didn't just roll out of bed and run 26.2 miles. They trained for it. I once taught people to fly jet airplanes. There again, effort was essential, but it took a year of hard training to create an Air Force pilot. Nobody flies a jet by effort alone the first time they try, or the second, or the tenth. They train.

² Craddock, F. B. (1985). Philippians. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (61–62). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

So it is with all the great endeavors of our lives. It takes learning and training and discipline. And what could be a greater endeavor than becoming the person God has created each of us to be, a loving disciple of Jesus with the power, as Dallas Willard puts it, “to work the works of the kingdom.” When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Greece, he was training hard in the things of God. He knew that without training, our resolve to keep the faith dissolves into unkept resolutions.

“I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7)

When Paul writes 2 Timothy, he is a much older man and knows that he is nearing the end. The race he described in Philippians 3 has been run and Paul has won the crown. It has been difficult, but Paul is God’s and will remain God’s. For, he has “kept the faith.”

In closing this series, let’s hear from Rev. Gerlach:

As we go forward from this series, we are called to continue pursuing God’s special wisdom and teaching it to others. We are called to pass it down to our children, share it with our coworkers, embrace it in our relationships and so much more. Just like the relationship between Paul and Timothy in sharing the faith... let us go forward from this series sharing God’s wisdom from Proverbs with others. As we take inventory of the daily rhythms that we hope to cultivate, may our focus remain on keeping God’s ways.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

This Sunday: *World Religions in Seven Sentences -- Judaism*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.