

Introduction

When graduation season comes around, you hear a lot about success. We look back at past successes. We celebrate with graduates the fact that they have been successful. They have completed a course of study in school, gotten a degree, finished a grade. We also look ahead to potential success in the future. Graduates typically receive lots of wishes for prospective success. In addition, many are the well-wishers who hand out advice on how to be successful. I want to do my part this morning to pass out such advice. And I can't think of better advice than Proverbs 3:5-6. It is advice from the mouth of God through the pen of Solomon, the wise. It points out the pathway to success. It may not be the kind of thing the world is looking for, but this is success that really matters. And we all need the reminder.

[Read Text; Pray]

These two verses are well-known among the Proverbs. The first devotional book I received as a gift commenced with a focus on these two verses. They were precious to me as I was beginning to ask questions about my future, and where the Lord would take me, and how I would get there. I could not have imagined as a teen growing up in South Carolina that the path down which the Lord would take me would include an eventual move to Wisconsin. But I have learned a lot since then. One thing I have learned is that the Lord works in unexpected and mysterious ways.

Anyway, as I was saying, these verses were precious to me. Unfortunately, I was a little off-base in terms of the verses' importance, however. Early on I took assurance that these verses indicated that the Lord had a plan for me, and if I sought him, he would share with me what that plan is. This is a common misunderstanding Christians have when they come to the will of God. It is no doubt true that God has a plan and he will lead his people down the path of life-choices. He will guide his people to their destinations in life, like the college destination, the marriage destination, the career destination, and the neighborhood destination, and so on. These matters

are important to be sure, but, mistakenly, these are the things with which individuals often become most consumed.

It is a mistake because there is a more fundamental matter. The more fundamental matter in the eyes of God than where he is taking me along the path of life is what is the nature of the path I am traveling. The kind of path I travel as a whole is itself more foundational than the "big" decisions I have to make along the way. The better attention I pay to Proverbs 3:5-6, the deeper is my realization that Solomon is addressing the nature of the path rather than the destination of the path.

Each of us walks our own path in life. I am talking about the path that leads from our infancy to our death. It winds through multiple choices we will make about education, friends, career path, marriage, and so on. Those paths go in unique directions for each of us. We tend to put more emphasis on these things. But God puts more emphasis on the path itself. And for good reason. You see, if the path is right, then the choices will basically take care of themselves. It becomes clear as we look at the details Solomon puts before us.

We begin with . . .

I. The Definition of Success.

A. It actually appears in the last line of these two verses, but if we start there we will begin with a right understanding of the goal for which we should be aiming. That last line says, in the ESV, "he will make straight your paths." The authorized version translates it, "he will direct your paths." The idea is that the Lord, the I AM, the self-existent God, will direct your path to be straight. He will cause the passage you walk to be unswerving; it will be a way that is plumb.

B. What is a straight path? We define a straight LINE as the shortest distance between two points, but a straight PATH in terms of the Bible is concerned with something other than distance. It is not about how far but it is about character.

I'm not a prolific hiker or anything, but I do enjoy a moderate hike now and then. I enjoy walking along the bluffs at Devil's lake and the paths around

Lapham's Peak. There's a really good hike between the bluffs and the bay at Peninsula State Park. Hikes are usually defined in terms of distance and degree of difficulty and, I would suppose, in terms of scenic value. Several summers back Ariail, Philip, and I were hiking up a canyon in Colorado to a lake up on the mountain called Hanging Lake. It was a tough hike through some narrow passages and along some narrow cliffs. It was up, up, up. The people going up were asking the people coming down, "Is it worth it?" The people coming down were like, "Oh Yeah!" And it was a beautiful hike—anything but straight—but it was beautiful. The scenic value was off the charts.

That's the way we need to think when it comes to the path here in Proverbs 3. A straight path describes the nature of the path. It's about being good and true and right. It is about honoring God and his righteousness. A straight path is one that does not double back in terms of glory. No backups or twists or turns needed. It is straight. It is like a standard or a ruler by which everything else is measured.

C. If you look back to Proverbs 2:15, you will see a reference to paths that are opposite from straight ones; they are called "crooked." The surrounding verses tell us that the people who walk crooked paths are those who forsake what is right (13); who walk in darkness; who delight in doing evil; and who celebrate what is perverse. They love what God hates. The course of this world is to walk a crooked path. We even refer today to people who are dishonest as crooked, and thieves as crooks. They are bent or curved. The contorted path walked by the unrighteous is a path of destruction. It is a path which inflicts injury to oneself and to others. It is devoid of love. It is murderous. And it leads to hell.

D. Whereas the crooked path is destructive, the straight path is joyful, peaceful, and restorative. Look down to Proverbs 3:7-8. Verse 7 basically restates what it means to walk the straight path. Verse 8 says that it will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

Picture the leper being healed by Jesus and the joy that fills his soul as he goes to show the priest. Picture the lame being straightened up in relief. His despair is turned into delight. That is the joy of the straight path.

It is a righteous path.

It is a God-pleasing path.

It is a path of joy and burdens lifted.

It is a path of satisfaction and peace.

It is a happy path.

It is the path of true and genuine success. If your path is straight, that is success.

E. No one's path was ever as straight as that of Jesus. His path was completely straight. He is the only human being to be an absolute success. As he never sinned, there was never a kink, never a curve, not the slightest deviation from God's perfect will. And for that reason he qualified to stand in the place of sinners once for all. For him and for us a straight path is not defined as an easy path, but it truly is the blessed path.

And so the question becomes what conditions must we fulfill in order that the Lord will make straight our paths? Imagine a GPS device or a directions app for your life. With these devices and apps there may be options to assist you to decide the route you would like to take. Do you want to take the road less traveled or the road most traveled? Side-streets or interstates? Do you want the quickest route or the scenic byway? You select the settings and the app directs your way. Solomon shows us here not only the definition of success, but also the "life settings" that are required for us to be on the straight path.

II. Setting 1: Trust in the Lord.

A. For God to make straight our path, the "Trust in the Lord" setting must be in the "100%" position. Solomon says, "trust in the Lord with ALL your heart." Complete and absolute trust in the Lord is required. The Lord is pleased to guide and lead those who trust him. But those who do not trust him will not be led by him. And he is unwilling to lead those who do not trust in him. It is like Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please [God]." God does amazing things in the lives of those who trust in him. Hebrews 11 lists such people and God's work in them. Abel's offering was acceptable to God because he trusted him. Having pleased God through faith, Enoch was taken straight up to heaven without having to die.

By faith Noah built an ark that saved himself and his family whilst the world died under the flood of judgment. The list goes on and on.

B. What does it mean to trust in the Lord? We go back to Hebrews 11:6. Here faith in God is defined as believing that God is and that he rewards those who seek him.

You can't trust God if you do not believe he exists. I am confident that all of us in this room this morning believe God exists. And yet you can believe he exists and still not trust him. Demons believe God exists but they do not trust him. They tremble before him.

Trust then also means that you believe God blesses you as you seek him. "Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." To trust God is to seek him. That is it is to seek to know him, to seek to fellowship with him, to seek his pleasure, to seek his direction, to seek his protection and provision, to seek his honor.

The bottom line in trusting the Lord is to rest completely in who he is and what he says. If I trust God, I am staking my life and my well-being and my eternal joy on him and what he tells me. I am willing to accept that he knows better than me what I need. He is able to protect me better than I or any other. He is able to direct me rightly. He will command me justly. He won't ultimately harm me. If I trust him, I may not always understand his ways, but I can always trust his heart.

C. Is it wise to trust in the Lord? The wisest thing you will ever do is to trust in the Lord. The most foolish thing you will ever do is not to trust him. Let me assure you this morning, you should trust the Lord. It is crazy not to trust the Lord.

You should trust in the Lord with all your heart because you can trust his heart. You can trust his love and care for you. Jesus makes this point beautifully in the Sermon on the Mount. He points his disciples to the birds of the air. These are of little value to the world. They do not farm. But, said Jesus, "your heavenly father feeds them." Your father takes care of birds. He is not the father of birds, but he takes care of them. Then if he

takes care of them, how much more will he care for you who are his child! You can trust his heart.

You should also trust in the Lord with all your heart because of his power. His power is infinite. He is the one who created all that is. He made the visible universe from nothing. Every created thing depends upon him for its existence from one moment to the next. He exercises providential sovereign control over it all. Even rebellious spirits and persons cannot overrule the power of God. Rightly did the psalmist say, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling." You can trust that there is no power in the cosmos that rivals his. He is an impenetrable fortress to those who take refuge in him.

Furthermore, you should trust him with all your heart because he is wise. He knows the best ways to achieve the perfect goals. His understanding is inscrutable. He is completely dependable. God will never lead you astray. It is impossible for him to lie or deceive.

It is not only sin not to trust God. It is crazy.

D. The beginning of trusting God is to repent of sin and trust God's provision for the forgiveness of sin. God's provision for salvation is Jesus. And the condition of receiving the redemption he died on the cross to provide is trust. You must believe. You must invest all your confidence in him. The Philippian jailer cried out to Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."

You cannot legitimately say you trust in the Lord if you are not believing in Jesus Christ for the saving of your soul from God's just wrath.

By nature your path and mine are completely crooked. If you would have a straight path, you must repent of your crooked self and its crooked deeds and trust in the one whose way is truly and completely straight and who died for the crooked to be made straight in him. That is where it all begins. From there it continues with a life of trust, a trust that obeys.

III. Setting 2: Your Own Understanding.

A. For God to make straight our path, the "Your Own Understanding" setting must be in the "0%" position. Solomon says, "lean not on your own understanding." It is critical that he adds this stipulation. Our sinful nature is in love with our own understanding. The pride that has engulfed our hearts is convinced that we are always right, that we know what is best, and even that we know better than God.

When we lean on our own understanding, we inherently are not trusting in the Lord. We think we have got to help God or that God might not be that bright. Or that God may not actually have our best interests at heart. Our understanding tells us that there must be a better way or that what God is saying surely cannot be true.

Even before the fall of humanity, it was bad for man to lean on his own understanding. He was thereby deceived. God was explicit: You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. But under the deceitful influence of Satan, Eve was deceived in her understanding. She became convinced the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and would make her wise so she ate. Since that time it is even more absurd that humans should lean on their own understanding. For now the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it? Mankind by nature is darkened in his understanding, ignorant, hard-hearted, and callous.

So in Jeremiah 17:5, the Lord says, "cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord."

B. When we lean on our own understanding, the results are catastrophic. A plane crashed into a mountain in Mexico a number of years ago. The well-experienced pilot and everyone on board were killed. The crash investigation revealed a disastrous pilot error. The flight recorder documented that alarms in the cockpit had sounded directing the pilot to pull up. However, the experienced pilot had disregarded the alarms as a malfunction because he had flown this route numerous times and knew better.

Leaning on one's own understanding causes many to disregard the clear teaching of the Bible. Full of self-confidence they boldly assert "My god would never . . ." They think they know God better than God reveals himself. The results are disastrous.

C. Your own understanding tells you to cover up sin rather than confess it. Your own understanding tells you there must be a better way than God's. Your own understanding is easily convinced by the persuasion of the devil. Your own understanding sees trouble and dives deep into the depths of anxiety. Your own understanding tells you that you are not that bad of a person and God is like a spineless grandfather. People's own understanding leads them to try to grow the church in ways other than faithfully preaching Christ. These are all disasters associated with disregarding Solomon's wisdom here.

Your own understanding tells you that it is okay to lie, steal, cheat, commit adultery, covet, if necessary, in the pursuit of worldly success. But it is not true and godly success.

D. The smarter we get the more we are tempted to trust our own understanding. You who are celebrating these accomplishments, we celebrate them with you. Use all of the knowledge and skill to excel still more, but when it comes to charting the path of life before God, lean not on your own understanding.

IV. Setting 3: Acknowledge God.

A. For God to make straight our path, the third setting in our life direction app is the "acknowledge God" setting. As with trust, this setting must be in the "100%" position. Solomon says, "In ALL your ways, acknowledge him."

B. To acknowledge God does not mean to merely recognize him as a participant at the summit table where your life decisions are made. It means to acknowledge Him as God, the giver of life and breath and every good thing. It is to affirm as Paul says in Romans 11 that from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever." To acknowledge God in all your ways means to operate in such a way as to bring him glory.

C. It is not just the big things—big life questions or major decisions—but everything. Even the smallest matters in life are part of the path. The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Conclusion

So I titled the message today, “How to Be Successful.” It should be clear that success is measured differently through different eyes. The most successful man ever to walk the earth, whose path was perfectly straight, who leaned on the Father’s understanding and the Spirit’s leading is not deemed by the world to have been a raving success.

Despite his being able to tell precisely where the fish could be caught, he did not become a fishing industry tycoon. Despite being able to feed thousands and thousands with only two fish and five small loaves, he did not emerge as a food service industry magnate. And though he healed everyone who came to him with an infirmity, he did not establish a lucrative health care corporation.

In fact the success of his life, walking a straight path, led to his death on a cross. And if you would listen to his call, you too would die to yourself. That’s what Solomon is teaching us here.

Proverbs is not pointing us to success in terms of an academic report card or a picture on the cover of a news magazine, but this is real success, eternal success. Success from heaven’s perspective is not about how you score on an exam or how much money you make but about how you do it. Actually it is how God does it. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”