

Using Proverbs 3.5-6 to better understand Bible study and teaching

Introduction

- Arden asked me to talk about sharing spiritual truth from the Bible. What came to mind was my first teaching for CSB, when Mark Fiscus asked me to teach the young men using Proverbs 3.5-6.
 - NASB: ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart / And do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, / And He will make your paths straight.
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I. Context

- It is important to look at the context of a passage. Else, you might easily misinterpret what you see.
 - For example, if you randomly open your Bible one day, determined to apply what you read, you might come to **Genesis 17.10 NIV: This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.** If you or any of the young men were presently uncircumcised, you might make a painful mistake in interpretation and application that evening!
 - Our passage today is part of a unit in Proverbs 1-9, which Solomon wrote to his son about how to live a successful life. Let's keep that in mind, and we'll discuss context more in a few minutes.
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II. Literary Form

- Every passage has a literary form, and sometimes that can affect how you interpret and teach it.
 - The proverbs are written in a poetic form. Why do people write in poetry? why did God put poetry in the Bible? for that matter, why did God give us the Bible with poetry, songs, prophecies, narratives, and letters, instead of a simple theology book?
 - You can wrestle with all that more on your own, but I submit that biblical proverbs are in poetic form to stimulate or provoke thought.
 - Let's consider the poetic form of our passage:
 - 5a: Trust in the LORD with all your heart
 - 5b: And do not lean on your own understanding.
 - 6a: In all your ways acknowledge Him,
 - 6b: And He will make your paths straight.
 - What is the relationship between 5a and 6a? They convey a parallel or similar idea: to trust in the LORD with all your heart is similar to acknowledging the Lord in all your ways.
 - What is the relationship between 5a and 5b? 5b elaborates on 5a using a contrast: you can either trust in the Lord with all your heart or lean on your own understanding. If you trust in the Lord with all your heart, you will not lean on your own understanding.
 - What is the relationship between 6b and the rest of the proverb? 6b is the promised result: If you acknowledge the Lord in all your ways [if you do all of 5a-6a], then he will make your paths straight.
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III. Key Words

- I cannot say the meaning of every scripture passage turns on key words, but this happens often enough that we should always consider what each word means.
- Let's look at our first verse here: what does it mean to trust in someone, particularly to trust in someone as your leader? You put confidence in them, rely on them, depend on them.

- Do you know what it means when you see LORD in all capitals in the Old Testament? When you see LORD in all capitals in the Old Testament, that always refers to God. It is how translators render the name God gave himself. We have lost the knowledge of how to say God's name, but we think it is something like Yahweh [YAH-way]. But English Bibles almost always write it LORD all in capitals.
- Why would the author say to trust in God with all of your heart? Heart is symbolic: Like in English, the Hebrew word [לֵב] can mean your physical heart, but it also can symbolize your inner being, or even more specifically it can symbolize your conscience, your will, your mind or reason.
- Why say trust in God with all of your heart? This makes it exclusive: there can be no one else on which you depend, only God. Not on yourself, not on the world's way of thinking, not even on your inherited ethical code: you must depend on the "person" of Yahweh, the covenant keeping God of Israel.
- So you have to rely on God, put your confidence in God, entirely, with all of yourself. That's a lot of meaning, and we are not even through the first verse!
- When the NASB says "Lean not" what does that mean? The idea is to not support yourself, to not rely on your own understanding. Other translations say do not rely or do not depend.

IV. Using Context with Analysis

- Now, remembering our context, why would this father tell his son not to rely on his own understanding?
- Start with the first half of the verse: if we are trusting in God with all our heart, all of our being, then we cannot be relying on anyone else. If we are relying on God's wisdom then we are not relying on our own understanding.
- I said Proverbs 1-9 is all one unit for study. If we look elsewhere in this section, at v.2.6, it says that the Lord gives wisdom. Scripture is his revelation and his revelation is wisdom for life on which we can depend.
- If we study the context of Proverbs 1-9 carefully, we see that Solomon is advising his son to rely on the woman called "wisdom" which symbolizes the revelation of God, because that will lead to true spiritual life; Solomon is countering the counsel of Satan, who advises the son to rely on the woman called "folly" which symbolizes human understanding, and leads to spiritual death.
- We can consider an even larger context: In all the wisdom literature of the Bible, there are repeat characters: there is the "fool" who rejects God's revelation and follows his own corrupted thoughts and desires; and there is the "wise person" who acknowledges God's revelation as wisdom itself and follows it.
- So trusting in God with all of our heart is connected with trusting in God's revelation, in his promises and commands as we have them in Scripture. So we rely on God's revelation in Scripture and do not rely on our own corrupted thinking, our rationality, our human wisdom, our philosophy.

V. Key Words Second Verse

- Let's take a look at the second verse, a little more quickly. What does it mean to "acknowledge" God? NIV has "submit" to God; NLT says to seek his will. "Acknowledge," "submit to," "seek his will in" are all interpretations of the actual Hebrew verb [יָדַע], which means "to know" God. In the context of Proverbs 1-9, it means to know God intimately: So in all your ways, know God intimately; walk with him...
- "In all your ways" is exhaustive: Walk with God in everything you do, say, even think. This is how you trust in God, as it says in v.5.
- If instead of relying on your own thinking, you trust in God with all of your heart and in all your ways walk with him, then God will make your paths straight. What does it mean to make your paths straight? HCSB: God will "guide you"; NKJ: God will "direct"; NLT: God will "show you which path."

- Are paths your behavior or the outcome? is this about success or obedience? **Proverbs 15.21 NIV: Folly** [which we know is human understanding leading to spiritual death] **brings joy to one who has no sense, but whoever has understanding** [i.e. wisdom from God] **keeps a straight course**. If Folly is human reasoning that leads to sin and spiritual death, then a straight course is obedience to God's revelation that leads to spiritual life. God helps this person avoid sin and the negative effects of sin.

VI. Interpretation to Application

- We could conclude that our proverb says, "Trust completely in Yahweh and his revelation in the Bible, and don't rely on your own faulty thinking; know Yahweh intimately in every aspect of your life, and he will bring you on the straight path of true spiritual life."
- All theology in the Bible leads to application and all application comes from the Bible's theology. We have touched on theology about scripture being God's revelation and thus wisdom, and our own understanding without scripture being limited, corrupted, and thus not the best tool we have.
- How can we apply these truths? How do we trust in God's revelation? How do we know God intimately in every aspect of life? These are questions you need to answer, and then ask the young men to do so.
- Why would we want to be on the straight path? We have this choice to make every day, so challenge yourself and your young men to think this through: do they want to live by God's revelation and experience spiritual blessings associated with spiritual life, or pursue worldly wisdom that will lead them away from God, into the symptoms of spiritual death even though they are saved?

VII. Presentation

- When presenting such a teaching, it is good to use humor, illustration, visuals. I preached this passage, and incorporated an illustration from a recent men's hike, humor about being a rabbi, illumination from the New Testament, a visual analytical tool I had recently taught my church, graphical posturing on the stage to represent walking with God or walking away to pursue folly.
- It is harder in CSB, when you have ten to fifteen minutes, usually at the end of a tiring night. This teaching went well with the young men, but I had some stinkers when I failed to retain their attention. In that situation, it is better to cut down on meaning to keep it short, to increase elements that will provoke interest, and to teach with interactive dialogue as much as you can. You can always follow up with more teaching on another date, through the squad meeting, or by giving them a handout.

VIII. Resources

- One last thing. I know few of you will be searching for meaning in Hebrew texts. You don't have to. If you know what to do, you could teach this text with good effect even without preparing at all.
- But the more you prepare, the better you will understand the text, and thus the better you can decide what to share and how to share it.
- At the least, you should pray for help, study the text in its context best you can on your own, reflect prayerfully on its meaning and application, and then consider how best to teach it.
- There are plenty of resources available to help you if you want to go deeper. Websites like Bible.org and Biblegateway.com allow you to view the Hebrew or Greek side by side with the English and click on Hebrew or Greek words to find their meaning. They also provide free access to commentaries, like Constable's notes on Bible.org. No doubt your pastor can guide you into trustworthy commentaries written in a non-technical manner. You also can use study Bibles, atlases, Bible dictionaries, and basic theology books.