

Sermon 11, The Faith-Shaped Life, Proverbs 3:5-6

Proposition: Trust in God, not self, leads to knowing God and walking right.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the passage before us this morning is one of the best-known statements in the whole of Proverbs. It highlights the centrality of faith and the rewards of faith for the one who exercises it wholeheartedly. It also warns against the opposite of faith, which we might call rationalism. The challenge of this passage is simple: Trust God. Believe Him more than you believe your own thoughts. It's not easy, but it's simple. And its rewards are profound. The faithful person will be given a clear path, a morally straight path, an open path. Do you want to know where to go? Brothers and sisters, the faith-based life is the opposite of the "simple" life. The simple person, in the vocabulary of Proverbs, is the uncommitted one, the one who has not made a firm decision to trust God. He doesn't know where he's going. But the faithful person has a direction as a gift from God. In brief, trust in God, not self, leads to knowing God and walking right.

I. The Definition of Faith: Whole-hearted trust in Yahweh, v. 5a

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart." That is what the passage says; there's no difficulty about the translation or the text here. This is what we call faith — a wholehearted trust and reliance. It is specifically directed toward Yahweh God. We all know that faith is very important, of course. It is the very name of the Christian religion — the Christian faith, we call it. Now, thanks to the influence of Christianity, all religions have been lumped together as "the faith community" or "faith groups," never mind that some religions have little or no place for faith.

But knowing that faith is important, and knowing that it means trusting in God, is very different from actually practicing it. What does it look like to have faith? I have shared with you before about the tightrope artist asking someone from the crowd to get into the wheelbarrow and be wheeled over Niagara Falls. That's what faith looks like in a very earthly, human sense. But what does faith in God look like? If you were to trust in Him with all your heart, what would you do?

The first thing you would do is seek knowledge. You would not just trust God in general, but rather trust Him specifically for what you know about Him. Faith is made up, in the first

place, of knowledge. An ignorant person cannot believe. Think about it. If I were to say to you, “Do you believe that people on the island of Java like to eat coffee beans on their pineapple?” you would have to say, “I have no idea.” You can’t believe something about something you know nothing about! In the same way, if I say to you, “Do you trust in the LORD with all your heart?” and you, like Pharaoh, respond “Who is the LORD? I do not know Him?” then the answer is obvious. You do not trust Yahweh if you do not know Him!

So if you are trusting in the LORD with all your heart, then you should know some fairly significant truths about Him. You should know who He is, what He is, where He is, how long He’s existed, and why and how He is. This is a basic, non-negotiable part of trusting in Him with all your heart.

The second thing you’ll do if you have faith is to assent to the truths you learn about God. This sounds simple, and in some ways it is. We are used to assenting to truths all the time. If you’re told that Walmart is the biggest company in the world, then you simply accept that and move on. But if you’re told something that directly affects you, your default is to reject it if it’s going to impinge on your lifestyle in a negative way. If you’re told that God is going to judge you for lusting in your heart and cheating on your taxes, it’s tempting to say “No He’s not.” Remember Heinrich Heine? “God will forgive me; that’s His job.” If you know that God judges, but reject that truth — or that He saves, but reject that truth — then you are not trusting Him with all your heart.

Thirdly, though, faith means a personal trust and reliance. Just as you count on your spouse to get the kids to school, or to grab groceries on the way home, so you count on God — you roll yourself onto Him, trusting Him to take care of you. It is this facet of faith which the passage highlights. Yes, it’s important to have knowledge. Yes, assenting to that knowledge is mandatory. But trusting is the most important element of faith.

That said, we come back to the question of how your life looks when you trust in God. I guess the first thing to point out here is that someone who trusts in God is not all worried and stressed out. Rather, such a person is calm and peaceful even in difficult times. Secondly, a trusting person is not always scheming and plotting. If you trust in the LORD with all your heart, then you realize that you don’t have to blaze your own trail through life. You have a leader. You have that extra measure of protection that comes from following someone who knows where He’s going and where He’s taking you. Thirdly, a trusting person is willing to make sacrifices to follow God. This might mean driving a certain distance to worship with God’s people. It might mean paying for a Christian school or doing the difficult job of homeschooling. It might mean continuing to give to your local church even when you aren’t at all sure that you have enough money to keep the bills paid. Your behavior will be shaped; you will, as we say, “step out in faith” when you trust God. When you’re looking for a spouse, you will follow His rules (no fornication and no marrying an unbeliever). When you’re doing a job, you will do what’s right even if the costs seem high, because you trust that God will come through for you. Now, remember, it’s not faith to believe that God will do something He never said He would do. That’s

wishful thinking. And He never said that your life would always be easy. He never said that nothing bad would ever happen to you. But He did say that He would make your path straight.

II. The Opposite of Faith: Worshipping your own mental prowess, v. 5b

Before we look at the corollary of faith and the reward of faith, it's important that we pause for a few moments and consider what Solomon says about the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is not described here as being an atheist, or as being an ignoramus. It is described as leaning on your own understanding.

Now, what does that mean? It means treating your own understanding as absolute — looking to it to provide the answers on its own. Think about a sentence that begins, “Now, my understanding is that . . .” Such a sentence may very well not be correct. If your understanding is that American families with children who make less than \$100,000 generally get a refund anyway and so you decide not to file your income taxes, you are leaning on your own understanding. Such an example is deliberately absurd, of course. A far more subtle, but all the more popular, method of leaning on your own understanding is to silently make assumptions about God. The intrusion of the state in our lives is such that if you make a faulty assumption about the IRS or the County Clerk, you will likely hear about it pretty quickly. But if you make a faulty assumption about God, you may very well be allowed to live in your delusion for decades.

What are some of these leanings on one's own private understanding? Well, many people assume that God will not judge sin. Or, even if they think that He does judge really bad sin, they don't believe that He will judge *their* sin. Many people assume that as long as our culture considers something to be acceptable, then God also considers it to be acceptable — and, perhaps, vice-versa. Brothers and sisters, ambient assumptions about God that you have just picked up or made up somewhere are the opposite of faith! They are a way of leaning on your own understanding. The way to correct them is to get back to the primary source, the Word of God, and carefully read it to see what its author is really like.

Another subtle way of leaning on your own understanding is to trust in your smarts, your know-how, your abilities, your mental prowess. When you recognize that life is complicated, but think that you are smart enough to find a good path through it without God's assistance, that is leaning on your own understanding. Such a leaning can be explicit, as it is in the many people who say that they don't need God to live a good life. But it can also be only implicit, a functional leaning on one's own understanding whereby you never or almost never ask God for help, never consult Him about your decisions, never mention His leading, and never even look in His word for His take on things.

In other words, beware this subtle sin. Did you know that the opposite of faith is prayerlessness? Did you know that failing to read and understand the Bible is ultimately a manifestation of trusting your own smarts so much that you think you don't need God's help?

It's a trap. Don't lean on your own understanding. It will break under the strain. Oh, yes, many people do live a life that looks quite good and successful without ever seeking to rely on God. But consider the end of such a life. Your understanding is a powerful tool, one that God

works through to protect you from sin and sinful people. But it is not an end in itself; it is not ultimate. The day it becomes an idol is the day you've stopped trusting in Yahweh with all your heart.

Don't be the prayerless Christian. That person is by definition also a faithless Christian.

III. The Corollary of Faith: Knowing God in all your ways, v. 6a

Instead, Solomon counsels us to live our lives in the presence of God. The verb here is simply the basic word *yada*, to know. In all your ways, know God.

In all your ways, you have to know God.

What does that mean? I think it is intentionally broad. Everything you do should be feeding into knowing God better. Everything you do should be done with the goal of knowing God in the doing of it. Everything you do should "acknowledge" Him — that is, be carried out in the remembrance that it is done in front of the Almighty.

When you're at work and the boss is standing there watching you, does it change the way you work? Most of us would probably say yes. Today's management culture might even agree with the idea that most of us don't do as well at work with the boss hovering, because we get nervous and stop focusing on the task and start focusing on what the boss is thinking. But brothers and sisters, God can't and won't stop watching you. He is present in everything you do, and if you remember that rightly, you will find it not crippling but liberating. You have to begin to share every experience with the Almighty. Prayer should be as natural as breathing to you. All of us talk to ourselves, and all of us talk to God at least sometimes. But if you are going to know God in all your ways, you need to be discussing life with Him as you go. You need to be seeking to know that house, hunt that deer, drive that dozer or that minivan, in such a way that you are getting to know God better. Are you looking at His creation and letting it remind you of Him?

I know a couple where the husband spends his days at the office, but his wife is a painter. In the husband's office are several paintings that his wife made. Now let me ask you a question: Do you think that that husband ought to be able to see and understand his wife better based on those paintings? In other words, even when he's away from her, do you think that he can fix his attention on her handiwork and thus on her from time to time?

We are surrounded by God's handiwork all the time. We ourselves *are* that handiwork. And so our lives should be lived with an understanding that we are always handling God's work, that we are always in His presence, and that He is always with us. I'm not saying that you should always be thinking about God and not thinking about the task at hand. Not at all. Clearly, God gave us all work to do and the ability to concentrate on what we're doing. But whenever that mental voice starts talking, it should be regularly redirecting itself to prayer. Whenever you have a few moments to think, your thoughts should be returning to your God.

Leaning on your own understanding means thinking that you don't need God in your life. To know God in all your ways is to bring Him into your life as clearly, effectively, and thoroughly as possible. He should be there in your entertainment choices. He should be there in

your work habits. He should be there in your family life. He should be there when the doors are closed and no one's watching.

Do you attempt to know God in all your ways? Do you keep Him in mind in everything you do? Do you remember Him regularly? Obviously, to lean on your own understanding is to forget Him. But to trust Him and to keep Him in mind are two sides of the same relationship. One is an active faith, the other is a passive faith. Grab onto Him; receive Him. And He will direct your paths.

IV. The Result of Faith: God will clear your way, v. 7a

After all, that is the promise of this verse. The faith-shaped life has its way cleared, has its paths directed, by God Himself.

What does it mean to say that God will direct your path? It does not mean that He will give you turn-by-turn directions through your day such that you need only blindly listen and the rest will take care of itself. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is through wisdom entering your heart and knowledge being precious to your soul that the LORD chooses to work in your life. Thus, we can automatically reject any theory which says that the direction of one's paths is an process which bypasses the rational mind. In any case, the "direct" of the KJV is not really what the Hb. says. The word here is the same word found in Isaiah 40, where the prophet says to "make straight in the desert a highway for our God." God will clear our path, make it straight and smooth, open it up in front of us. Thus, "direct" is a rather appropriate paraphrase.

God will open up your path. That is, He will guide you through life by making your way plain in front of you. Where should you go? What should you do? How should you live? Where should you live? Such questions will be answered soon enough when you walk by faith. God Himself will clear the obstacles in front of you.

This means that you don't need to scheme, strive, and force events into the shape you think they should take. If God wants a project or institution or relationship to succeed, He will make it succeed! Now, that doesn't mean that you and I ought to kick back and take it easy. What it means is that we don't have to stress out. We do what we know to be right and let God take care of the rest. You don't have to plan your entire future, in other words. You don't have to force things to turn out just right. You don't have to be everything and make it all happen. You simply need to trust God wholeheartedly and stop assuming that you can make it on your own.

A. A Morally Straight Path through life

When you walk by faith, your path will be morally straight. You will not sin against God, but instead do what is pleasing to Him. Your ways will no longer be crooked, but instead will be straight.

B. An Open, Unblocked Path through life

But second, your path will be open. This doesn't mean that your life will always be easy, or that what you need to do will always be pleasant. But it does mean that God will get you where you need to be. You need only trust Him.

Jesus died so that you could believe. He gives us salvation, and part of that salvation is the faith He grants to His people. Do you want to live the faith-shaped life? Then start trusting Him. Start talking to Him in prayer. And He will make your paths straight and smooth. Amen.