

WISE PLANNING**PROVERBS 3:5-6**

We all need guidance and direction at times. Some of us need all the help we can get! Perhaps you heard about the summer visitor to Southport Island off the coast of Maine who asked a local farmer how to get off the island so he could get back to Boothbay Harbor on the mainland. The farmer explained how to find the road back to the bridge which was the one and only connection to the mainland. The tourist said, "But I didn't cross any bridge to get here." The farmer shook his head wearily and replied, "Well, now, if you didn't cross any bridge, then you ain't here in the first place, so you got nothing to worry about." It's easy to lose one's direction in life. One remedy is to invite the Lord to help you to become a wise planner.

Two weeks ago I started a message series considering some of the dominant themes found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. How to live wisely and well. Planning might not sound like a very spiritual subject, but the book of Proverbs teaches that if you want to be successful in life, you need to master the ability to plan wisely. It's good, godly, and God-honoring to be as thoughtful as possible about your family, your career, your finances, your spiritual development, and how you serve the Lord. God wants you to live your life on purpose. Be intentional about it. Don't be content just to make it up as you go along and call that approach "faith." It's true you don't have to love God and follow Jesus to realize the importance of making wise decisions in life. But this is even more important for someone who does love God and who does want to make their life count for the Lord Jesus. It honors the Lord to want to know what to do in life, when to do it, how to do it well, and whether He approves of your choices and decisions.

Proverbs offers several statements about wise planning we want to consider today. Perhaps the best overall statement is our primary text for today's message. Great verses to memorize, by the way! The last line is a promise about guidance and direction in life – "... and He (God) will make your paths straight." The promise is preceded by three conditions. Let's consider each of those today. First, if you're going to plan your life wisely, you will need to meet this condition.

THE CONDITION OF TRUST.

There it is in v. 5 (NIV), "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." Do you know what the future holds for you? Of course not. Then, in what or in whom do you put your trust? Most people – if you really analyze what they say and do – trust in themselves ultimately – their own intelligence, their own ability to work hard, their educational qualifications, their financial assets, their own get up and go. Here's one definition of a real Christian to ponder: a person who's given up trusting in himself or herself ultimately. A follower of Jesus has abandoned any attempt to get into Heaven through his or her own efforts. All the more reason to abandon ultimate trust in oneself for living life as well. By definition, a follower of Jesus trusts in Jesus alone ultimately.

Trust in the Lord means recognizing the sovereignty of God. That's a big word that simply means God's will is never ultimately frustrated or set aside. It's gets fulfilled

sooner or later. God always has the last word. Of course, God being sovereign doesn't prevent us from making sinful choices or bad decisions. But neither our sin nor our foolishness frustrates God in any final way. He's simply too big and powerful for that. Proverbs is full of this truth. "We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it." (Pro 16:9 MSG) "We humans keep brainstorming options and plans, but God's purpose prevails." (Pro 19:21 MSG).

There's everything right and appropriate about making wise plans for your life. Those verses aren't suggesting you should live an aimless, perpetually spontaneous, "take it as it comes" kind of life just because God is sovereign and in control. The ability to make a plan and execute it is good and God-honoring. It's actually evidence you've been created in God's image. After all, God is the ultimate planner. As His creation, you've been given the ability to plan. But there's one major difference. God's plans are never frustrated ultimately, but our plans get frustrated often. Why is that? Sometimes, it's because their sinful or bad decisions. But, in addition, some plans don't come to fruition, because we're both ignorant about many things and in control of very little.

Your plans – good or bad – never frustrate God's plans. Is that a reason to be discouraged? Shouldn't be! It means God is bigger than our mistakes. God is bigger than our ignorance and lack of power as well. God is limitless where you and I are very limited. We need to get a fresh understanding of the immense sovereignty of our gracious, loving God! We must trust Him with all of our heart because He alone can bring good even out of our bad decisions. The Bible is full of people – Jacob, Moses, David, Peter, Paul (just to name a few!) – who on occasion made sinful choices, bad decisions, and ignorant plans. But, ultimately, nothing frustrated what God wanted to do in and through those people for His glory. One of my favorite Bible verses says, "God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the day that Christ Jesus returns." (Phil 1:6 CEV) When God starts something, He always finishes it. When God makes a plan, He always brings it to completion. That's exactly why we can and must trust Him with all of our heart.

Trusting in the Lord also recognizes that trusting Him needs to be comprehensive. This is trust that touches every conceivable area of our lives for both time and eternity. Proverbs said, "Put God in charge of your work, then what you've planned will take place." (Pro 16:3 MSG) That phrase "put God in charge" can be literally translated "to roll over upon." I like that image! To trust the Lord with all of your heart means you can roll over up and on Him all your plans and decisions in life. When you do that sincerely, faithfully, and with a clear conscience, you can expect reasonable success for the plans you make. Now, let's be careful right there. God didn't offer some kind of absolute promise about every single plan you and I might make in life. Instead, this is a principle for living life wisely and well. The fact is that sometimes even great plans – plans you pray over, plans you commit to the Lord, plans that seem to honor God, plans you get godly advice for – can fail for reasons you don't understand. But – more often than not – when you truly put God in charge of your life and how you live it including your plans and decisions, you experience success.

It's easy to go to the Bible in search of some technique: how can I pray to get what I want; how can I exercise faith so God will help me do what I plan; how can I be a good spouse or parent. The Bible always puts relationship over technique. As a result, you won't find a lot in the Bible on how to plan, but you will find a lot about how to love God. In the Old Testament book of Psalms, you see its primary author, David, exalting God, praising God, and thanking God. But you also hear David doubt God, express disappointment with God, and even get angry with God. Here's the point of that observation. David had an authentic relationship with the Lord. It wasn't about a technique. Regardless of what happened, God was never far from David's thoughts or plans. David intentionally involved God in every major and minor event in his life. Putting God in charge of your life means exactly that – relationship not technique. Out of your love relationship with Him flows His guidance, His leading, and His direction as you make your plans in your daily life.

It reminds me of a grandfather who took his little granddaughter for a stroll through her new neighborhood. She had just moved in and was still getting acquainted with the streets. They walked for about 15 minutes when the grandfather said, "About how far do you think we're from your new home?" The granddaughter said she didn't know. "Well, what direction do you think we should take to get back to it?" he asked. "I don't know," said the girl. "Sounds like we're lost," teased her grandfather who knew the way back to her home very well. The little girl smiled and said, "I'm not lost, Grandpa; I'm with you." My friend, if you truly put God in charge of your life – you trust Him with all of your heart – you will never be truly lost. Now, if you're going to plan your life wisely and well, there's a second condition in Proverbs 3:5-6.

THE CONDITION OF HUMILITY.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart (what does the second phrase say?) and lean not on your own understanding." (Pro 3:5 NIV) That emphasizes the simple fact you are wise to recognize your limitations. That's one aspect of being truly humble, is it not? Proverbs says, "Don't brashly announce what you're going to do tomorrow; you don't know the first thing about tomorrow." (Pro 27:1 MSG) Isn't that the truth? You don't even know for sure what the rest of this day will be like! Does that mean you shouldn't make plans – simply because you have no idea what tomorrow will be like? No. What's being rejected here is a kind of arrogant, prideful cockiness about what you're going to do, what you're going to achieve, or what you're going to accomplish. In a recent series of messages on God's will, we saw how James over in the New Testament gave a perfect example of how to correct this kind of boastful attitude. "And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, 'Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money.' You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, 'If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that.'" (Jam 4:13-16 MSG)

Do you worry about the future? I suspect anxiety about tomorrow is a bigger problem for most of us than overconfidence about tomorrow. Did you know chronic worry

displeases God? Essentially it's a failure to trust Him. These passages we've just read aren't meant to discourage us from planning, but simply to remind us that tomorrow belongs completely to God. When you truly accept that fact, you are actually released to plan even more wisely because it's done with an eye and a heart to do God's will. When you plan with humility, you acknowledge the fact you're limited but God is limitless and He controls tomorrow fully. You can rest in the knowledge that even when your life takes unplanned and unwanted detours, God is still very much there working out His plan and purpose for your life, nonetheless.

The year was 1920. The scene was an examining board for selecting missionaries. Standing before the board was a young man named Oswald Smith. One dream dominated his heart. More than anything else he wanted to be a missionary to another part of the world. Over and over again, he had prayed, "Lord, I want to be a missionary for You. Open a door of service for me." Now, at last, as he stood before this missionary sending board, it seemed his prayer would be answered. But the board turned Oswald Smith down to go as a missionary. He didn't meet their qualifications. Oswald Smith had made his plans – plans that honored God in every way – but life now presented him with an unplanned, unwanted detour. What would he do now? As he processed this disappointment, God planted another idea in Oswald Smith's heart. If he couldn't go as a missionary, he would build a church which could send out missionaries. And that's exactly what he did. Smith went on to pastor The Peoples' Church in Toronto which sent out more missionaries than any other single church of its day and time. Oswald Smith brought God into his frustrated plans and God turned that detour into a new, wonderful highway of service for Him!

Something else about humility. If you're humble, you recognize your limitations which means you're happy to get counsel from godly people about your plans. Have you ever known someone who constantly said, "God told me to do this. The Lord told me to do that"? People like that make me a little nervous simply because they seem to lack humility. They also seem slow to recognize God's desire to speak into our lives through the counsel of godly people. Humility demands the willingness to receive wise advice. Listen to what Proverbs say, "Refuse good advice and watch your plans fail; take good counsel and watch them succeed." (Pro 15:22 MSG) Humility calls for having a healthy skepticism about the 100% accuracy of your own perceptions. How important it is in living wisely and well to have people you can go to when you're faced with a big decision – people who know you well, people who love you, and people who want God's best for you. If you want to make wise plans in life, you must trust God first and be humble second. But I see a third condition in our Bible passage today.

THE CONDITION OF OBEDIENCE.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (and here's the next phrase or condition); in all your ways acknowledge Him." (Pro 3:5-6 NIV) To acknowledge God is obey Him. While it's true our sins can't frustrate God or His will for our lives ultimately, they can most certainly frustrate, complicate, and burden our lives more than necessary. What did the writer of Proverbs mean by acknowledging or

obeying God? It means you offer Him a moral lifestyle. You increasingly live life His way. You don't expect to receive God's wisdom and direction in life if you're still intentionally living in ways contrary to His will. That's a central truth in the book of Proverbs. "If you do the right thing, honesty will be your guide. But if you are crooked, you will be trapped by your own dishonesty." (Pro 11:3 CEV) "Those who follow the right path fear the Lord; those who take the wrong path despise him." (Pro 14:2 NLT)

You never have to wonder if it's OK with God just this once to tell a lie, or steal, or commit adultery, or gossip, or despise a poor person, or treat anyone with disrespect. Whenever you or I tolerate a known sin in our lives – we just find ways to excuse it and rationalize it rather than confess and turn away from it – something becomes obvious to God that should be just as obvious to us. We don't really want His guidance for our plans or our lives. Oh, we may want God to do something for us, but we don't truly want His direction. And so God rightly concludes, "If he or she won't do what I've said in My Word to do clearly and plainly, then they put little value on any direction I might give them about their plans in life."

Let's not bother asking God to bless our plans in life if we're unwilling to obey the clear teaching of His Word in how to conduct our everyday lives. I'm not talking about being perfect. That's impossible for any of us! But, if there's something in your life you know is immoral and displeases God, confess it and get rid of it before you ask Him to bless your plans. That word "path" or "walk" back in Proverbs 14:2 could just as correctly be translated "lifestyle." "Those who follow the right lifestyle fear the Lord; those who take the wrong lifestyle despise him." When your lifestyle is truly moral and follows what the Bible teaches, you indicate a proper respect for the Lord. But when you call good what God calls bad, you only reveal how little you really value the Lord. Don't have the nerve to ask God for His blessing on your plans when you thumb your nose at His rules.

What does it mean to acknowledge or obey God? A moral lifestyle. But you also offer Him a diligent lifestyle. Proverbs says, "The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty." (Pro 21:5 NIV) Right there we can see we're all called to make wise plans and to do it diligently. God is not anti-planning. Far from it! What did the writer of Proverbs mean by "diligence"? The word literally means "to cut, to sharpen" like when you cut with a blade or sharpen a knife so it's more effective. Diligence is mental and spiritual sharpness. When you plan diligently, you work at it by preparing well. You put together a step by step process and then implement that strategy. A hasty person, on the other hand, just settles for a quick, easy plan, a sloppy strategy, and an effort that's half-hearted at best. Is it surprising the result is failure?

I hear God's Word telling us to apply mental and spiritual sharpness – diligence – to making decisions and plans in any area of life – your family, your business or career, your financial affairs, and – most importantly – how to follow Jesus more intentionally and better every day. You pray. You search the Bible for its input. You talk with friends who love God and love you. You wait upon God. All that demands time, effort, patience, and discipline. That's work and sometimes it can be hard. But you can't be diligent and lazy at the same time. They cancel each other out. In the end, a diligent

person makes careful decisions while a hasty person makes casual decisions about life. Living diligently is part and parcel of obeying the Lord. When you do that, you can expect Him “to make your paths straight” in life. You’ll be shown the way.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, (here’s the last phrase) and he will make your paths straight.” (Pro 3:5-6 NIV) What’s meant by a “straight” path there? It’s not the easy path in life necessarily. I believe it means a God-led path, a God-led life. I think of how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness all the way to the Promised Land. Spiritually, it was a very straight path – a God-led path – but not an easy one. I think of Jesus’ life and ministry. He knew the Holy Spirit’s moment by moment guidance for every area of His life, but it was a path that included persecution, betrayal, and – finally – a cross. It was a straight path – a God-led path in every way – but it wasn’t an easy path. Let’s keep that in mind as we plan our lives and live out our plans. Keep the conditions. Trust God. Be humble. Obey God. I can’t promise the path God opens up to you or me will always be easy, but it will be straight. If we stay on it, God will lead us safe, sound, and straight all the way to our eternal home.

During World War 2, an American reconnaissance team was scouting Nazi troop positions. Leaving early one winter morning, they had to cross a mine field along the way that had been set up by American soldiers. The mines had been secretly and clearly marked for them. Very cautiously, but successfully, they made their way around and over the deadly explosives hidden in the ground. Just on the other side of the field, the team entered some woods and secretly approached the Nazi positions. They didn’t get far, however, before Nazi machine guns opened up on them and pinned them to the ground. For hours they were trapped there just lying on the ground unable to advance or retreat. Snow began to fall and before long they found themselves in a blizzard. That was actually good news because it made it possible for them to risk retreating. They accomplished part of their journey back successfully. The bad news was that the same snow had now completely covered all the secret markings in the mine field they’d successfully crossed that morning. What now?

The platoon leader sensed the Nazi soldiers were heading in their direction. He called his men together and told them he was going to lead them single file across that mine field. He ordered them to walk 30 yards behind each other and – most important of all – to put their feet exactly in the boot imprints of the soldier ahead of them. Slowly that group of soldiers made their way across the mine field. Only one set of boot prints was left in the snow. Miraculously, the leader had guessed the right path and the entire platoon made it back safely. The next day it was discovered the entire group had just barely stepped over a mine avoiding its explosive, deadly power. They followed their courageous leader and made it home safely.

Even when we plan wisely and well, walking through life is a little like walking through a mine field. But take courage! Jesus, our Leader, has gone before us. His footprints can be seen if you look for them. And if you follow them, you’ll arrive safely home. Trust God. Be humble. Obey God. That’s how to live wisely and well.