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The Truest Wisdom
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Proverbs 3:3-4

We have had some really incredible preaching here at Brewster Baptist Church over the past several weeks. When we think about the lessons we have learned and the speakers we have hosted, from Pastor David Pranga to Tom Carr, Jonathan Malone to Kyler Barr and Rev. Patti Ricotta just last week, we have had an abundance of wise speakers on some vital topics. They have shared from a wide variety of perspectives, at times challenging us, educating us, and encouraging us with what God had given them to share.

Good teaching does that; it pricks the conscience, gives us opportunities to dissent and to discern for ourselves, still providing a framework for us to grow in our understanding of God, ourselves, and our surroundings. It is like a trellis in a garden; the framework is there for us to use, and we can either climb on and advance in our growth, or we can refuse and stay rooted right where we are. God, like a good gardener, prunes our understanding and our lives to help us be healthy and to grow in wisdom, understanding, and love.

One of the questions for discussion this week is, who is the wisest person you know?

For me, Dan Ryan is one of the wisest people I know. For the past several years at our Annual Meeting in his role as BBC Treasurer, Dan has shared, from memory, a different quote each year by Charles Dickens. This inspired me as I prepared for and thought about this morning's message.

Charles Dickens said, "A loving heart is the truest wisdom."

If the collection of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is a primer for wising living, then chapter 3 is a distilled version of the vast bounty of this book. In order to find a text on wise living, we need look no further than Proverbs. So, I'd like for us to take some time and look at that concept through the lens of *Proverbs 3*. In fact, as we begin to take a deeper look at the book of Proverbs, we are bound to find all sorts of instances where this saying is true.

We can also find all sorts of examples of wise living here at BBC. Earlier in today's worship, we heard Gwyneth Preu read from the central portion of *Proverbs 3* (verses 7 through 26). What an inspiration in the way of wise living! This past week, members of the Eastham Bible study met to conclude their study "John: The Gospel of Life." In the course of that conversation, questions arose about love, about the different kinds of love found in the Bible. For instance, did you know that between the Hebrew and Greek languages, there are at least seven different words for love?

In the Hebrew, we learn about *rayah*, friendship love; *ahava*, committed love; and *dod*, romantic love.

In the Greek, we learn about *storge*, parental love; *phileo*, mutual affection or brotherly love; *eros*, deep fondness or affection; and *agape*, God's love, the greatest form of love.

Found within these seven examples of love is a footpath for wisdom which Marilyn Murrow, a member of our group, shared with us and helped us remember. When we have found our way to agape love, this is the greatest and most fulfilling love we can experience. *Agape* is the Greek word for God's unconditional love, the character of love referenced in today's sermon passage, *Proverbs 3:3-4*.

In the NIV, it reads thus:

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

Those first two words, love and faithfulness, are key. The original Hebrew speaks of loyalty and faithfulness in the words *hesed* and *emet*, which can also be translated as truth. **Faithfulness when expressed by God is God's steadfast love**, and in the New Testament this is known as grace. **Faithfulness when shown by people, especially to the poor and less fortunate, when expressed to one another and to God, is based on God's great love for us**. Because God has so loved us, so we ought to love each other, as we heard last week in *1 John 4:19*.

Wise living according to Proverbs is concerned as much with our attitudes and behaviors as it is our actions.

That's because God looks at our heart, not just what other people see on the outside. We are told not to let love and faithfulness forsake us, and we are reminded not to forsake them.

So, what does a loving heart look like? If only God can see the motivations of our hearts, how can we tell if we're living wisely by living in love? That's an excellent question, and *Proverbs 3* and the scriptures help us to answer it. Check out these three simple ways from scripture we can show love with our face.

Mark 10:17-27 (The Rich Young Ruler) – Jesus **looked** at him and loved him

Luke 9:35 (Transfiguration) – God's voice from the cloud said to **listen** to Jesus

Genesis 21:6 – Sarah declared, “God has brought me **laughter**. All who hear about this will laugh with me.”

God and others can tell our love by the way that we look, how deeply we listen, and even our laughter is a testimony of God's work in our lives.

If we're living with love and loyalty, with truth and faithfulness, then we're living wisely.

Do we listen to the truth, or do we prefer our own narrative?

Do we show faithfulness and commitment by our actions, or are we more interested in the fascination or passing fancy of the week?

Do we show love by being patient, being forgiving, forbearing, and *walking with others*, or are we by nature more prone to being short-tempered, hostile, irritable, with little time to be interrupted by the nagging needs of our neighbors?

This afternoon, we have a wonderful opportunity to look, listen, walk, and laugh together as we gather in Orleans and Walk for Hope in support of the Housing Assistance Corporation. This is a tangible way in which we can show our concern for and support of the needs of our neighbors, and I encourage you to take part or to say even a brief prayer for those who are participating.

In a deeper sense, Proverbs is like a mirror for our lives; if we hold it up in comparison, will we be found to be living wisely, or foolishly? Here's a test: when someone insults you, is your first response usually of grace, or of anger? When someone cuts you off, are you able to extend kindness and grace toward them, or is your heart set on vengeance and retaliation?

If a loving heart is the truest wisdom, how wise are you living?

If you were asked to give a message about love and faithfulness, what would you preach about?

Better yet, what if the way you live your life from day to day were to be the storyline, heading, or sermon? What story would it tell? Would the way that you love inspire others to be more loving and faithful, or would it marginalize the need to live with love, compassion, kindness, and commitment?

How interesting it would be if we considered our lives as sermons we shared with others in the work place, at the office, at home, in the marketplace, filled with examples of God's word and God's presence. Such a perspective might motivate us to rethink some things or to go about living in a different manner.

Two of the key lessons we can glean from Proverbs are "Fear the Lord, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7) and "Trust the Lord fully in all your living" (3:5-6). When we are in a position of trusting God in our attitude, behavior, and by our actions, letting love and loyalty guide how we live and how we operate and even what we

value; when we allow God's will instead of self-will to govern our lives, this is the best possible way to live.

In the context of the Hebrew Bible, wisdom means wise practices, doing the right thing. It's not just knowing the right thing to do (that's knowledge), it's knowing the right thing and *putting it into practice*. That's wisdom, more than knowledge by itself.

The Wisdom Literature consists of Job, some of the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, the teachings of Qoheleth the wise teacher. In it we can find instructions for daily living, common folk wisdom, moral and religious instruction from parents, advice from wise elders, as well as the advice of royal counselors. It is also a course of discipline in education for student learning. Proverbs is a textbook for young people in the way of good and wise living about the benefits of obedience to guide and direct the lives of God's people according to God's will. It must be taught, explored, tested, applied, and commanded to people in order for its full value to be realized. (Daily Study Bible Series, Kenneth Aitken, Barclay)

This week's daily devotions will feature selected readings from Proverbs, and if you follow along, you will have the opportunity to read a different chapter of the book each day. In fact, with the 31 chapters in Proverbs, you could read a different Proverb each day of the month and have something helpful and inspiring to read all throughout the year.

These words to the wise are more than words on a page, they are meant to teach us how to have healthy relationships. They point us toward trusting in God and leaning into God's presence in our daily decision making. As we continue to follow this journey of wise living, may we remember the lessons that confront us along the way, remain open to instruction, and compare our own values to the wise values shared in the wisdom literature that show us the way to God's will.

The words "path" and "way" consistently appear, nearly one hundred times in fact, in Proverbs. This is because wisdom does not exist in a vacuum; it must be lived. If we choose Wisdom, this path leads to life. If we commit ourselves always and only to Folly, this way leads eventually to death. In the way of life, we find God's peace and *protection*, God's words of guidance and *direction*, God's blessings of goodness, counsel, and *perfection*. (The Weirsbe Bible Commentary)

We must trust God in order for this to be so. Faith consists of believing in God, loyally studying, following, and obeying God's teachings, and trusting that God's ways are better and more fruitful than any path of our own choosing.

The Hebrew word in verse four translated as "high esteem" or a "good name" is the word "shekel" which we may recognize if we are familiar with Middle Eastern currency. A shekel to this day is the basic monetary unit in Israel. The practice of its origin is as a

unit of weight or measurement, a coin, usually silver. It translates to value, worth, and quality. The value, weight, worth, and quality of our character is measured not only by our deeds, but by our attitudes and outlook, too. If you want your character to have a weight of value, to be considered well thought of by God and others, then living with love and faithfulness is the way to go.

Does the path we are on lead to right living, abundance through trusting God's ways, and revering and honoring God and our neighbor? Or does it lead to darkness, into danger and foolishness, and eventually emptiness and a void?

If we want to find favor and high esteem, worth, and value with God and others, it's not so much through what we possess as what we value; not through how much we have as much as how we treat others and how we share; not as much from having it all as having enough, being content (*Philippians 4:11*), and helping others in their time of need (*James 1:27*).

That's one of the things I love about our church, BBC. We are willing to meet the needs of others. I can't tell you how many stories I've heard about people in need coming to BBC to find relief and how hearts are moved to meet those needs. It's truly an inspiration!

Just as a loving heart is the truest wisdom, a loving church is one of the truest homes for heaven on earth that we can experience.

Let's keep the doors of our hearts open to love God and love our neighbors.

Let's make our church a beacon of love, belonging, hope, growth, and grace.

Let's make plenty of room for loyalty, truth, and goodness, and all the fruit of God's Spirit (*Galatians 5:22-23*) to prosper and flourish in our lives.

Let's expand our membership by inviting others to walk with us along God's path to life.

Let's study, teach, learn, and apply God's word to our everyday living, storing God's word in our hearts, making God's Spirit at home in our lives.

May the fruits of hearts filled with love bring God praise and glory. I am delighted that today we can experience that as a community through the ordinance baptism (8:30 am), as well as next week (May 28, 2023) when we receive new members into our church through the Right Hand of Fellowship. May the Lord bless you in allowing you to see, hear, and share life wisely through all your days.

A loving heart, a heart where Christ is at home, is the truest wisdom. Let's let God's loving heart expressed in our daily living be our true source of wisdom.

Quote for Conversation: “A loving heart is the truest wisdom.” Charles Dickens

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who is the wisest person you know?
2. What attributes does this wise person consistently display that distinguish them as wise?
3. According to the Hebrew Bible’s Wisdom Literature, what is the definition of “wisdom”?
4. When in your life have you experienced a lack of wisdom? How did you respond?
5. Where can we go to gain wisdom at any age?
6. Why do you think wisdom is such a valuable resource?
7. What is the truest wisdom, and why?