



## The Good Life

Proverbs 3:1-35

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Becoming a parent, as it is for many, is an exercise in learning how to give wisdom, advice, and rules. Good parents set ground rules for their home: they tell their toddlers not to touch dangerous objects or throw things that aren't meant to be thrown. They tell their children not to run in the house, not to talk back, to obey and listen. They tell their teenagers to avoid certain situations, to be kind to everyone, to learn to take responsibility for their actions. All families are familiar with rule, with commandments, with advice. Few and terrible are the parents who never tell their children "no" and "don't" and "watch out." If every child is familiar with the rules they have grown up in, parents are also family with that one word, that questioning challenge: "why"? Why must I obey? Why must I keep the rules?

Oftentimes, parents don't have a good answer. Because I said so, becomes a default. This could be a sign that the rule imposed on the child is arbitrary and unnecessary. But generally, what is the reason that the parent gives? Why obey? Why eat this and not that, act this way and not that? Because it's *good* for you. For the child, good commands are meant for their flourishing. To put it simply, children who obey wise parents are happy.

Everyone wants to be happy. No one desires misery. We all seek the Good Life. The trouble is, we have forgotten how to get there. Proverbs 3 is not God telling us to listen and obey him: "just because I said so." It's him telling us to obey and listen because it's good for us. It's the way back to happiness. It's a place to go when we feel burdened by commands and rules and restricted by the way things are and begin to ask "why"? Proverbs 3 is the way back to the good life.

By the "Good Life", we can mean a number of different aspects. I think it can be summed up by one word in **verse 1-2: peace**. Shalom—true, soul peace. This is God speaking, saying: my son, do what I say. Don't forget what I teach, put my commands in your heart. Why? Because doing so will bring you peace, rest, the green pastures you crave and the comfort you seek from your pain. **Verses 3-4** show us another picture. Write these things on the tablet of your hear, and then the good life will come by way of favor with God and man—good success, flourishing.

Augustine has a small book, a philosophical discourse, discussing this very thing. It's called *On the Happy Life*. In it, Augustine details a conversation between some of his family members, himself, and his mother Monica. Gathered around for two days, they discuss what it means to be happy. As they reach their initial conclusion of the good life, they all agree that happiness cannot simply be



found in acquiring possessions: whether those possessions are physical, mental, or even a possession of wealth. Why not? Because no one who is in fear can truly be happy—and as long as happiness is made up of things that can be lost, it will also be tinged with fear. To be truly happy, we must possess something that cannot be taken away. And of course, Augustine confirms, since “God is eternal and ever abiding... he who has God is happy.”<sup>1</sup> This is the good life: acquiring the one thing that brings peace, the one thing that satisfies, the one thing that cannot be lost: God himself.

I believe this is the meaning of **verse 3** as well. In Exodus 34, Moses goes up to meet with God a second time. The first time, he receives the Law of God on tablets of stone, but smashes it to the ground when he sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. Now Moses is back with new tablers, and in verse 6, the Lord passes by him and proclaims his name. How does God describe himself? “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” So **verse 3** is really telling us: let not God forsake you. Bind him and his commands around your neck and on your heart. If you want to be happy, you want the good life, you must possess God, who is steadfast love and faithfulness. He who has God is happy.

So do you want the peace that comes in finding your happiness in good in that which cannot be taken away? Let’s listen then, to the wisdom of Proverbs 3. We will find here the commands of the good life, the benefits of the good life, the recipients of the good life, and the application of the good life.

## **The Commands of the Good Life: Trust, Fear, and Honor God (5-10)**

If Proverbs 3 is the Father giving to us his house rules, we find them organized for us nicely in verses 5-10. Obviously, the instruction of God is a huge meta-narrative in the book of Proverbs. We can summarize the instructions of God here with three words: trust, fear, and honor.

**Verse 5** may be one of the most well-known verses in all of the book of Proverbs. The command there is simple: *trust*. Trust is a child-like word, isn’t it? It’s a word sons and daughters use of a kind father. Because the aramaic cognate of the Hebrew “trust” means to throw oneself down on one’s face, one commentator says that to trust God is to “do a belly-flop on him with all our sin and all our failure and all our fears.”<sup>2</sup> Trusting God is less a sincere belief that he will come through and more a life filled with actions that *demand* God come through. It’s not just looking out of the plane and saying to your skydiving instructor: “I trust that a good parachute could save me”; it’s jumping off the plane with abandon. We get a sense of what this kind of trust is in **verse 6**. Trust is not acknowledging God in *some* of our ways, but *all* of our ways. It’s not half-hearted, it’s not hesitant. Trusting God doesn’t come up with back-up plans when the whole Christianity doesn’t pan out.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *On The Happy Life*. trans. Michael P. Foley.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Ortland, *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, 63.



There is no back-up plan for the life of faith—that’s what makes it faith. And so it’s natural that the blessing that comes from trusting God with everything is *straight* paths, also translated as *smooth* paths. We fling ourselves over the edge onto God, and he makes the sailing smooth, purposeful, and life-giving. We can actually say it this way: Jesus Christ embodies this wisdom by trusting in his Father all the way to death. He leaned all he had on the Father’s plan. Sweating blood, he did God’s will even when it looked crooked and foolish to the human eye. And what happened? God used Christ’s wisdom and obedience to make straight ways. The crooked cross became the smooth path to everlasting life for the people of God. Jesus is the son who trusted.

We need not spend too much time on **verse 7**’s command, because we can remember two weeks ago in Chapter 1. Fearing the Lord doesn’t mean being afraid of him, it means trembling before his goodness as redeemer. When we fear and stand in awe of his beauty and holiness, that is when, as verse 7 implies, we turn away from evil. A knowledge of God as creator will not cause us to turn from evil—we are too dense for that. Only a knowledge and fear of God as redeemer will brighten the gospel in our eyes to make it more compelling than evil. This is coupled with the command not to be wise in our own eyes. Being wise in our own eyes is simply fearing things that are not God. Instead of trembling before him, we consider ourselves pretty grand. And in doing so, we mistake what is good for evil and what is evil for good. Meaning, we can never turn away from evil if we judge it with our own eyes and not by fear of God. This is what the text means then, when it promises in **verse 8** healing and refreshment. We are sick with sin, and unable to see with our own eyes, but a right view of God in Christ as a loving redeemer awakens our hearts, turns our eyes, and heals us. Remember that the miracles Jesus performed while on earth are shadows of our future and echoes of spiritual realities. He is healing our bodies and our souls when we go his way.

**Verses 9-10** give us one more command: honor. I believe other versions than the ESV give a better sense of verse 9 when they say “Honor the Lord *from* your wealth.” To honor the Lord *with* wealth can imply simply using your money and resource in a way that is good and pleasing to God. This is not a bad thing, but the reference in verse 9 to the “firstfruits” leads us to believe that this text is not about how to honor God with your spending and your saving and investing. This is a text about honoring God *from* your wealth, meaning what you directly take out and give up for him and his kingdom. The firstfruits are what you take *before* you spend, before you save. It’s the first thing you do with anything you have been given. Why is honoring so God linked to our wealth? Because when we give generously to God’s kingdom, we give him honor by saying: “this is really your gift that I am giving back to you.” Giving firstfruits to God is a sure way to say: “you come first.” It’s giving him honor. And so notice the blessing of this kind of giving in **verse 10**. God isn’t promising more wealth in order to spend more and save more, although again you can honor God in how you spend and save. No, the context here is giving. God blesses those who honor him from their wealth by giving them more to give! This is how God gives: he generously offers Christ his son, the firstfruit of all creation, in order to bring about a harvest of righteousness, full barns and bursting vineyards of spiritual fruit. Why? So that he can give even more to his children whom he loves.



The good life starts with these commands. Trust God, fear God, and honor God. And they come with incredible blessings too, benefits like favor and healing and plenty. So how do we understand these benefits? Are they simply rewards for being wise? Let's turn to that question now.

## The Benefits of the Good Life: Learning to Delight in Discipline (11-12)

Earlier this week I was talking to someone who spent his youth attending and participating in the Catholic Church. Back then, all of the Mass was in Latin. He said that most of what he learned was just listening to the readings of the scriptures, which were in English. He told me that in his mind, the entire take-away could be summarized like this: do the right thing, and you will be rewarded for it. That's the wisdom of God that he was taught in his exposure to the church: do what God says, don't make bad choices, and in the end, it will turn out well. In many ways, we can approach the commands of Proverbs 3 similarly. Do what God says, and you will have straight paths, refreshment, good success and favor, your barns will be full and bursting like verse 10 says. The problem with that is that it is not good news. It's not gospel. It's not gospel, because it doesn't start or end with God.

God's command is not "work towards God with all your heart, and lean on your own goodness, and he will make your path straight." No, it's *trust*. Don't lean on your own understanding, on your own ability, on your own goodness, on your own works or morality. Lean instead only on him. The text does not say: "fear and tremble before your upright deeds and you will be healed" No, it's *fear God* and you will be healed.. And neither does the text say: "Give away your money in morally acceptable ways to charity you believe in, and you will receive more." No, it's *honor God* from your wealth.

This is precisely the reason that the wisdom of God is so difficult at times to grasp—because it's so simple. We want there to be a catch, we want to contribute, we want to, **verse 7**, to be wise in our own eyes. We want wisdom and blessing to start and end with our own effort, our own ability, our own pride. But **verses 11-12** dynamite that perspective. If the central message of the wisdom of God is "live good and get good things" then we are of all people most to be pitied! Because now God has ceased to be Father and has become to us stock broker. We muster up our investment, and he multiplies it. And the reason that is bad news and not good news is because of how messed up the stock market of this world and our hearts is. Friends, if all you see Proverbs to be is good advice to get back on track and live a good life, then you've lost already. You are a fool, who will acquire some possessions now, but you can never be happy. Your happiness is dependent on that which fades, and so the good life will pass you by as you exchange trust for toil and fear for self-fortitude and honor for gain.

Why is Proverbs good news? Because it's good news for fools, not good news for good people. What happens when we are too dumb, too idiotic, too foolish to trust, fear, and honor God? Are we



then cut out of his blessings? No, the gospel tells us that God disciplines the ones he loves, **verse 12**. When his sons are foolish, he won't let them get away with it. He will teach them, through hardship, how to be wise and so inherit his gracious blessings. Listen here: God often rips away his benefits to show us our foolishness. And you can respond by despising that in anger. Or you can respond to hardship and discipline by being weary and despairing. Both of them miss the point. The wisdom of God is not that if you live a good life you are guaranteed blessing. The wisdom of God says that if blessing is not coming your way—God is refining you in order to trust him as Father. He is disciplining you so that he may give you all the blessings of himself. This is what we call *sanctification*. If God has saved you in Christ, he is making you holy and sanctified so that one day you are wise enough to receive total and uninhibited communion with God in paradise. Discipline is the benefit of the good life, because it shows us that God is treating us as sons and not as servants only. And that is good news for those of us in dark places. Jesus too “learned obedience through what he suffered”, as Hebrews tells us. He was the son who perfectly delighted in the discipline of God—not because he was foolish or deserving of discipline, but because he trusted that as he took the punishment we deserved, he was becoming wisdom for us.

## **The Recipients of the Good Life: From Sons of Adam to Sons of God (13-26)**

Now, I could end there. But I want to spend just a few minutes with the rest of our time examining the question: “how do I receive the good life, the blessings of God?” Starting in **verse 13** we actually have a new lecture, but the theme is similar. Look at how the good life is described in **verses 13-18**. The main thrust of this section is simple: when you lack wisdom, you have nothing, but when you get it, you have everything. There is a prominence here that makes sense: as wisdom flows from God, God becomes the most precious thing to us. Without him, we can have everything and yet have nothing. With God, we can have nothing and yet possess everything. I want us to focus on **verse 13** to see who the recipient is here. Blessed is “the one”. So although this is a new lecture, it is not yet addressed to the son, as all the previous ones have been. Instead, it's addressed to “the one” which in Hebrew is essentially “mankind” or “anyone” but is literally “adam”.

The reason this is interesting is because of the allusion in **verse 18** to the “tree of life”. If you are familiar with Genesis, you know that Adam's first sin, first folly, his first turning away from wisdom, was to eat of the tree God told him not to eat, and the consequences were that he was cut off from the tree of life. God tells Adam: eat of the tree of life, and you will live forever. But disobey and eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and you will die. So here in verses 13-18 we have a retelling of the Genesis account. Wisdom is listening to God and obeying God and therefore having access to a tree of everlasting life and immortality. This offer is given to “the one” to “everyone” to “adam”. And as the whole world is descended from Adam, every human being's *lifeblood* is contingent on receiving the wisdom of God. In other words, anyone who does not make the mistake of Adam and listens and obeys God, will receive what Adam was cut off from: the tree of eternal life.



This story line, drawing us back to the garden, is confirmed by **19-20**. God was wise when he made the garden, and wise when he placed Adam in it. Even now, dew and rain and water only come from his knowledge. To put it another way: God is the fountain of wisdom, he is wisdom, and wisdom is a tree of life. So to lay hold of and walk with God is to receive life everlasting. This was Adam in the garden: he walked with God, and lived forever.

But again, we know the end of that story. Adam forsook wisdom for folly, and plunged all of his descendents into that folly with him. Romans 5:12 says it this way “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” Proverbs 22:15 picks up the same theme and puts it in wisdom language as it says: “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child.” We are born into foolishness, children of Adam. And so the promises of the blessings of wisdom cannot come to us! We can never trust and fear and honor God—we have been cut off from the tree of life. To tell us the benefits of wisdom, if we are only in Adam, is to heap despair on us when we know we can never receive them!

But this is not the message of Proverbs, is it? Remember, this lecture starts differently. It starts with everyone, with A-dam. But it doesn't end there. **Verse 21** takes us back to that sweet refrain, reminding us of who the receipts of blessing and wisdom are. “My son. Do not lose sight of these.” A specific word begins and ends this section. It's *keep*, which is found in **verse 21** and **26**. Another way to define it is “guard.” It's as if God is saying to us: wisdom and her benefits are available to everyone, but remember this, guard this. Not all will possess them. But don't forget: you are not “everyone”, you are “my son”. Guard that knowledge, because I am guarding you. Don't be dismayed when fools fall all around you, don't be afraid when you lie down to sleep and feel guilty for all your foolishness. Keep my words near, let me be your confidence. Remember that you are my son, who I love, who I delight in, who I discipline, who I will guard.

See friends, in Adam we are sinners. We are foolish, and we have lost the tree of life. The good life is not ours. But there is a new tree, a tree of everlasting life, and tree to hold fast to, a tree, as **verse 18 says**, will bring us blessing, and will usher in the good life. It's not the tree that Adam forsook, it's a new tree. It's a similar kind of tree. If we eat the fruit of the tree, we will live forever. And it's made of wood. It's also the centerpiece of God's flourishing, as the original tree was the center of the garden. But it's also a different kind of tree. Instead of fruit hanging from the tree, there is a man hanging there. Instead of eating the fruit that grows there, we are told to eat his flesh. By the first tree, Adam and Eve became fools. At the new tree, we become wise. The cross of Christ is the new tree. And when we take and eat of Christ's sacrifice by faith, we are no longer sons of Adam. We are sons of God, guarded by God and kept by God and given wisdom from God.

In Revelation 2, John is writing down what Jesus Christ himself has revealed to him. Here is what he says to the church in Ephesus: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” We might hear it this morning like this: to the one who is a son in my son, I will grant to receive true wisdom and eternal life.



But here is the catch. The Father will treat you like a son when you are one. And if your only relationship with God is as divine bank teller—well, he will treat you that way. You'll come at the end with all your works and he will say: you haven't earned the blessing of my presence. But if you come by way of Jesus Christ, throwing away your works and trusting, leaning, fearing, and honoring God—making him the first and the last—and pleading the work of Jesus. He will accept you as a son, as a daughter, who he loves and in whom he delights. And you will realize on that day that you have nothing to offer: God did it all. He saved you and progressively disciplined out your foolishness and made you wise. All through Christ. And so, with open hands, you receive favor, healing, and blessing, as God says: enter in with me, my child. I will guard you ways, I will make you wise.

God wants you to have the good life in him. It may not be what you expect, and it has nothing to do with what you bring to the table, but he is moving you towards eternal happiness. Trust him, fear him, honor him. And receive his blessing with humility, as good news for fools.

## **The Application of the Good Life (27-35)**

You receive the good life of God in Christ. Don't withhold from other image bearers—instead offer out the good life by generously living to good to all within your power. (27-28)

You receive the good life of God in Christ. Don't take advantage of those who gravitate towards you, and don't try to get blessings any other way. Both dishonor the blessing you have received. (29-32)

You receive the good life of God in Christ. Don't treat God's blessing like it's a reward for your good behavior, because that is the path back to foolishness (33-35).

